

In Christ

Ephesians 1:3-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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January 5, 2020/ Second Sunday After Christmas/Epiphany Sunday

Well, today is a very significant Sunday. I'm sure you all know what I'm referring to.

It's the gold medal game between Canada and Russian in the World Junior Hockey Championships!

What did you think I was going to say??

I believe they are midway through the first period in Ostrava, Czech Republic. I'm recording the game, so no updates please, if any of you are planning on "multi-tasking" during this morning's sermon. I will interpret any sudden bursts of cheering as joyful affirmation of my sermon. Any groaning or booing, I will ignore.

But of course, today is significant for another reason.

It is the twelfth day of Christmas.

You thought I was going to say the first Sunday of a new decade, didn't you?

Perhaps you feel like Christmas has already come and gone—for me Christmas kind of came to an end when we dropped Claire off at the airport this morning to go back to school—but technically, it hasn't.

For much of Christian history, Christmas was not a single lonely day on the calendar but an entire twelve-day feast that ended with the celebration of Epiphany, which is tomorrow. This day was typically associated with the visit of the Magi to Jesus (in the Western tradition) and the revelation to the Gentiles.

So, Christmas *technically* ends tomorrow. This is why we've left our Christmas nativity display up for one last Sunday. That's why I plugged our tree in one last time while I did my last-minute sermon edits this morning.

This idea that Christmas is an entire feast and not just a mere day is put to song in the memorable Christmas carol, "On the Twelve Days of Christmas."

I was always a bit puzzled by this song when I was a kid. It made little sense for two reasons: 1) I didn't yet know anything about the Christian calendar; and, 2) More importantly, the gifts seemed truly lousy.

Who on earth would want a bunch of geese and hens or maids a milking? What on earth was a lord-a-leaping and who would ever want *one*, much less ten! I'd prefer a new hockey stick, thank you very much.

The song made a bit more sense once I learned a bit about the Christian calendar, but the gifts still seemed terrible.

So, I did a bit of research this week. Apparently, according to Associate Professor Bronwen Neil from the Australian Catholic University, the gifts assigned to each day might have served as teaching tools in the medieval church.

- "On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree," symbolising God (true love) and Jesus Christ (the partridge).
- Two turtle doves were the Old and New Testaments.
- Three French hens represented the three gifts of faith, hope and love.
- Four calling birds were the four gospels.
- Five golden rings were the Books of Moses.
- Six geese a-laying stands for the six days of creation.
- Seven swans a-swimming were the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- Eight maids a-milking were the eight beatitudes.

- Nine ladies dancing were the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit such as charity, peace and kindness.
- Ten lords a-leaping represent the 10 Commandments.
- Eleven pipers piping were the 11 apostles.
- Twelve drummers drumming represented the points of the Apostles Creed.

So, there you go. It's at least possible that there's more to the story than just an irritatingly repetitive song with a bizarre number of birds in it. 😊

At any rate, happy twelfth day of Christmas!

I have no drummers drumming to offer you, and we won't be reciting the twelve points of the Apostles' Creed, but I hope this Christmas season has been a good one for you.

And, of course, having said *all* this about Christmas, I do also want to wish you a very Happy New Year!

The Christian calendar begins with Advent and this is good. I think it is valuable for Christians to try to tell time according to the story of Jesus.

But for most of us, a new calendar year remains the *real* New Year.

And this is not only the first Sunday of a new year; it's also the first Sunday of a new decade!

So, I think it quite naturally feels for many of us like an opportunity to take stock, to reflect upon what is to come, to ponder how we might take further steps toward health and wholeness in the year ahead (and beyond).

And, of course, each year around this time, we are presented with a virtually endless list of things to *do* in 2020, to *do better* on this trip around the sun.

