

Three Promises

Rev. William Stell

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Ephesians 1:3-10 — 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, just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love. God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will, to the praise of God's glorious grace that God freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Christ we have redemption through Christ's blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of God's grace, which God lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight, God has made known to us the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in God, things in heaven and things on earth.

Change is a part of life. From minuscule things, like the cells in our bodies; to massive things, like the state of our planet; to the things in between, like our weekly routines and our circles of friends, things are always changing, and that's part of what it means to be alive. Some of these changes are exciting. They bring a breath of fresh air or open up a new avenue. They have us feeling like we're explorers traveling through uncharted territory, or audience members sitting in the front row on opening night. But of course, other changes are unsettling for us. They throw off our plans or douse our hopes. They leave us feeling like someone who's just been robbed: vulnerable, upset, uncertain, afraid, and just plain sad.

In times of unsettling change, I think it's helpful to remind ourselves of what is *not* changing, what remains the same. Our scripture passage this morning can help us out here. Through this letter, traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul, written to the church in the city of Ephesus, we receive assurance of God's providence in our lives. We are reminded that God is caring for us and guiding us, as God has done in the past, and as God will do in the future. This morning, I invite you to receive three of these reminders, three promises.

First, this passage in Ephesians begins by proclaiming that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. The word "us" here is crucial. It's not that God has blessed *Paul* with every spiritual blessing, and Paul is bestowing these blessings on the church in Ephesus. Nor is it that God has blessed the Ephesian Christians *as individuals*, who independently possess every spiritual blessing. No, the "us" here is the Christian community, in its togetherness. It is the church in Ephesus as a whole that has been blessed with every spiritual blessing—and friends, it is this church as a whole that has been similarly blessed. Together, as a community, a body, you are blessed with wisdom, patience, courage, compassion, commitment, gratitude, and more, and more. Everything you need, you have it, together. You may struggle to find this or that blessing for a while, you may forget one thing or neglect another at times, but you have it. Every spiritual blessing is yours, together. Moving forward, one of my prayers for

this church will be that you all continue to grow in your trust that no matter who is standing in the pulpit, no matter how many people are sitting in the pews, and no matter where all the changes in your life are taking you, the Spirit of God is present and at work in this body, blessing you in abundance.

Second, we are told in this morning's passage that God chose us, destined us, for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will. This is a promise about our past, an assurance of what has already happened and what has brought us to this place. I don't think I've talked much about the metaphor of adoption from the pulpit, but honestly, it's one of my favorite things about the Bible. Now, because we are created by God, we *could* say, metaphorically speaking, that we are God's biological children—and, here and there, Scripture does say that we are born of God, as a mother gives birth to her children. More often, though, Scripture speaks of us as God's *adopted* children. And part of what I love about this, from a theological perspective, is that adoption entails intentionality. If you adopt a child, you are making an intentional choice to do it—you *want* to do it. Biologically conceiving a child, on the other hand, is not a matter of intentionality. You may very well want it to happen, and you may try to make it happen, but at the end of the day, it just happens—like an accident, and sometimes, like an undesirable accident. When Scripture tells us that we are God's adopted children, it is telling us that, so far as God is concerned, we are never an accident. God wants us, God intentionally chose us, and God goes out of the way to get us—as we see in the person of Jesus, in whom God comes to us as one of us. Moving forward, one of my prayers for this church will be that you all continue to grow in your trust that your history, your identity, your journey as a church are not accidental. In the words of Ephesians, before the foundation of the world, and according to the good pleasure of God's will, God chose Bordentown Presbyterian Church, and God chose every single person who has been a part of this congregation since it began.

By the way, do you all know that this upcoming January, in 2019, will be the 150th anniversary of the very first worship service in this building? The congregation was founded in 1848, but the first worship service here was held on January 3rd, 1869, almost 150 years ago. Sadly, I won't be here for it, but I thoroughly expect all of you, when that time comes, to remember with gratitude what God has chosen to do in this community for generations past, to celebrate with joy what God is choosing to do in this community at present, and to anticipate with hope what God will choose to do in this community for generations to come.

And speaking of what's to come: third, and finally, the last verse in this morning's passage gives us a glimpse of where we, where all of us, are headed: God's plan, set forth in Christ, for the fullness of time, is to gather up all things in God, things in heaven and things on earth. Now, I don't know what you all believe about hell. Personally, I am open to the idea that there is such a thing as judgment and even punishment after death, but I firmly disbelieve that any such punishment is everlasting, for anyone. And this verse in Ephesians is one of numerous verses in Scripture that, I think, backs me up. Whatever happens to us in this life, and whatever happens to us right after we die, in the end, God will have gathered up all things in God. In the end, there will be no conflicts, no divisions, no separations, for all will be united in the God who is Love.

Moving forward, friends, one of my prayers for this church will be that you all continue to grow into this unity: a unity that endures hardships and bears one another's burdens; a unity that honors each person's gifts and celebrates each person's triumphs; and a unity that will hold each other accountable, graciously, to the way of Christ—a way that chooses forgiveness over bitterness, a way that chooses solidarity with the stigmatized over respectability among the pious, and a way that chooses generosity born of gratitude over animosity born of fear. As our first reading puts it, my prayer is that you all continue to clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect unity. Amen.