**Sermon for March 10, 2024 Ephesians 2:1-10 “Once Upon a Time”**

*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

I have a few pieces of Ikea furniture in my home; you probably do, too. It can be fun to go to their giant stores and see all the varieties of home goodies that they dream up in those long Scandinavian winters. But what I like most about Ikea products are the assembly directions that come with the larger pieces. They have somehow managed to overcome the language barrier; and the provided directions are *completely* non-verbal. Instead of words, a series of clearly drawn cartoons and sketches lead you from a box of bits to a finished product. I don’t know who writes these instructions, but they are just brilliant.

Sometimes I find myself wishing that the apostle Paul had been trained by the Ikea writing team…not that I want his epistles in cartoon form, but there are times when their kind of incisive clarity would be really, really useful. And I know that he probably made things as clear as he could, but the intervening centuries and languages and cultural shifts can make interpreting Paul’s writings quite challenging. Today’s writing to the believers at Ephesus is an excellent example of the kind of scripture that has received a huge variety of interpretations across the centuries, some of which have certainly caused bloodshed in God’s name. Since the writing today is at the very core of our Christian belief system, I think it is essential that we understand it rightly.

Today’s passage begins with a sobering Lenten idea that many of us modern folks resist, but which paves the way for the rest of the section, and that idea is that all of humanity was pretty much up a creek without a paddle when it came to deserving God’s love and care. Here are Paul’s words again: *You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among the disobedient in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.* Wow, that is bleak. Like everyone else, just bopping along in the world, doing what felt right, doing what we could get away with, only, according to Paul, we weren’t actually getting away with anything. We were *children of wrath*, children who had fallen short of God’s instruction, children who deserved punishment. This idea of the wrath of God was a big emphasis for Luther and Calvin and Wesley too, and is still active in some ways in all of Protestantism. The startling part is that there was no mercy, not yet; *all* had sinned and fallen short, and *all* deserved punishment, **all.** The Law, for all of its merit, could not save; Paul wrote volumes on that subject. We, for all of our striving, could not save ourselves. The entire human family, according to Paul, deserved, and had *earned* the wrath of God through our willfulness and our disobedient natures.

What we needed, of course, was a way out, a bridge over, a solution, and that solution was provided in the saving work of Jesus the Christ. Hear Paul’s own words again: *But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* This is the part we really, *really* need to understand correctly; who *exactly* is redeemed, here? Is it the whole human family, the same *all people* we have just been talking about? Or is this majestic gift reserved for only those who already believed? What about future generations of believers, who have no guarantee of the accuracy of Christian teaching across history? Some spiritually dead people are made alive in Christ; redeemed by the atoning work of Christ, who took the punishment on their behalf, who died in their stead, and averted the inevitable consequences of being up the creek without a paddle in relation to the Almighty. I wanna know, who exactly are these blessed ones?

What is clear, at least to us Methodists who have been thinking this way for a few hundred years, is that salvation, whoever is included, is an act of God’s grace. A way *was* provided; a bridge *was* built; a solution came forth. It seems, by human standards at least, that this is way too simple, way too forgiving, for God to just wipe every slate clean and cancel every debt. We cannot conceive of this level of generosity and graciousness, which may be exactly the point. But now a few more words from Paul are in order: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* Wait, wait, wait, wait, we have heard this before, just a few sentences ago. By grace we have been saved, but now Paul adds a qualifier, probably the most significant qualifier in the entire Bible…do I have your attention? By grace we have been saved, he says, and then adds, through faith. Aha! The grace is for *all*, but accepting it, doing something with it, that skill set comes to the faithful. And even faith is a free gift, right? One of the famous fruits of the Spirit, right? *This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* Not the result of following rules and regulations, which will always be more complex and abstract than our lives. Not the result of bloody knees and broken spirits, hours and hours of fervent prayer. *No earthly striving* can make us faithful enough, but God can. And so we discover, I think, that this is a gift in two parts; the forgiveness part, which comes through grace, but then the ability to joyfully *accept* the forgiveness part, which comes through faith.

Here is my understanding thus far, not only today butafter nearly six decades of trying to be a good Christian: the forgiving salvation of God is for all persons, without exception. For God so loved the world, right? The redemptive work of Christ is for all persons, that is how we measure the greatness of God’s mercy. But that is just the first half of the equation; the *accepting* of the gift, and living a new life *in response to* the gift, that comes to a smaller number of persons, those who have received the second part of the gift basket, the gift of faith. Here is where the arguing, the excluding, the inquistioning, and the historic bloodshed enters the human drama, as our sinful needs to feel better than or mightier than chafe against the broader compassion of God. We just cannot accept this level of generosity, and so we are suspicious of the faith understandings of others. We divide the world into saved and unsaved, which seems a very inaccurate category to me. We divide the world into faithful and unfaithful, as if those were categories of mere behavior and not gifts and blessings of God. Perhaps most heinous of all, we teach and model that some folks are loved by God, and others are not, and that is all depends on how good you are. That last one is a real heresy and the foundation myth of so much needless pain.

But here is the good news, straight from the lips and pen of Paul: *For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.* This is the conclusion of the argument, the truth that sets us free. WE ARE WHAT GOD HAS MADE US. We are also, unavoidably, what we have cobbled together on our own, but the core of us, the essence of us, the soul of us, the heart of us, that follows God’s design, a design beyond words and languages and creeds. We are what God has made us, and what is that? We are created for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. We are created to do good stuff, meaningful stuff, helpful stuff, not in order to earn our way into God’s grace, but because we are *already within* that comforting embrace! The good works are not tick-marks on the positive side of some imaginary heavenly ledger; the good works flow from the grateful heart that is already redeemed, already saved, already rescued, already loved.

Next week we will enjoy a celebration of our Celtic brethren and of St. Patrick, the patron saint of the emerald isle. His brilliance around today’s subject matter just couldn’t wait till next week, so as we close, listen to these words of Patrick, a Christian deserving of wrath but redeemed from it, and living into his Divinity by applying the gift of faith in every nook and cranny of his life. *“God watched over me before I knew him, and before I learned sense, or even distinguished between good and evil, and God protected me, and consoled me as a father would his son. I pray to God to give me perseverance, and to allow me to be a faithful witness to Him to the end of my life. Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.”* Amen.