

To Live in Christ
Ephesians 1:3-14
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On this Second Sunday of the Christmas season, the final and twelfth day of Christmas, I've chosen for our text today's epistle lesson, which comes from the Letter to the Ephesians. Writing in the commentary *Feasting on the Word* Episcopal minister Lisa Fischbeck sets the scene for us:

In these opening verses of Ephesians we are taken far from the narrative of the nativity, and beyond the cosmic comfort of the "God with us" aspects of the incarnation. In these verses it is as if the camera lens is backing up and lifting up, until now we are high above the earth, high above the galaxy even, and now we can see that in Christ we have been given a part in God's eternal plan, and we are swept up in a hymn of praise to the glory and wonder of it all.

Hear now, these words from the Letter to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 1:3-14

Praised be the Maker of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavens! Before the world began, God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless and to be full of love; God like-wise predestined us through Christ Jesus to be adopted children—such was God's pleasure and will—that everyone might praise the glory of God's grace which was freely bestowed on us in God's beloved, Jesus Christ.

It is in Christ and through the blood of Christ that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurably generous is God's favor given to us with perfect wisdom and understanding. God has taken pleasure in revealing the mystery of the plan through Christ, to be carried out in the fullness of time; namely, to bring all things—in heaven and on earth—together in Christ.

In Christ we were willed an inheritance; for in the decree of God—and everything is administered according to the divine will and counsel—we were predestined to praise the glory of the Most High by being the first to hope in Christ. In Christ you too were chosen. When you heard the Good News of salvation, the word of truth, and believe in it, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the pledge of our inheritance,

the deposit paid against the full redemption of a people who are God's own—to the praise of God's glory.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God.

What child is this? What sort of human being is this Jesus?

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury and current Master of Magdalene College in Cambridge University, writes that Jesus' contemporaries and immediate followers described him in ways that went "well beyond what is normally ascribable to a human individual." In some ways, this wasn't odd for the time, as Williams notes that in both pagan and Jewish society people believed that human beings could be agents of divine power. But, he notes, the descriptions of Jesus go even beyond this. Decades after his earthly life, Jesus is treated as a currently active agent, the spirit animating a community, the source of "an entirely new frame of reference for perceiving human agency and human hope."

Yes, this goes far beyond what is normally said about a human being. For in this one particular human life his friends and followers experienced something radically new and different and decided to reorient their lives around it, to build a community to sustain the movement, and even to spread what they had heard around the world.

It's an amazing development. How a few mostly illiterate peasants from a backwater of the empire turned into a worldwide and world-changing phenomenon all because of what they experienced in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

But my goal today is not to recount that story, instead it is to focus on a question—"What does it mean to live in Jesus Christ?" Given what was experienced in Jesus and how the original followers of Jesus describe him as the source and plan for their lives and communities, what does that mean and what does it mean for us?

That question was posed by the Presbyterian theologian Johnny B. Hill in his commentary on this passage, and I adopt that question and, in what follows, his basic structure for how to answer it.

What does it mean, for us, to live in Jesus Christ?

Core to Christian belief is the claim that God has most fully revealed God's self in the person of Jesus. This claim, the doctrine of the incarnation, has a multitude of implications, one of the most important of which is that we encounter God in humanity, that divinity exists in solidarity with human experience. Johnny Hill writes, "God meets us, even confronts us, in human history amid our daily lives."

God is not remote, strange, foreign, out there somewhere in the cosmos, hidden and obscure. No, God is here. In us and in our daily lives. We encounter God in our pain and in our joy and in the boring routines of the day. This is the great good news of Christmas—Jesus is Immanuel, God with us.

This central claim evokes our wonder and our praise. For it means so much.

For our care and comfort, we know that when we suffer, God suffers with us, for God knows what it is to suffer like we do.

For our prayer and spiritual practices, we needn't take an esoteric approach, we can connect to God in the most mundane of our daily routines. We can even connect to God in our breath.

For our church organization, we don't require some priest to mediate between us and God, for we are all priests, able to connect directly to God no matter who we are, and freely able to interpret and practice our faith according to the dictates of our consciences.

I could go on, with the myriad implications of this core claim that what it means to live in Jesus is that God meets us in our daily lives.

The second answer to what it means for us to live in Jesus is, as Johnny Hill writes, "To recognize that we do not walk alone. The Christian life is intelligible only within the context of Christian community."

Americans like the myth of the lone individual, making his way in the world, overcoming obstacles. We know it's a myth, because we humans are social animals, and we only thrive when we are part of a network, a community.

There is a tendency, particularly in American Christianity, to over-emphasize the individual. To focus on personal salvation, a personal relationship with Jesus, self-help, individual improvement, or solitary spiritual practice. We can become addicted to the notion that religion and spirituality exist for our comfort, to satisfy our needs.

But that's not biblical wisdom or the great teaching of our tradition. The Christian life is not an individual life; it is a communal life. Our faith provide us meaning and purpose by giving us a mission. It's not focused on our personal comfort, but calling us to service on behalf of God's plan to change the world.

Even I talk often about becoming our best selves and becoming who God has always dreamed for us to be. But I understand that as a communal identity. We can't learn or practice the virtues without other good people to mentor us and work with us. Our flourishing depends upon the wider community. As Hill writes, "Understanding our lives as believers as members of a grand, historic, and holy community is essential to what it means to flourish and thrive in all of life."

We are part of something—a movement, a story, a grand adventure—that is ancient and global and always moving forward into the future, a rich and varied tradition, with glorious music, beautiful art, challenging prophetic voices, courageous social justice action, deep thinking, and profound witnesses to human good. And this, this movement centered on Christ, gives shape to our lives and inspires us to be and do our very best.

To live in Jesus is to be a part of this great, ongoing, work of God.

But there's more.

This passage in Ephesians takes a cosmic perspective about the work of Jesus Christ. These are among the boldest of claims made for Jesus by those who knew him. In Jesus God is revealing God's plans, the plan of the universe, God's purpose for all creation. And, most excitingly, we are part of it.

Rowan Williams writes that Christ is the divine agency that sustains the coherence of the cosmos. "Where he is active, creation itself is brought closer to its ideal convergence." "The life that lives in Jesus is the active source of all relations in the finite world."

Ephesians proclaims that the unity of all things is in Christ. What does that mean? The Christ incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth is the source and harmony of all connections, all relationships. Jesus is at the center of God's plan for the universe, holding everything together.

Yes, as I said before, God meets us in our daily, ordinary lives, but God also calls us to a cosmic quest, to participate in the very plan of the universe. And what is that plan? What is the goal of all creation? The communion of all things together in an ecstatic fellowship of love.

To live in Jesus is to be part of the unity of all things in love. This is the meaning and purpose of our lives. The true understanding of our identity and our call. Everything we do ought to be aimed forward in hope to God's grand goal and work for the cosmos. Everything we do ought to be about expanding love and unity within the world. That is a high and challenging calling indeed.

Because we have been given this role to play in the cosmic project, we can burst forth in joyful praise and celebration, wonder and awe. For our lives have a profound meaning and purpose.

On this Second Sunday of the Christmas season, then, as we continue to contemplate the Christ who is born anew in us and for us, we begin to grasp the revelation of what this means for us. We are God's children, chosen and loved, and given a role in God's plan and work.

And so the Christmas story is an inspiration, a challenge, an invitation, and a call. How do we respond?

Rowan Williams writes that our response should be "an act full of openness to divine purpose and divine love."

As this new year begins, let us resolve to be open to love, open to possibilities, open to the work God has for us to do.