

A grand vision for a crumbling world (Ephesians 1:15-23)

## **Christ has brought the entire cosmos into submission? Frankly, it doesn't look that way.**

by [Greg Carey](#)

May 23, 2022

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

One Greek sentence. That says it all.

For the sake of us readers, the NRSV renders Ephesians 1:15–23 as four English sentences. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* divides these verses into seven sentences—one with an exclamation point (!)—and two paragraphs. But it's one Greek sentence. (So is Ephesians 1:3–14, by the way.)

One big sentence for one grand gospel. The passage warms up on a most personal note by blessing those who read it. And that blessing! This is some of the most high-flying language in the New Testament, rivaling John's "In the beginning was the Word" (1:1).

Ephesians has already announced a divine economy in which "all things" heavenly and earthly are brought together in Christ (1:10). Now the letter's author wants those who worship Jesus to appreciate this reality fully. Imagine. Through his resurrection Christ has brought the entire cosmos into submission, ruling it through the church.

Frankly, it doesn't look that way. So much of the news has been so bad and so dramatic that we largely overlooked the release of the new report from the International Panel on Climate Change: nearly half the world's population already vulnerable to disruption, serious changes already cooked into the atmosphere, and a

rapidly closing window of opportunity to prevent cataclysmic harm. All this in a world so riven by division that the cooperation necessary to intervene seems vanishingly distant.

Is the author of Ephesians simply naïve?

Let us acknowledge that Ephesians has its own problems. Christians who proclaim that God has a grand order for the cosmos tend to impose hierarchical order upon people. If there's "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father above all" (4:5-6), we ought not be surprised to find women, children, and the enslaved told to submit to patriarchal household structures (5:21-6:9).

I wrestle with Ephesians' grand gospel precisely for this reason. The submission of every power under Christ's feet (1:22) and the submission of women, children, and the enslaved (5:21-6:9) reflect the same Greek verb. A certain kind of gospel puts everyone in their place—and keeps them there.

Yet I have not let go of Ephesians and its grand gospel. The author of Ephesians is not naïve. Jesus has already put all things under Christ's feet, and Christ rules through the church—yet powerful forces, "cosmic powers," rule "this present darkness" and confront believers (6:12). That feels profoundly true right now. Alongside Jewish apocalypses like Daniel and Revelation, Ephesians proclaims a "gospel of peace" in the midst of alienation and violence. What God is bringing about already is.

The preaching of Martin Luther King Jr. carried this apocalyptic sensibility. Often called "the Dreamer," King commanded national attention when his "I Have a Dream" speech called forth the image of Black and White children holding hands together. Still, the struggle encountered fierce resistance even after the passing of landmark legislation. Less than a year before his death, King lamented the movement's early optimism as "[a little superficial](#)."

Yet in his "Mountaintop" address the night before his assassination, King returned to his vision. God had allowed him to look out from the mountaintop and survey the land. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

I do not believe we can redeem Ephesians' language about the submission of women, children, and enslaved persons, nor am I confident we can separate it from the bold confidence that opens the letter. Yet King diagnosed that people in a

struggle need a grand vision and a word of assurance. God's people today need a grand vision indeed. And confidence that hope is not naïve.