I lost track of the number of articles that I encountered since Wednesday with headlines like, “Ten Steps to Take Control of Your Life in 2020” or “Better Control of Emotions Will Help You Make Better Habits” or “Five Toxic Practices to Avoid as a Parent” or “How to Have that Difficult Conversation in 2020” or “Be a Better Spouse This Year” or “Make this the Year You Take Back Your Body” or “Nine Easy Steps to Decluttering Your Home and Your Life...”

Do this, don't do that, embrace this, leave that behind, change this, get better at that, five steps, ten steps, twelve steps to the revolutionary new you...

After a few days of headlines like this, 2020 was beginning to feel one enormous to-do list.

Everyone wanted to help me become a better version of myself in the year ahead. But I was mostly just feeling exhausted.

And outside of improving myself relationally, professionally, physically, I was also exhorted to think more globally.

I should reduce my carbon footprint. Australia is burning and there are daily ominous warnings about the impact human greed and overconsumption is having on the planet. I should probably drive less, fly less, waste less, eat less, use less plastic, cut back on my demand for energy.

I should also become more civically engaged. In a world increasingly dominated by extreme ideologies, in a world of Twitter wars and “cancel culture” and reactive politics, I should speak up more often, protest more, refuse to cede the airwaves to the nastiest and most polarizing voices.

I should do more to speak up for the marginalized. I should become a more articulate defender of the church, particularly in a cultural context where the church is often seen as irrelevant or worse.

I should spend less time online (this would, at the very least, expose me to less things “to do” in the year ahead!).

And then, on top of all this, my wife tells me that one of the things that I need to do in 2020 is to spend less time reading depressing news articles and more time reading more uplifting, restorative fare.

She's probably right. She usually is.

The news *is* very often bad because bad news sells better than good news. It's easier to monetize people's fear and anxiety, after all.

It's tough to generate clicks with headlines like, "Today was a pretty average day full of a variety of moderately pleasant things happening around the world."

In a world of dying print media where viability is measured by clicks and advertising revenue, everything has to be sensational to even get a look.

I should certainly opt out of all this madness for the sake of my own spiritual and mental health.

Well, now I'm feeling even more exhausted! How about you?

On Friday morning, with everything that I needed to be *doing* to make 2020 a better year for myself and for the planet swimming around in my head, I sat down and reread this morning's text from the first chapter of Paul's letters to the Ephesians.

I found another list. But it was not a list of things that we have to do, but a list of what Jesus has already done for us.

In Ephesians 1:3-14, all of the action words are attributed to God, in Christ, not to us. All of the doing is God's, not ours.

In particular, there was this consistent refrain of "in Christ" or "in him" or "through him" pounding out like a drum beat throughout this passage. Eight times in twelve short verses!

In Christ... blessed with every spiritual blessing (1:3)

God is not a miser when it comes to blessing—he has withheld nothing from us. We have been blessed with belonging, with being part of a family, with the blessing of forgiveness and the gift of new life.

In him... chosen to be holy and blameless (1:4)

Chosen. Loved, called, wanted. What deeper need could there be in the human soul than this?

And we have not been chosen to the exclusion of all others, but for the benefit of others—to put on display the character of God, to imitate his love, welcome, mercy for all around us.

Chosenness is not a way of saying, “Look what we get that others don’t,” but “Look what God has done for all people, look at the role that we get to play in making this love known!”

Through Christ... destined for adoption according to the pleasure of God’s will (1:5)

As non-Jewish Christians, we identify with a family of faith that we have no biological connection to. This is the point Paul makes throughout many of his letters to the early church. This is the “mystery of his will”—that Gentiles are inheritors of salvation with Jews, both by faith *in* and through the faithfulness *of* God.

The family of God is a family dictated not by bloodlines, but by the gracious adoption of God. Bringing together a diverse family of adopted kids is God’s will for all people and all time. This brings God pleasure!

In him... redemption through Christ’s blood (1:7)

To redeem mean to buy back, to liberate, to forgive and restore. To repurpose and recycle what was intended for evil into goodness. This is what happened on the cross.

