

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Sing in Exultation*, No.1

Ere the Worlds

November 28, 2021

Ephesians 1:1-10 [NIV]

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in
Christ Jesus:

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and
the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus
Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with
every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him
before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless
in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to
sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his
pleasure and will — ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace,
which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him
we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of
sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he
lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he
made known to us the mystery of his will according to his
good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put
into effect when the times reach their fulfillment — to
bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under
Christ.

Beginning in the very earliest of days, those who
came to know and follow God have been singing people.
I can't prove, by the Bible, that there was music in Eden,
or even in Abraham's days, but I'd be shocked if there
were not.

We do see it, Biblically, beginning in Moses, and
really from there on. Songs about God. Songs about the
Messiah. Songs about Jesus.

The music of the people of God, the Church, changes
too. It has changed quite a lot, actually, over the last
century especially.

But one bit of church music that hasn't changed all
that much is the songs of Christmas.

For most people, in our culture anyway, whether
they attend a church where the music is totally rock and
roll or southern gospel or classical or traditional African
American or whatever, as the calendar gets close to
Christmas, there's a move toward the traditional hymns
and carols of the season — which is because, I think,
people are hesitant to mess with Christmas music.

People like the music of Christmas, and that's all fine
and good.

The problem is, though, the season is so short that we
rarely get to sing all that much Christmas music. And the
songs we do sing, we typically sing only one time each
year. And on top of that, since most carols are so familiar,
we tend to take them for granted and no longer really
listen to their message. So, we can miss a lot of things, I
think, in and about the songs of Christmas.

The fact is there are some very big and sometimes
rather unexpected theological truths in Christmas songs
that we don't always catch.

So, considering all of that I thought that throughout
Advent this year, we might look together at some of those

big declarations that Christmas carols make that we often
sing right past in our rush to the baby in the manger.

The first of them we've already sung today: #118 in
the hymnal, *Of the Father's Love Begotten*.

I'm pretty sure this is easily the oldest Christmas
song that any of us know. It is certainly the oldest that we
sing as a church, and it's actually the second oldest
Christmas carol in existence.

The words of this song (this poem) were written,
historians believe, between the years 395 and 400 by a
fellow named Aurelius Prudentius.

Prudentius was born in the year 348 in the part of the
Roman Empire that's now northern Spain. He was
educated there and became a lawyer and then a judge.

In the year 379, he was invited to Rome to become
part of the emperor's staff — to which he agreed, as if he
had a choice.

Shortly after arriving in Rome, he was introduced to
and became fascinated with Rome's still relatively new
Christian faith, and the church buildings, and especially
the stories of the Christian martyrs and their tombs.

Of course, Constantine had just legalized Christianity
in Rome in 313, and it became the official religion of the
Empire ten years later, and so, relatively speaking, it was
still very new and very different.

And it all affected Prudentius.

In time, he grew tired of public life, feeling he had
become too self-centered. So, in the year 395, Prudentius
gave up his career and all he owned and entered a
monastery, and it was there that he wrote a number of
books and poems about faith and God and Christ.

This one was found among fragments of his writings,
translated, and eventually set to music.

I find it comforting and inspiring to remember that
the words we're singing here are over 1600 years old.

As is often the case, we include in our songbooks and
repertoires only a few of the verses of many songs and
hymns. Publishers know we don't have the patience or
attention span today to sing any more than four verses of
anything — and in our day, even four is quite a lot.

Our hymnal includes only three verses of this song,
but Prudentius' poem originally had at least ten verses —
verses that probed far more deeply into the themes of
Christ's coming. He wrote of the words of the prophets,
of heaven and hell, of Mary, and of the physical circum-
stances of Jesus' birth.

All of the other verses that have been found have
been translated, but we don't sing any of those.

We do sing, though, what Prudentius wrote about the
eternality of Jesus, which is what I'd like to look at this
morning. Right there in the first verse, the first couple
lines actually, Prudentius writes that Jesus is:

*Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to
be;*

He is Alpha and Omega, He the Source, the Ending He,

Of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!

Motivated by love, Prudentius writes, “Jesus was begotten of the Father, ere the worlds began to be”, which means that before creation, even before time, as we understand it, began, Jesus was.

