Invitation to the Table

Galatians 4:6-7 reminds us that because we are children of God, God has sent the Spirit into our hearts, to cry “Abba…” The text translates Abba as “Father,” but the word is a familiar variation meaning more like our word, “Daddy.” The feeling is that of a loving family.

The text continues, “…so we are no longer slaves, but children of God, and heirs of God.”

We come to Christ’s table as ones who’ve been fully adopted into God’s family; we belong at this Table—not by any merit or value we have accrued, but because God chooses us. Come to the family table. Eat, drink, and remember the one who made your place at the table.

Our communion hymn is #404, “A Hymn of Joy We Sing”

Pastoral Prayer

One of the most common things we hear around Christmas is, "They've taken Christ out of Christmas." It's hard to deny that Christ isn't always visible when "It's Beginning to Look a lot like Christmas."

Last year, as my kids began asking for my "Christmas List," I started to put one together. About that same time, I ran across this from my colleague, Mark Sandlin. It's called "My Grown-Up Christmas List." It spoke to me, and I played with it, adding some, rewording some. And in the process, I realized that "My Grown Up Christmas List" was made up of ways to keep Christ in Christmas. Here it is, "My Grown Up Christmas List." My prayer for Christmas:

God in heaven, Christ on Earth, Holy Spirit within us, hear my prayer for Christmas:

I want everyone to be loved deeply by someone...
and I want them to know without any doubt that they are loved.
Life is hard enough without that.

I want the childhood lesson of sharing to carry over into adulthood.
It could solve homelessness, hunger, and poverty in an instant.

I want the love of money and power to be overcome with love for each other
and a recognition of the value of every life.

I want us each to see we are much more alike than different
and, because of it, always focus on the similarities.

I want there never to be another child who is made to feel
forgotten, unwanted, unloved.

I want it to be impossible to hide heartache behind a smile,
so we can always know who to hug.

I want those who are sick to always be cared for
and never worried about the cost of care.

I want us all to see that life is the gift itself.
Not the stuff wrapped in pretty paper this season.
Not the money we earn.
Not the job we do.
Not the lifestyle we lead.
Not the treasures we store up.
Life.
Each minute.
Each second.
Each moment.
Is a gift.

I want us to spent more time celebrating that
and less time struggling through it...
struggling through it
because we've been taught to believe
the real gift is
the money,
the lifestyle,
the...
stuff.

I want peace.
For me.
For us.
For our communities.
For the world.
I know, some will say
it's unrealistic,
but it is also beautiful.
And, I happen to believe
that something that beautiful
is worth wishing for,
working towards,
believing in.

And, that's my Grown Up Christmas Wish that will keep Christ in Christmas. Amen.

The First Incarnation

EPHESIANS 1:3-14 (NRSVUE) ***Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4]just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. [5]He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, [6]to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. [7]In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace [8]that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight [9]he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, [10]as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. [11]In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, [12]so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. [13]In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; [14]this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.***

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Let's deal with the elephant in the room first. Ephesians is written in the best Greek of the New Testament, but even in its eloquence, neither in the Greek nor translated into English, is it capable of communicating fully the reality today's reading addresses. Human language fails.

The distraction is a word used in verses 5 and 11. In the original language, the word is προορίζω. I reviewed 13 English versions, and in today's reading from the NRSVUE and two other English versions[1] it's translated "destined." Four[2] versions render it "predestined;" and one[3] translates it "foreordained."

The other five versions I surveyed don't translate it, but interpret it with complete sentences; for example, the NLT says, ***"God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ."***

13 versions; eight different translations. It's as if the whole community of biblical scholarship can't agree on that one word. An entire doctrine of predestination has emerged from that one word, which appears only six times in the Bible. One of those six times has nothing to do with God, and the other five times are all in the body of writings under the name of Paul.

Some see a difference between something being foreordained and being fore known; but something foreknown can't be avoided; and if it can be avoided, it's neither foreknown nor foreordained; so the distinction is irrelevant. The debate over predestination versus free will has sometimes been hostile and has divided the church, all of which contradicts anything related to Jesus of Nazareth.

