



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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But God!

Ephesians 2:1-10

Fr. William Klock

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Earlier this week Veronica and I watched an episode of the X Files that unintentionally had some pretty sound theology embedded in the story. Agents Mulder and Scully were called to investigate some strange goings-on in a small town—as usual. As it turned out, a guy cleaning out an abandoned storage locker found a genie. And the genie gave him three wishes. As you would expect, it didn't go well. He wished to be able to make himself invisible so that he could spy on people. And not being terribly bright, he promptly got killed crossing the street, because he was...invisible. His brother claimed the genie and didn't fare any better. His wish ended up blowing up his house with him in it. And so Mulder ended up, unexpectedly, with the genie and three wishes. And he asked the genie why the wishing thing always ends in disaster and the genie told him that it's because people are stupid and selfish. So Mulder thought long and hard and in his best effort at altruism, he wished for world peace. St. Paul would call it *shalom*. And he went outside to discover that he was the only person left on earth. Because the genie knew fallen human nature and getting rid of all of us was the only way to bring world peace. Thankfully, Mulder had two more wishes so he could undo the first and set the genie free with the third.

And I thought that St. Paul would probably have a bit of a chuckle at that. Because Paul knew the same thing the genie knew: we are all sinners, idolaters who worship anything and everything but the God who created us and loves us. And,

like Agent Mulder, but unlike the genie, Paul also knew that there is no *shalom* without human beings in our rightful place. Creation groans in eager longing for the day God will finally set us to rights, he says in Romans, Creation waits for the day when God restores us to our position as his stewards, to rule creation and to serve him in his temple. That, Brothers and Sisters, is *shalom*, peace. Creation can never be complete without us in our proper place—filling the vocation God created us for in the first place. That's why God doesn't just "Deal with evil" like so many people want him to. Like the genie, he'd just have to remove us all from creation—and that's not how creation is supposed to be. This is why Paul practically shouts out *ho de Theos*, at the beginning of Ephesians 2:4: "But God!" Because he knew that in setting creation to rights, God can and will, first, set us and our fallen, sinful hearts to rights—something no genie could ever do.

And so far, in Ephesians 1, Paul has begun with a great shout of praise for what God has done in Jesus the Messiah and then he's told the Ephesians how he prays for them—that they would know, that they would understand this great story of redemption, the power behind it to renew creation, so that they can be part of this story that ends with the knowledge of the glory of God filling the earth. Remember at the end of chapter one, closing his prayer for them, he wrote about the church, united with Jesus and full of the Spirit being the "fullness of the one who fills all in all." It's a prayer that God, that Jesus, that the Spirit, that the scriptures would form and shape them and truly make them the church. And while we might miss the significance of Paul's language of filling and fullness and being all in all, it was not lost on the Ephesians. *This was temple language.*

It's the language of God coming to dwell with his people. The way he did with Adam and Eve in the garden.

The story ever since has pointing in that direction. The restoration of God's temple, the return of his presence, and God dwelling with his people forever. This is what the Exodus was all about. God rescued and created a people, he gave them a law to make and to keep them pure and holy, so that he could take up his residence in their midst—so that he could *tabernacle* with them. It wasn't perfect. The people needed to offer sacrifices repeatedly so that they could be purified by that blood. A veil separated them from the direct presence of the Almighty. But this model of new creation pointed forward to the day when God would set his people and his creation fully to rights. The long exile, first from the promised land and the temple, then from the presence of God, primed Israel with hope for that coming day. And now Paul's ready to explain to the church that they—that we—are the beginning of that fulfillment. In us, God has established a new temple. By the blood of Jesus he has purified us. Through the gift of his Spirit he has taken up his dwelling in us. He has begun the work of setting our hearts to rights. And in that, he has made us the working model of his new creation and stewards of his good news—that we might, to use the language he used with Adam and Eve, that we might be fruitful and multiply, spreading the gospel, until the earth is filled with the knowledge of his glory.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the story we need to inhabit. Too often Christians have got it backwards. We think the gospel story is a story of escape from creation—that in Jesus, God forgives our sins, so that someday he can take us away from earth and up to heaven to live with him. But it's really just the opposite. Through the blood of Jesus he has purified us and made us fit to be his holy temple, so that *he can dwell with us*. Jesus is the model, Immanuel, *God with us*. This is the story Paul wants to get across in Ephesians 2. Ideally we'd cover the whole chapter all at once, but we'll have to break it into two halves. This

temple story will jump out at us in the second half. The first half begins with our sin problem.