So where did Prudentius get that idea?

Well, Jesus claims it about Himself – in several places actually.

In the Gospel of John, Chapter 8, for example, when Jesus was speaking of Abraham, He said to the Jewish leaders, “*Your father, Abraham, rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day.*”

And the Jews replied, “*But you’re not yet fifty years old – and You claim to have seen Abraham?*”

And Jesus said, “*Truly – I tell you – before Abraham was born, I am!*”¹

Of course, that comment provoked them to try to stone Jesus, because, you see, right there, Jesus is proclaiming His existence before time – not to mention claiming that Abraham (the Jews’ own spiritual hero and father) realized who Jesus was and would have loved to see Him arrive on earth.

You can see why the Jews wanted to stone Him.

I mean, that’s a pretty arrogant thing to say – unless, of course, you are, in fact, the co-eternal Son of God.

Jesus also claims, about Himself, what Prudentius states in his next line there, “*He is Alpha and Omega.*”

Jesus declares that about Himself three different times in the book of Revelation – in chapters 1, 21, and 22.²

Prudentius’ hymn also says that Jesus is the source and the end of all things that ever *were*, that *are presently* and that *will be*. In that claim, he’s probably thinking of John 1 where John writes, “*Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made.*”³

So, you see, in Prudentius’ thinking, one very important thing we need to understand about Jesus, before we can really understand who He is as Messiah or Savior, is the scope of His person, and His authority to be such a thing to us.

In other words, Jesus can save us because of who Jesus is. He’s not just some latecomer to the problem of humanity. He’s not some hired-gun mercenary “fixer” whom God the Father employed to repair what’s broken in our world.

No. You see, Jesus is, and has been, intimately involved in everything that *has happened*, everything that *has been*, and everything that *is, even today*, going on. He’s been part of it *all* right from the *start* – since “*before* the worlds began to be.”

Now, this “ere the worlds” stuff is something you and I can have trouble conceptualizing, because it’s hard

for us to think outside of time – which is totally understandable.

Since we’ve only consciously existed *in* time, we are, in many ways, *trapped* in a *linear* way of thinking about it.

Life, for us, goes: the day before yesterday, then yesterday, then today, then tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow, and on and on, just like that. Our existence is a line that extends in two directions all the way to the horizons of our birth and of our death.

But *Jesus was* – before that line of time ever began.

And, not only did *Jesus* exist “ere the worlds began to be,” so also did His *purpose* – His *work*, which is where we get to today’s text that was just read for us.

Ephesians, Chapter 1 – you’re welcome to turn there if you’d like. Ephesians 1, those verses 3 through 14: 275 words in my English translation, and that is all one sentence in the Greek, which is often the Apostle Paul’s mode of operation when he gets on a roll, you might say – when he’s obviously excited about what he’s saying and so goes on and on without even recognizing he’s going on and on, to the point that he doesn’t even seem to stop to take a breath, but instead just keeps moving from one sub-topic to the next, appropriately and accurately stitching them all together to make his point.

And what is his point here?

Paul’s point is to broaden and deepen these early Gentile Christians’ understanding of Jesus.

You see, just like most of us, those who originally received this letter tended to see Jesus – who He is and what He’s about – in a very *limited* way.

Because we’re born self-absorbed and self-centered, we tend to see others – and even Jesus – only as they relate to us in the present time and place.

We see ourselves as the center of creation and everyone and everything else revolving around us.

Paul is saying, though, that this Jesus is far, far bigger than our conceptions of Him suggest.

Jesus is not *just* the messiah for whom the Jews waited.

Jesus is the one who has fulfilled God’s own divine intention to redeem and restore His creation.

Which means Jesus is actually nothing less than the clue to all history and to the meaning of the whole universe.

Jesus is the One around whom all creation revolves.

In Jesus, you and I and all the world can find, as verse three there says, “*every spiritual blessing.*” Every good thing that is possible to be given, Paul says, began in the mind and intention of God the Father and comes to us, is offered to us, *through Jesus*.

God’s plan from the very beginning was for a people, a creation, to be as Paul spells out there in verses 4 and 5, “*His own holy and blameless children.*”

So, you see, the idea of redeeming the world was not a last-minute contingency of God’s.