In him... mystery of his will made known (1:9)

The foolishness of God that is wiser than any human wisdom. A crucified and risen Messiah. A peacemaker instead of a conquering hero. A strength that is displayed in apparent weakness. That way of salvation, open to all who believe, not just those with the right DNA.

In him... all things in heaven and on earth gathered up (1:10)

All things. Good things and bad things, things above and things below, outsiders and insiders, nations and families and histories and personal stories and sins and sorrows and joys and triumphs and everything else. All gathered up in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In Christ... obtained an inheritance (1:11)

We have been given good news both for this life and the next. Nothing good is lost. Nothing is so terrible that it cannot be forgiven. Nothing is so painful that it cannot be healed. There is a

future that awaits the children of God and the created world that is better than we can imagine.

In him... marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit, the pledge of our inheritance, the promise of redemption, to the praise of God's glory (1:13)

All of this is for God's glory—forgiveness, redemption, adoption, gathering up all things, the promise of a healed and restored creation. The Holy Spirit testifies to us that what is promised, what we hope for, will indeed one day be a fully accomplished reality.

The seeds of the kingdom have been planted in Christ.

Christ has left nothing undone. He has not left us with a to-do list when it comes to securing the future for which we were created and for which all creation longs.

All of this is the free gift of God for those who are *in Christ*.

I hope you can hear this at the outset of 2020.

There is nothing you have to *do*—this year or any year—to earn the love of God.

There are no heroic displays of spiritual fervour, no checklist of causes to protest against (or for), no acts of service to the poor, no moral purity to demonstrate, no new theological insights or doctrinal precision to attain to prove that you're serious enough, spiritual enough, committed enough, devoted enough, holy enough for God to accept you.

It is not your job in 2020 to save yourself or the planet, not your job to ensure the future of the church, or any of the endless other tasks that the headlines implicitly or explicitly try to convince you are yours to accomplish.

This is the good news of the gospel.

Isaiah's prophecy does not say, "Arise, shine, for a new and better set of laws has come through which you can make your way to God!" No, it says, "Arise, shine, your light has come."

The good news is that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

God, in Christ, has accomplished everything necessary for your salvation and for the healing and restoration of the world God loves.

God, in Christ, is the one whose will will finally be done, on earth as in heaven, in your life and in mine, in the church and in the world.

It's not as though there's nothing for us to do. We *are* called to be holy. We are called to put the love of Christ on display. We are called to proclaim this gospel in word and deed.

We are to called to live in imitation of Christ, the one who loved us and gave himself for us, to pursue justice, mercy, humility.

We *are* called to be good stewards of what God has made, everything from the planet to our relationships to our own bodies.

All of this is true.

But there's a big difference between frantically trying to do, do, do to become people worthy of God's love and salvation, and pursuing lives of holiness as a *response* to the finished work of God in Christ.

Between those two things is all the difference in the world.

One response is that of fear and anxiety. It is a response that implicitly says, "I don't trust God, I don't actually believe in a grace that outruns all of my folly, I don't actually believe that I or the world will be ok without my frantic effort.

God is viewed as a taskmaster always demanding more. And the result is burnout and anxiety.

The other is love in response to love. It is a response of gratitude and joy. It is faith, hope, and love—the three primary Christian virtues in action.

God is viewed as a gracious parent or the lover of our souls.

God knows us, knows what we are made of, knows our weaknesses and limitations. God doesn't see everything we have failed to do; rather, God views us through the lens of the

finished work of Christ, whose “all-sufficient merit” will “raise us to thy glorious throne,” as we sing in the Advent hymn.

On this last day of Christmas, it’s worth remembering that this is reason for the season.

God enters the world that he created so that through faith in the birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection, ascension, and future return of Christ, we can enter into the life of God.

In Christ is the best place to be—for you, for me, for the church—in 2020 and beyond.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

