

All Things New | How the Incarnation Changes Everything

A New Humanity

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12.21.14 (Advent **FOUR**)

Ephesians 2.14-3.6, 10-11; Micah 5.2-5

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ¹⁵ by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. ¹⁷ AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; ¹⁸ for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, ²¹ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

^{3,1}For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- ² if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; ³ that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. ⁴ By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; ⁶ to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel... ¹⁰ so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord.

^{Micah 5} "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity... ⁵ This One will be our peace.

This is the FOURTH Sunday in Advent, the season that prepares us to celebrate the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

And this year, the Advent sermons look at HOW the Advent/Coming of God in Jesus Christ, how God becoming human makes things NEW. Last week we saw that there's a NEW ME...as I said "T.J. 2.0". For people who receive this gift there's personal transformation and ongoing renewal that leads to love... ethical change NOT motivated by fear but by grace...not simply because I have to but WANT to.

Today, we see, as promised, that THIS is NOT simply an individual transformation...but it has huge ramifications for human community, for human relationships, for cities, for societies. It's a frequent

theme of the New Testament...a theme predicted and anticipated from the start of the Bible and amplified in the prophets i.e. the coming of shalom or peace, relational well-being from God embodied in one Person – “this One is our PEACE”.

This is NOT a little thing: if the Christian Church can demonstrate to our OWN racially divided culture a new way to relate – THAT’S A BIG DEAL. And IF one consequence of believing the Gospel (basic message of Christianity) if one result is that people who would normally be enemies become friends – then, THIS is something the Church has to think about, to study, to celebrate and to proclaim loud and clear to a deeply fragmented nation and world.

Let’s look at it today – how the Incarnation produces a NEW HUMANITY/man (v.15): 1) The Tenacious Preparation for it 2) The Sudden Revelation of it and 3) The Exciting Participation in the NEW HUMANITY.

From the start...with God calling Abraham and Sarah to become His people...and IN that calling we see these two themes: 1) separateness from the Nations and 2) blessing TO the nations. That’s Israel’s calling.

In other words, if you want to get a broad-stroke picture of the entire Bible (and that’s what Paul’s doing here in Ephesians), you have to see that, at the start (12 chapters IN) God chooses Abraham and his descendants as the vehicle that will reveal His own Purposes and Character to the world. God will show to the whole world that He is separate and totally different from all the man-made gods (YHWH is holy) AND through His holy, called out, separated people, HE will bless all the other people/nations: Separation and Blessing demonstrated through Abraham’s people.

Separation or holiness or specialness was reinforced in the Law. The Law constantly reminded the Hebrew people that YHWH was different from idols and that THEY were different because they belonged to the Unique God. Their clothing couldn’t MINGLE two kinds of fiber (Deu 22.11) ...had to be separated. Their food was different... their crops were different (couldn't plant beans and wheat in the same field – had to be separate [Lev 19.19]). They were the uniquely chosen people of the Unique God – separated... AND they were separated SO they could show God to the nations that didn't know Him. They were to be a blessing to all the nations. It was right there in the initial calling to Abraham: “In you will all the nations be blessed”.

But...this end-game, this ultimate purpose, “that God is blessing US so that all the nations can know HIM” – that wasn’t always clear to the Israelites. And because all Israelites are human beings and all human beings are sinners...their mission to be separate often lacked the “blessing-motive” and degenerated into segregation for segregation’s sake.

This is why the Prophet Jonah is scandalized when God tells him to preach to a Gentile Nation – Nineveh. And he runs in the other direction; leaves Joppa and charts a boat for Spain. And yet the Gentile sailors know that Jonah’s God is the real Unique God and they complain to Jonah, “Why didn’t you tell us?!” And the truth is, Jonah saw the calling to be separated from the Gentiles but had missed the corresponding calling to be a blessing TO the Gentiles...but God wanted both. (“In you will all nations be blessed”)

And when the twin callings of separation AND blessing were not held together, Israel's separateness degenerated into a kind of racism...a kind of racial superiority divorced from the knowledge that they were chosen by grace (Deu 7.6-8) and NOT because they were, in any way, superior to the Nations.

But didn't God make a distinct separation between the Jews and the Gentiles? Yes! A dividing wall, the Law reminded them in every way that He was distinct from all man-made gods and that THEY were His people and thus distinct from all other people... SO THAT...they could show the Nations that THIS is the One and Only True God...

This is why I called it "The Tenacious Preparation": it was always God's intention to separate the Jewish People from the Nations IN ORDER TO make them a blessing to the Nations... but they lost their sense of undeserved blessing and grace and their separateness became an end in itself...just another form of racial superiority... BUT God was persistent... tenacious... determined and was true to His original purpose – to bless ALL Nations through His own chosen Nation.

And then suddenly...it was revealed...unmistakably so that His people could NO LONGER miss it – no longer divide the dual mission of separateness FROM the Nations for Blessing TO the Nations.

God, the HOLY ONE, came near...to BLESS. He satisfied the demands of the Law that created the division of Jews and Gentiles... God became a Jewish Man in order to satisfy His own Law...He became the embodiment of Israel in order to fulfill Israel's mission and BLESS THE NATIONS as Israel had failed to do. Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, the embodiment Israel, the seed of Abraham satisfied the Law of separateness in order to bless all nations.

In doing so, He eradicated the ONE RACIAL DIVISION that God not only sanctioned but actually established.