It seems like that to us, because we live in time.

But to God, a redeemed, holy, blameless people has always been the plan – the predestined intention of God from all eternity.

¹ John 8:56-58

² Revelation 1:8; 21:6; 22:13.

³ John 1:3

Now, I might mention here that this passage has provided a point of theological disagreement for hundreds of years.

Some within Christendom claim that what Paul says is “predestined” here are certain *people – individuals* – to be redeemed.

Theologian John Calvin sharpened that idea to a fine point back in the 1530s.

And from there, following his logic, those who came after him went even further and said that just as God predestined some persons to redemption, He must also have predestined others to damnation.

To varying degrees, admittedly very simply put, that is the Reformed view of election and predestination.

Yet, the broader spectrum of Christendom has not seen what Paul is speaking of here as the predestination of individuals or of a group of persons, but rather as God's election and choice of a plan of redemption. God chooses to redeem all persons, but His plan will only come to fruition in the lives of those who accept His call.

You see the difference?

God chose the Jews. “How odd of God to choose the Jews,” as someone once said, when He could have chosen the very civilized Egyptians or the very talented Greeks.

Yet because the Director gets to cast the production His way – God chose the Jews and that’s that.

But all the Jews did not go along with the Director’s directions, did they?

Even within the chosen ones – the company of the Jews, all were chosen, but some rejected the call.

Which is very possible to do, isn’t it?

To be able to reject – to make a choice – that’s part of human free will, which is part of God’s image upon us.

And that has to be added into this equation.

Consider Moses: Moses himself was chosen – plucked from a river – to be part of Pharaoh’s royal house, but he rejected Pharaoh’s call.

In our own Wesleyan tradition, E. Stanley Jones was chosen by the leaders of Methodism to be a bishop, but he rejected the leaders’ call for the sake of continuing his work as a missionary.

The choosing and the saving: that’s all God’s doing. There is no way by which we save ourselves.

The apostle Paul never once thought of himself as a person who “chose God.”

Paul knew that he was simply one whom God has chosen.

Just as Jesus said in John 15:16, “*You have not chosen me – I’ve chosen you.*”

God is the one who has chosen to save as He has. He’s determined the destiny of the world is redemption.

But, because we are created in His own image, He leaves the response to His call to us.

That is God's predestined plan, and it has always been, from the very beginning of time (our earthly perspective) and even before, "ere the worlds began to be."

And Jesus has always been God’s means to His plan’s completion.

Which speaks to the immense depth of love God has for all He’s created – including every person.

God has predestined His creation for redemption.

God intends for every person to be redeemed and restored.

God wants every person to be holy and blameless, as He originally created us to be.

And God wants every person to go along with this plan; He proves that and His unwavering commitment – and His intense love – in His giving of Jesus.

In considering all this, someone once said, “It’s not so wonderful a thing to think that a person might choose to go along with God. That’s only common sense, really. But what is absolutely astounding is that God would ever choose people to go along with Him!”

And to even offer His Son to make it happen!

But He did.

Prudentius wanted us to understand this depth of God’s redemptive nature and plan, accomplished through the person and work of Jesus, not just at Christmas, but from the very beginning – ere the worlds began to be.

Do you know how much God loves you – and how He’s planned for your redemption?

Do you know that He’s chosen you – that He wants you?

Do you realize that, from the beginning of time, He’s predestined you to be His own – to be holy and blameless before Him?

Do you know that He gave His only begotten son in order to make it happen?

He did.

Even today, He’s calling you – He’s choosing you, no matter who you are, no matter what you’ve done. He’s inviting, and right now He’s waiting to see if you’ll accept His invitation – and in doing so, accept His plan for you to be part of His family.

If you haven’t yet accepted – if you haven’t yet said “yes” to Christ, would you today?

Prayer

Closing Song: *Of the Father’s Love Begotten*

Benediction:

May we all participate gladly and completely with God’s predestined plan of salvation and redemption. May our willingness be complete and our assent be quick, so we can keep in step with the One – the Christ, the God – who loved us and chose us “ere the worlds began to be.”