

All Things in Him

Ephesians 1:3-14

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by wishing you a very Happy New Year!

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

But for most of us, a new calendar year remains the New Year that *feels* the most real. For some reason, swapping one digit for another on our calendars feels like a turning point, a new beginning, a blank slate.

At least it used to. I'm not sure how you're feeling as 2022 begins. These last two years of pandemic living have perhaps blunted our enthusiasm and expectations for another spin around the sun.

Perhaps you are wearied by the news, wearied by Omicron, wearied by the restrictions, wearied by the whole thing. Perhaps optimism is a bit hard to come by this year.

I get it. Given how the last two years have looked, it's hard not to imagine more of the same for 2022, much as we might hope this is not the case.

Yet, there is still something about a new calendar year that prompts many of us—myself included—to take stock, to reflect upon what is to come, to ponder how we might pursue health and wholeness in the year ahead (and beyond).

Lots of people want to help us with this last part. Perhaps you've noticed?

Each year around this time, we are presented with a virtually endless list of things to *do* in order to make the year ahead better than the one that preceded it.

There is a steady drip of headlines like, “Ten Steps to Take Control of Your Life in 2022” or “Five Toxic Practices to Avoid as a Parent” or “How to Have that Difficult Conversation in

2022” 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.”

We hear talk of “dry Januarys” for those who have imbibed too much over the holidays, digital detoxes for those who just can’t seem to unglue their eyes from their screens.

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...

There is no shortage of voices clamouring to offer the sure-fire path to a better version of you in the year ahead.

And this is just in the personal domain. I haven’t even talked about the voices telling us what we have to do for our fellow human beings or for the planet!

From the personal to the social to the global, there’s plenty to *do* in 2022.

Well, on this first Sunday of 2022, we have another list.

But it’s not a list of things that we have to do. It is, rather, a list of what God has already done for us.

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

Did you notice the consistent refrain of “in Christ” or “in him” or “through him” pounding out like a drum beat throughout the passage? Eight times in twelve short verses!

1:3 — In Christ... blessed with every spiritual blessing.

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.

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

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.

1:5 — Through Christ... destined for adoption according to the pleasure of God's will.

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!

1:7 — In him... redemption through Christ's blood.

To redeem means 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.

Grace, not law, is God's final word on our world and our lives.

1:0 — In him... mystery of his will made known.

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.

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

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.

1:11 — In Christ... obtained an inheritance.

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.

1:13 — 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.

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.

I hope you can hear this at the outset of 2022.

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 2022 to save yourself or the planet, not your job to ensure the future of the church, not your job to end racism or sexism or any of the isms and phobias that beset our world.

It's not your job to accomplish *any* of the endless other tasks that the headlines implicitly or explicitly try to convince you are yours to do.

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 finally be done, on earth as in heaven, in your life and in mine, in the church and in the world.

Now, 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* 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.

The result is freedom and rest.

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.

I was glad that this text from Ephesians showed up on the first Sunday of 2022.

It's important to start the year ahead secure in the conviction that God will indeed gather up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ.

This includes you. Your past, present, and future. Your joys and sorrows, your anxieties and frustrations, your sins and your failures. Your deepest loves and longings. Anything that you might face in the year ahead.

There is no corner of human experience that God has not claimed in Christ.

I was also glad that this text showed up before I jump into our Faith Questions sermon series. The “all things” that have been gathered up in Christ include our questions.

On December 19, I said that my inbox was like a barren, windswept winter landscape. Well, a week later, it had turned into a lush and leafy jungle.

A lot of questions came in. A lot of very good questions. Questions that will not be easy to adequately address in a 25-minute sermon. Some have had to be combined to fit everything in

I am regularly impressed and encouraged by the thoughtfulness of this congregation!

Here’s a look at how the time between now and Lent will look in our sermon series.

January 9: Why Covid? What and how should we think theologically about this pandemic? I thought I’d begin with the least controversial one ☺. What does a uniquely Christian response look like?

January 16: Doug Wiebe

January 23: The Songs of Sinners: What do we do with the good things that come from bad people?

Example of songwriter David Haas who has been accused of fairly serious sexual misconduct. Some of our favourite songs including “Holy is Your Name,” “I Will Come to You in the Silence” are written by him. What do we do about this? How do we think about it in connection with, for example, the psalms of King David which we still read and pray?

Are we too eager to mete our judgment and to purge sinners from our midst? How do we wrestle with this in light of the very real pain that victims of human sin experienced and continue to experience?

January 30: Go and make disciples? How should we think about sharing the good news when the church has sometimes been bad news for people?

The history of Christian mission is filled with many good things. The spread of literacy and healthcare, the founding of orphanages and hospitals and universities. And of course, the good news of Jesus Christ making its way into virtually every corner of the earth.

But it's also brought with it colonialism, white supremacy, individualism, capitalism, and other forms of cultural imperialism that have no connection to the gospel, and which in many cases have done harm.

What do we do about this? Can we still send missionaries? What do we do with Jesus' great commission with our mixed performance in the rearview mirror? Jen Otto is going to be tackling this light and breezy topic for us. ☺

Then we move from some of these more abstract questions to the personal domain for a few weeks.

February 6: What does it mean to say that God chooses us? Does God choose some and not others? What does "chosen" even mean?

February 13: God told me? How do we hear from God? What do we do when we're convinced we've heard from God and things don't turn out the way we hoped or expected? What about when the voice of God is ambiguous or silent?

February 20: How should a Christian respond to the Global Climate Crisis? For many, this is the defining issue of our time and one the church is too often silent on. What should we say? More importantly, what should we do?

February 27: What happens when we die? Are we whisked up to heaven? Is there an intermediate state between our death and the resurrection of the dead? Do we just become worm food? We'll talk about these matters on the last Sunday before we head into the season of Lent.

So, as you can see, some very good and important questions.

I'll warn you at the outset that I may or may not address them to your satisfaction. You may or may not like what I have to say about some of these questions. I'm well aware that some of these questions provoke strong feelings in people and can be quite divisive!

Maybe some of these sermons will provoke more questions in your mind than they answer.

But here, at the outset of this sermon series—before I even attempt to address these questions—I want to remind you, and I want to remind myself, that *all things* really does mean *all things*.

God does indeed have "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10).

This includes our questions. Our questions matter to God. They are important. I wouldn't devote sermons every January and February to them if I didn't think this was the case.

We are called to love God with our minds, to think carefully and compassionately about God and the life of faith.

But as I've said many times, the life of faith is not, "Whoever dies with the most right ideas in their brains about God wins." Every single one of us will go to our graves with some errors in our head.

We cannot earn our way to God by what we do; likewise, we cannot earn our way to God by what and how we think.

And so, hear this good news on the second day of 2022. All things means *all things*.

God will gather up our good ideas and our bad ideas, our right opinions and our wrong ones. And God will bless our and honour our best, most worthy thoughts. And God will forgive us our blunders. And God will smile at our hubris and say, "nice try."

And then, God will do what God does. He will love and forgive and judge and heal and grace us into salvation and newness of life.

This is the hope of the gospel. This is the hope that I pray will guide all of our thinking and questioning and doing in 2022.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