He made both Jewish people and Gentile people ONE NEW MAN with one shared way of access to God. There is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. (Col 3.11 as we read last week). That truth is repeated again and again in the New Testament: something has happened that makes it crystal clear like never before – we are all of us, every single one, regardless of our labels and those categories that mean so much to us (even very basic markers like jobs, income/education levels even our gender "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3.28)

We are ALL ...now...quite clearly...(clearer than ever before) on the same level – we are ALL made in the image of God; we are ALL fallen and failed and sinful and disqualified before God AND we are ALL...any who receive the gift by faith WE ARE COVERED! God has satisfied His own demands FOR us, by being born a Human Being and completing our "To-Do" list. In Jesus Christ He lives the HOLY LIFE and He takes the blame for our sins so all nations are blessed in Him.

We are all on the same level – those near to this message and those far from it (Jews and Gentiles alike) have been granted the same access to the Father through what Jesus Christ has done. Gentile people who believe in this Way and Jewish people who believe in this Way are FELLOW HEIRS AND

FELLOW MEMBERS OF THE BODY, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. He Himself IS our shalom...and our petty labels can not, must not, WILL NOT BE ABLE to divide us from one another...THIS ONE IS OUR PEACE.

God has made a new way to be human – a new man, a new basis for significance NOT based on nationality or income or gender or tribe or political affiliation. All those tags and identifiers that are so important to the OLD WAY of being human are now infinitely less important than that ONE identifier: “I am reconciled to God...have access to the Father...am fitted into the new and living Temple...a fellow heir, fellow member of the Body, a fellow partaker of the promise IN CHRIST JESUS THROUGH THE GOSPEL.”

The doing and dying of Jesus Christ, the Gospel, the grace of God now determines who I am far more than those labels that used to define me...AND I am being enabled to relate to YOU (fellow partakers) NOT on the basis of what we DO or DON'T have in common – but...by grace... brothers, sisters in a new humanity, a new way to be human.

So...a tenacious preparation FOR it... a sudden revelation OF it and THIRD, an exciting participation IN this new humanity; let's look at that.

1) When ministers talk about “exciting” it's often a euphemism for something hard or challenging... and this IS ...IT'S both...It's thrilling AND a challenge.

Think of Jonah...a prophet! You'd think he'd have it down but he didn't. And I know: he hadn't seen the sudden revelation of this IN Jesus Christ...but still... he was God's prophet and should have seen God's purposes more clearly. Maybe that's a signal that racial superiority and class superiority and these other labels are NOT easy to overcome. The old way of doing humanity is deeply ingrained.

Think of Simon Peter. He'd seen the great and sudden revelation of the new humanity – the New Adam! He was Jesus Christ's closest disciple.

He was there at the great reversal of Babel, that symbolic miracle of Pentecost that propelled the Church from Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth... but then he needed that triple vision on the roof in Joppa (that was where Jonah went wrong in running away from the Gentiles and now Simon Bar Jonah has a revelation at the same place that should put the Church back on track). He saw that sheet come down from above with unclean animals and heard the words, “Kill and eat”... Each time he said, “I'll never eat common/unclean food, Lord!” and then Simon Bar Jonah hears, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” (Act 10.15) THREE times repeated!

Then he's asked to go to a Gentile home (unclean – yuck!) but he goes and he preaches the gospel and the Holy Spirit comes upon those unclean gentiles and takes up residence in them, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”... Then Peter reports on it to all those self-righteous Jewish Christians so convinced of their racial superiority and Peter says, “Guys! It ain't so! We are ALL – Jewish OR Gentile ONLY acceptable to God because of what Jesus Christ did – a NEW way to be human, not based on race ...but on grace!”

And you'd think that'd do it! But in Galatians ch. 2 the old racist Simon Peter shows up again and acts as if Jewish-ness is superior... Read it – how Paul had to publically correct him and say, “Peter, you're not walking in line with the Gospel...you've gone back to the old way of being human!”

Point is: we're all a lot more hung up on this stuff than we realize. And only by coming back to the gospel again and again are we able to root out our pride and prejudices and learn this new way.

#2 – We're all self-centered and more hung up on race and these other markers than we think (think of Peter!) but we can also be highly motivated to change because the stakes are high. Our own culture (not to mention the wider world!) NEEDS a model and a picture of this new way to be human. We are, like little Bethlehem, such an underwhelming strategy (the Church – this church) but in this weak way the manifold wisdom of God is now made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (3.1). In other words WE can model to the world that Jesus Christ has brought us together. Join a home group or find some way to make friends with people in this church who are different – do it on the basis of the gospel (new way to be human).

We may be natural enemies or just not care about “those kind of people” but NOW we are in this new humanity. As the Body of Christ the Incarnation continues IN US and we have something to say...really to SHOW to a world that can sometimes tolerate differences...but needs to see how to LOVE.

As we think about the much publicized cases of Eric Garner (NY) and Michael Brown (MO) – we have resources in the Gospel to help us see – for instance, all people are created in the image of God...all people are sinners...(syllogism) all people are sinners, police officers are people ergo police officers are sinners AND... according to God's commands (especially the 5th Command!) we are all required to show respect to those in authority AND those in authority are required to be just and honorable and will answer to a HIGHER STANDARD – that's only PART of how the gospel worldview equips us to see the world...WE PRAY (for those who have lost love ones and for the police and we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.”) And we preach – Jesus Christ IS OUR PEACE!

Learn toleration for cultural differences...learn empathy ...listen...not simply putting up with different people but learning...eating their foods...embracing – THIS requires ongoing renewal, new grace and grace is received by repenting and believing...

Paul calls it a stewardship /calling... and we are living in a part of the world where there are a lot of different kinds of people and therefore REAL opportunities to put grace to the test...to show the world what the New Humanity, Jesus Christ IS our peace...and we can show glimpses to a world desperately in need of SHALOM.