How did these mostly Gentile Christians in Ephesus find themselves in this oh so Jewish story? He writes beginning at verse 1, “Well, you were dead because of your offenses and sins in which you used to walk, keeping in step with the world’s ‘present age’; in step, too, with the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit who is, even now, amongst the children of disobedience.”

“You”—he’s addressing them as Gentiles. In verse 3 he’ll link them with “us”—the Jews. You were dead. Because you walked—there’s that great word *peripateo* again—you walked, you lived a life of offense and sin against God. And we can’t hear these two words sin and death together without it taking us back to Genesis. And if we go back to Genesis 3 and Adam and Eve’s choice to listen to the serpent’s lie, not just to disobey God, but to reject their vocation as priests of God’s temple and to try to become gods themselves, if go way back to the beginning of the story there, we should understand that sin and death aren’t about God just setting up a bunch of rules and then condemning the people who disobey them. Sin, and especially “offence”, are what we call it when human beings, created to bear God’s image—that means to be his priests and his representatives in the temple, in creation—sin and offence are what we call it when we reject that vocation. When we try to take the temple for ourselves. And death is not an arbitrary punishment, but the natural result of turning away from the God who is the source of life. That’s why the wages of sin is death.

And, of course, once humanity chose that path of disobedience and death it just snowballed. Human culture and even those unseen powers that God had put in place to oversee the nations went horribly wrong. The Jews called it the present evil age, because they

lived in hope of the age to come when God would set creation to rights. But the Gentiles had no hope. They just went with the sinful flow. We see it today as the world rejects Christianity. Jeffrey Epstein and his cabal of degenerate, paedophile friends would have been right at home in pagan Greece or Rome and they’re exactly what you get when a people rejects God. The devil didn’t just tempt the man and woman to reject God. He and his cronies continue to steer and influence fallen humanity. Paul will have more to say about this later when he writes about “principalities and powers”. In our baptismal rite, we put this in terms of the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

All these forces work together to keep humanity lost in idolatry and sin. And so far as this goes, Paul is just restating the standard Jewish analysis of the Gentiles. But then in verse 3 Paul goes on and writes, “We all used to live this way, in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of flesh and mind. We, too—he means he and his fellow Jews—were by nature children of wrath, just like everyone else.” Paul recognised that even though his own people had the *torah*, God’s law, and were trying to live by it, they were suffering the same problem as the Gentiles. The corrupt desires of flesh and mind had just as much a grip on Israel as they did the peoples of the nations. The whole world, all of humanity was mired in darkness, Jew and gentile alike.

And this where, at the beginning of verse 4 Paul interjects this powerful, earth shattering: “But God!” Into the darkness, into the hopelessness, into the condemnation, into the death, God intervenes to bring light, to bring hope, to bring deliverance, to bring life. “But God,” Paul writes, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, he took us at the very point where we were dead through our offenses, and made us alive together with the Messiah. Yes, by grace you are saved!”

