The Book of Common Prayer is filled with beautiful prayers, and sometimes (stay with me here) I, at least, need to take care not to be mesmerized by the very beauty of the language. I need to pause and look beyond phrases that trip easily off the tongue to listen for the meaning behind them. Phrases such as, “such good things as surpass our understanding.”

Honestly, when I have paid particular attention at times I’ve taken a really childish view, something along the lines of, “Well, whatever I want or need, God is eventually going to give me even more of that—that stuff, or feeling, or acceptance, or love.” It’s like a kid getting two stockings crammed with candies and goodies at Christmas instead of one. “Surpassing our understanding must mean more than just “more.” It must mean something along the lines of God’s preparing for us something we can’t imagine. I can’t describe it for you or for me, because I can’t imagine it.

We humans create stories like the Garden of Eden to try to describe the indescribable. So we get a mental picture of these two people—beautiful people, we’re sure—strolling around in this perfect place, this paradise with trees and streams and helpful woodland creatures like those in Disney’s version of Snow White.

It’s what we know, or what we can imagine. Really, really happy people, right? It’s just more of that same imaginable stuff. Kind of like a cleaned-up version of the Big Rock Candy Mountains, where there are crystal fountains, handouts on bushes, cigarette trees, and lemonade springs. Cops have wooden legs, bulldogs have rubber teeth, and the hens lay soft-boiled eggs. There’s more, of course. More of the same.

This is what happens when this old preacher can’t get past the first line of the first prayer, the Collect of the Day. And this is the point at which I think, “Come on—you don’t even remember what the readings are about, do you? Don’t you think you’d better look at them too.” So I do start reading through them again, as they’re formatted in our bulletin. There’s Paul, talking to the Athenians about their take on the good things that surpass their understanding, expressed in an altar to an unknown god. For them, it’s like all the gods they already worship, but more. One more. Their understanding and imagination are limited, just like ours. Why not at least an altar to the unknown gods, plural? They weren’t hampered by monotheism, so why not an altar to all the unknown gods? Maybe they thought they could get by with one more without angering the gods they already knew, or invoking their jealousy. Who knows? In any case we see a limited way of thinking.

Paul explains to them. “You know that unknown thing, that elusive god who can’t be named? That’s our God, and that’s what I’m here to tell you about. There is one God with all power.”

Now right there the Greeks are probably thinking, “That’s crazy talk! How can one god take care of all the things that need divine attention in the world, in our lives? Impossible.”

Paul alludes briefly to his/our story of creation, saying that this one God created every thing that is, including a single ancestor of all of us. [I have to admit, at this point I thought to myself, “There’s that Garden of Eden thing! Maybe I remembered having read it in this passage at the beginning of the week, but I don’t think so.”] Paul goes on to say, or imply that as a result of this creation and this single ancestor (a) we’re all related, all brothers and sisters, and (b) we’re all children of God.

Well, the Athenians probably broke into a cold sweat at this point. Oh no, they were thinking, only Caesar has the divine presence in him. He is a god, and he’s the only human who is. We have gods of water and earth and . . . well, you name it. Everybody knows these basic facts.

Paul patiently continues: This one God came into the world as one of his own creatures, as one of his own children, someone just like the rest of us common folk, not even an emperor. And he died, just like one of us, and then he rose from the dead.

Nuh-uh, they thought. Now you’re talking less, not more. One god, while we have too many to count? And being weak like that, becoming a mere mortal? Dying? We think not. Although that resurrection thing is interesting. But no—there’s too little in this story. We’re looking for more gods, gods that whoop it up in grand style, even more than we do. One god? Dying? Nope.

Some of them did pay attention, though. Some listened to Paul’s talk of repentance and forgiveness, and it appealed to them on the basis of their day-to-day lives. Some of them listened, or we wouldn’t be sitting here today, together, in this amazing virtual gathering. Some of the Greeks were early believers and became fathers and mothers and saints of our faith. Some of them knew that good things were being prepared for them that surpassed their understanding.

A kind of side note occurred to me here: Jesus once responded to a complicated question by one of his critics by saying that in the kingdom of God we are not given marriage. It’s a hard saying for us, as many of us envision a reunion—a recreation of what we know—with those we love in the idyllic afterlife we imagine. It’s merely one more indicator by Jesus—a pointing beyond our limited understanding—of God holding out for us such good things as surpass our understanding. How could something be better than that? We don’t understand, because it surpasses our understanding.

Back to today’s readings: Peter writes about the hope that is in us. It’s that phrase in today’s passage that most stands out to me. “The hope that is in us.” Hope, like faith, something that lives outside, beyond, our logical, reasonable, understanding.

We hope—and we pray—for a way through this pandemic, but few of us have any real understanding of how that might be accomplished. In the beginning of all this—or before this outbreak—how to effect a way through it was beyond anyone’s understanding. Yes, scientists have been working on coronaviruses for years and years, and evidently their efforts arel bearing fruit. There will be a \_\_\_\_\_\_ . . . my limited understanding won’t allow me to fill in the blank, but at present it seems that a vaccine will be the answer. But hope precedes and exceeds all of that essential technical knowledge. Hope is the precursor to any attempt at a solution. Hope is what allows us, enables us, to participate in taking the necessary steps to buy time for scientists and researchers to develop a vaccine without being overwhelmed by even more deaths and fallout from the massive number we’ve already seen.

Today’s Gospel begins with Jesus saying, “If you love me . . .” And there it is, that good thing that bears everything surpassing our understanding: love. And it’s not just more of the kinds of love we know already. He tells the crowd—and you and I are in that crowd—that a force is coming to be with us forever. An Advocate. A Spirit. The Spirit of truth. Because he lives, Jesus tells us, we will live. Those who love God, he says, are loved by God. There’s the shape, the holder of the good things which surpass our understanding—God’s love.

So maybe we should let up, every in once in a while, on trying to understand it all. We have God’s Holy Spirit within us, among us, to teach us how to love each other in a way that surpasses our present understanding.

+ + +