

Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity
Christmas 2, Ephesians 1:3-14

Merry Christmas!

This is such a common greeting this time of the year. We say it joyfully, lightly, happily...and sometimes through gritted teeth! This familiar greeting has become part of a culture war with some insisting that “Merry Christmas” is the required greeting for this time of year. Using “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays” proves that we’re good Christians, the test makers say. But of course, shunning “Happy Holidays” completely misses that these are, indeed, *holy days*, happy holy-days.

Christmas has become so common. It has become so encumbered with consumerism and social expectations that it’s easy to miss the birth of the child. Christmas is so full of lists—of things to do, things to buy, things to bake—that it’s easy to miss the birth of a child, especially one born so many years ago. The lights of Christmas are beautiful, their light so cozy and welcome in the dark and cold of winter that it’s easy to miss the star that is shining over the place where a baby has been born.

And while we might be tempted to say, “But *we* haven’t missed the birth of the baby,” I wonder. My sense is that we’ve heard the story of Christmas so often, that when we hear the story told one more time, we *already know it*. It’s too familiar. And because it’s so familiar, it’s hard to hear anything new. It’s hard to be surprised by the story. It’s hard to grasp the implications of this story on *our stories*. Because the Christmas story is so familiar, it’s hard to understand or appreciate that the birth of the Christ child *completely alters* what it means to be human in this world.

The writer of Ephesians gets it. We cannot miss his overflowing joy and gratitude. We have a sense that words fail him. That there aren’t enough superlative words to capture and

express the magnitude of joy and gratitude for the birth of the Christ child. The light that was shining over the Christ child is shining brightly and with the angels, this writer is singing God's praises. And his letter invites us in. As he talks about it, we begin to see and imagine Christmas as an entry into a new understanding of who we are as human beings. Christmas opens the door...year after year...and we are invited in—into the presence of the Christ, into the reality of God-with-us.

When the Christ child was born, Creator God opened the heavens and came to earth. As a human. As a baby. This isn't information to know. Nor is it a theological concept to believe in. Rather, this is our reality: heaven came to earth. In the coming of Jesus, the Christ, we have been blessed with "every spiritual *gift* in the *almighty* places." In other words, *we have access* to everything that heaven has to offer! The heavenly story is now woven into the earthly story. And even after decades, even after Jesus the Christ had already ascended into heaven, the light shining over the Christ child was still glowing as this person wrote this letter to the Ephesians. And the Christ light reveals the new reality of the Incarnation. And when we look, we see the light glowing still. And we are changed, transformed. And our stories are changed.

The new story that Christmas gives to us is a story that begins *in the beginning*. Creator God "chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world to be holy and *without blemish*." Before the foundation of the world, within the love of Creator God, the story is that we are "holy and without blemish." This is what the birth of the Christ reveals. Our stories don't begin with how bad and terrible we are, they begin *at creation*. And already at creation, before the foundation of the world, our story, the story of humanity, is that we would be adopted into the Creator's family. To be adopted into the Creator's family...what a holy, heavenly calling!

Again, this isn't information to know or theology to believe in. This is our reality. This is our story. What the Incarnation reveals is that the Jesus story isn't just his story, it is our story as well. We too have been gloriously graced! We too are recipients of lavish grace, freely given. Because this is God's desire. We are graced, not because we earn it, but because *God is a gracious God*. We are graced not because we deserve it but because *it is God's desire* to grace us. This is our story.

There are several things that the Ephesians writer is revealing here for us. Subtle things with big implications. Subtle things that completely change our understandings of how the world, and how God works.

A first thing is that when the writer uses the language of "holy and without blemish," he is invoking the sacrificial system. And a bit later he writes that we have "release through [Christ's] blood." The writer is calling for a transformation, a conversion, in how we understand salvation. If we have thought that God required a sacrifice so that our sins could be forgiven—so that we would be saved—this passage tells a different story. There was an understanding in ancient times that God required an animal to be killed. That God needed the spilled blood of a spotless animal to make us right with God and to keep the world in order. And once the blood would be spilled, *then* and only then would God look on us with favor and grace. But the revelation in this passage is that with the birth of the Christ child, there is *jubilee*. Sins, transgressions, unfaithfulness...all of it...with the birth of Christ, our stories change from the need to make sacrifices in order to appease God to a story of jubilee. Our sins are already released. It is God's gracious jubilee, lavishing given to us, that saves us, that liberates and heals us. Not sacrifices. Not the blood of a slaughtered creature. But God's lavish and gracious jubilee.

There are some who hear this reference to blood and assume that it is because Jesus was crucified that our sins are forgiven. That Jesus was holy and without blemish and therefore could be offered as a sacrifice. No. That is an old story. That is a pre-Christmas story. Because at Christmas the Christ child is born. The Christ child, who was fathered by the Holy Spirit. The Christ child has a heavenly bloodline. And the Ephesians writer is clear that from the beginning, God destined us for adoption through Jesus the Christ, “according to the good pleasure of his desire, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely graced on us in the Beloved.”

We have been *adopted*, not sacrificed, into the family of God. It is because Creator God is abundantly gracious that we are God’s children. The story of heaven is a story of love and grace and jubilee. At Christmas, with the birth of the Christ child, the story of heaven comes to earth. And becomes our story.

The story we have before Christmas is a story of sacrificial violence and death. A story that understands God to be a god that wants sacrifices, a god who *desires* the blood of an unblemished innocent on the altar. And when we worship a god who not only condones violence, but wants blood, then we learn to tell stories of violence and spilled blood. Our history books are filled with such stories, of wars and conquests. And our parks are filled with monuments memorializing these wars. Our news is full of headlines telling the story of America’s greatness, evidenced by our military’s ability to target and kill our enemies. The most recent assassination of an Iranian military leader is yet another enactment of the same story. These are the very real stories that we live in. And whether we like it or not, they teach us and shape us. This is how the world works. Violence and death are its lifeblood.

But then the Christ child is born. And when this Baby was born, God came to us, to be with us, to live with us. At Christmas, heaven comes to earth; God comes to be with us.

God's presence with us invites us into a profound conversion, a conversion from death to new birth, to life and aliveness; a conversion from punishment to jubilee; a conversion from revenge and retaliation to mercy and reconciliation; a conversion from not being enough, not being loved or loveable, to adoption *with an inheritance*. With conversion comes a new story. A story in which we are the adopted and beloved children of God. A story in which we are heirs to the riches of grace and its full access to the Holy Spirit. This is the new story to live into. And new story to form us and transform us.

We need Christmas to come every year because conversion is a long, slow process. And telling new stories doesn't happen in one year. There will be personal transformations that happen in an instant, but the transformation of communities takes time...God's time...and many Christmases.

May the light of the Christ child continue to shine on us and into our world.

May we open ourselves to receive and share all the gifts that have been given to us.

May we know ourselves as sons and daughters who have been adopted into the Creator's family, as sisters and brothers to Jesus, the Christ.

And may we begin telling our stories in new ways—holy, grace-filled, Christmas stories!