Israel knew about God’s mercy and love. The story they told of their history with God was full of mercy and grace. And occasionally some gentile would hear that story and be drawn to it, because the God of Israel was unlike any of the other gods. Zeus and Poseidon and Hades, Aphrodite and Artemis, people might believe all sorts of things about them, but no one ever believed that the gods loved them. The gods served themselves. If they sometimes showed favour to this person or to that city, it wasn’t because of love; it was to further their own schemes and ambitions. No Greek or Roman—no Egyptian or Persian, for that matter—would have ever said of their gods anything even remotely like what Paul says here of the God of Israel: that he is rich in mercy, that he loves us with a great love, or that he has shown us kindness. Zeus and Hera, Osiris and Isis, they were all purely transactional. If you did something good for them and you were lucky, they *might* do something nice for you. We need to be careful, because Christians can fall into the same pagan way of thinking about God—making deals with him or treating him like a divine vending machine. But Paul makes it clear that the God of Israel isn’t like that. Instead, he’s full of mercy and love and kindness. Yes, his purpose is to fill the earth with his glory, but he is glorious precisely because he is unlike the gods humans dream up. He is full of mercy and love.

And Paul reminds the Ephesians: By his grace, God has taken what he did for Jesus when he raised him from death, and has made it true of us. If we are “in the Messiah”, then we are alive together with him. He goes on in verse 6: “He raised us up with him and made us sit with him, in the heavenly places in Messiah Jesus. This was so that in the ages to come he could show just how unbelievably rich his grace is, the kindness he has shown us in Messiah Jesus.” This is how God reveals his glory. Not merely with a

show of strength or power, but by showing his grace.

Again, what is true of Jesus is true of the church—of the Ephesians Christians, and of us. And it's not just Jesus' resurrection, his being made alive again. Paul has said that before. But here he also stresses that Jesus' ascension is somehow true of us too. God didn't just make us alive with Jesus the King; he's made us alive in order to sit us with the Messiah, with the King in the heavenly places. So Jesus ascended to sit at the right hand of his Father. He's the King and that's what kings do: they take their thrones and they rule. But Paul is saying that if we are "in the Messiah", then we're right there with him.

The resurrection part of that, the being made alive with Jesus probably isn't too hard for us to wrap our heads around. In Jesus, God has made us a promise. Even though we'll die, because we are in the Messiah, he will raise us to life again just as he did with Jesus. If we have any doubts, Paul would remind us that God has filled us with his Spirit to give us a taste of and downpayment on resurrection life with him. That part I think we can pretty well wrap our heads around. But what does it mean to be seated with him in the heavenlies?

This is where we need to make sure we've got the story right. Because if we understand the climax of the story as someday escaping from earth, as escaping our bodies, to live a sort of disembodied spiritual life forever in heaven, we're going to miss Paul's point. Again, the story isn't about us going up; it's about God making us fit, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, to be his temple—so that he can *come down—to us*.

Consider: Jesus has already done this. Remember the end of Chapter 1, where Paul said that Jesus is the one in whom heaven and earth—all of creation—are summed up, are brought together, are unified, the way it was in

the beginning: heaven and earth overlapping, God and human beings dwelling together. That's how it began and that's the ending towards which God is taking history—to set his broken, sin-sundered creation to rights. Jesus is the prototype, the signpost who points us to, who shows us what God's future will be like. In him, God has joined our nature to his own. In him, heaven and earth have been brought back together. Think of that great Ascension Day hymns, "See the Conqueror Mounts in Triumph": He has raised our human nature, on the clouds to God's right hand; there we sit in heavenly places, there with him in glory stand." Brothers and Sisters, Jesus is the temple *in person*. And Jesus is the whole of creation—heaven and earth—in miniature.

And what is true of him is equally true of those who are united with him by God's grace. As we'll see in the second half of the chapter, the church—the Ephesian Christians and you and me—we are also that temple and if we have any doubts, all we need to remember is that God has come to dwell in us in the person of his Spirit. And remember the goal, the one promised by the prophets so long before, the goal is for the knowledge of the glory of God to fill the earth. The church is his means of making that happen. He didn't just send his son to be the on-earth-as-in-heaven man, through his son and through his Spirit he has created a whole community of on-earth-as-in-heaven people to do just that: to live out in our lives, in our relationships, in our community heaven on earth—to be a people who show the world God's love and mercy and grace and kindness. To be a working model of his new creation and to give the world a taste of that future right now. To reveal the glory and the beauty and goodness of God in our lives and in our own proclamation so that everyone around us will know his glory and be drawn to him.