[1] CEB and RSV.
[2] KJV, Net, NIV, and Amp.
[3] ASV

Despite a variety of interpretations, one element remains consistent in every translation in every language: regardless how one translates or interprets the problematic word, the key is that it happens "in Christ." Nothing in the text requires a debate about election and predestination as we traditionally understand it.

Again, the key is "in Christ." Christ is not a proper name. It's the Greek translation of the Hebrew word, Mashiach (Messiah in English) and was the title given to kings and priests when they were anointed. It's related to the biblical personification of God as Wisdom in the Old Testament and as Word in the New Testament—the Word became flesh. It is a way of reflecting God's purposes and intentions established physically in creation.

In other words, God's choosing is timeless. "In the beginning was the Word"—the full manifestation of God's will, intention, and purpose; so, it is impossible to conceive of a time when God was not involved in creation—when Christ—God's vision for humanity—was not operational.

To say that believers are destined "in Christ" is to say they participate in the purpose and intention of God—the Word—that was with God in the beginning.[4] That's what it means to be "in Christ;" so this morning's reading is not about God deciding in advance which individuals will be "in Christ."[5]

OK. That's pretty deep. So what?

This is the fourth day of Christmas. We're still celebrating the incarnation, when the Word—the purpose and intention of God—became flesh. We treat it as a new thing, but Richard Rohr writes that the Incarnation began with the birth of the cosmos, long before the birth of Jesus: the first incarnation, he says, was creation. The nature and purpose of God is fully disclosed in creation.

What was God up to in those first moments of creation? Was God invisible before the universe began? Is there even such a thing as "before"? Why did God create at all? Was there a purpose in creation? Is the universe eternal, or is it a creation in time as we know it—like Jesus himself?

We likely will never know the "how" or "when" of creation. But the question religion tries to answer is "why." Rohr writes, "Most religions offer explanations, and they usually go something like this: *Everything that exists in material form is the offspring of some Primal Source, which originally existed only as Spirit*. This Spirit—this Primal Source—somehow poured itself into finite, visible forms, from rocks to humans; and there is purpose in everything God created. This self-disclosure of whomever we call God into physical creation was the *first Incarnation*, long before

[4] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 597). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.
[5] Ibid., page 489.

the personal Incarnation Christians believe happened with the birth of Jesus."

Most of us relate the word "incarnation" to the birth of Jesus, who personally demonstrated God's radical unity with humanity. There is no difference between divine life and human life. But Rohr suggests that the first Incarnation is described in Genesis 1, when God joined in unity with the physical universe. And, given the biblical tendency to relate light with the presence of God, it makes sense that the subject of the first day of creation is light.

The Incarnation, then, is not only "God becoming Jesus." When John says, "The word became flesh", the reference is to the ever-present Christ—the Word that was with God was God in the beginning and who we now continue to encounter in each other.

And with that longwinded and probably overly academic introduction, hopefully we can move into a deeper understanding when we come to the heart of today's reading: "***With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ***—again: the human living out of the purposes of God—***as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."***

The phrase, to gather up all things, is a mathematical term for summing up a column of numbers; and again, the key is "in Christ:" Christ—human participation in the purposes and intentions of God—the Word—that was with God and was God from the beginning.

And so incarnation is not a one-and-done thing. Creation itself is the first incarnation—the first physical, tangible participation in the purposes and intentions of God; and God hasn't changed his mind. The birth of Jesus was a physical, tangible, in-the-flesh incarnation of that same eternal reality—not just another incarnation, for there have been many—but the one announced by angels and stars; the one that, like the proverbial 2X4 upside the head, gets our attention; the one through which God shouted, "This is what I've meant all along!"

Humanity hadn't gotten it; and, given the unending debates that divide us rather than uniting us—over things that don't matter—Jesus talked about swallowing a camel but straining over a gnat—the evidence suggests we still don't get it.

But, incarnation is not a theological idea or a one-time example for us to follow; nor is it about a substitute human who'll get it right to satisfy God's displeasure so we can all go to heaven—if we'll jump through the right hoops. Incarnation; indeed, Christ, is human participation in the intentions and purposes of God; it is working in partnership with God to sum up all of creation and all of time in Christ—a human way of living out the intentions and purposes of incarnation. By extension, I suggest that same intention and purpose is ready to be born—ready to be incarnated in you and me. Pray with me.