This is then what Paul gets at in verses 8-10. He writes, "For you have been saved by grace, through faith. This is not of your own doing; it is God's gift. It isn't on the basis of works, so no one is able to boast. You see, we are his workmanship, created in Messiah Jesus for the good works that he prepared, ahead of time, so that we should walk in them." What does he mean? Well, Paul's reminding them that there was a time when Jews and gentiles were separated by the law, by *torah*. God poured out his grace on Israel, set them apart with his law as a way to teach them how to love him and to love their neighbours, so that they could be a light to the gentiles—so they could make his glory known in the earth. Israel failed in that mission, but God acted in grace again. He gave his son to be the faithful Israelite and in Jesus, Israel's mission to witness the grace and glory of God was fulfilled. And now these gentile Ephesians who have encountered the risen Jesus, who have heard the gospel, and been filled with God's Spirit—they've been united together with faithful Jews in Messiah Jesus. In them, God's promises—all the way back to Abraham and even to Adam—are being fulfilled. In them, God's glory is on display before the nations. And there is no longer a need for the division that had been given by *torah*. Now the Spirit is teaching them and enabling them to love God and to love each other for all the world to see. In Jesus and the Spirit, God has made them a people who are fulfilling the very thing that *torah* was meant to do, not just because we keep a set of rules or live according to a certain moral code—there's a sense in which we actually do do that—but because, through Jesus and the Spirit we actually live out and put on display the new creation, God's future that is breaking into the world in the midst of the old.

Paul puts it beautifully, but in a way we might miss in English translation, when he says that we—the church—are God's "workmanship". The Greek

word is *poiema*. We get our word “poem” from it. The Greek word doesn’t mean “poem”—maybe we could almost say it means “artwork”. In the Old Testament it’s often used to describe the creative work of God. In other places it’s used to describe things that are carefully and meticulously crafted for his use, like the garments of the priests or the vessels of the tabernacle. Brothers and Sisters, we—the church—are God’s carefully, purposefully, and wonderfully created masterpiece. He’s given his son and he’s given his Spirit to craft, to create, to work us into something good—to restore his broken creation in us. And, Paul sums up, God has done this work in us so that in our own lives and in the life of the church together, we can do such good work too. Not doing good works to please him or to earn his favour. That would be like going back to the pagan world of people doing things to manipulate the gods. God is pleased by our good works, but he’s created and enabled us to do good works as a way of showing his new creation to the world, a way of fulfilling the law he had given to Israel, as a way of loving him and loving each other—ultimately as a way to restore us to that vocation as his image bearers, to be the priests of his temple who steward his goodness and his good rule for the sake of creation.

Brothers and Sisters, this is the story that God has written for us. The story of our priesthood, reject and lost, but now restored through Jesus and the Spirit, a story of renewal and a story of hope—as it points us toward the day when God finishes his great work of bringing heaven and earth back together, of the day when he will return to dwell with us as he did in the beginning. This the story that reminds what Jesus and the Spirit have made us. It’s the story that reminds us of our vocation as the church—that we’re not just the people who long for things to be on earth as they are in heaven; we’re the people who find our very identity in Jesus, the heaven-and-earth

Messiah, and who are, ourselves, called to be the heaven-on-earth people—a people who reflect back to the world God’s love and grace, his justice and goodness, who are by our very redemption witnesses of his faithfulness and, above all, his glory. We are his workmanship. May the world, by God’s grace, see his glory in us and in our life together.

Let’s pray: Heavenly Father, our Collect today reminded us that without love, nothing we do is worth anything. Fill us with your grace, that we might truly love. Love you. Love our neighbours. Making us the heaven-on-earth people you intend for us to be, so that the world may see your glory on display in your church. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.