

Impressions: a carol sing for the first Sunday After Christmas

Greeting:

Long Time Ago in Bethlehem

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

Why does it seem so hard for us as Christians to have an influence on our world? Maybe it's because we live at a time in history when we feel obliged to explain *everything* about God. Answer every question – scientifically. If our god is in fact all-good and all-powerful why doesn't he ended barbarism in our world? But one really has to think deeply and carefully about whether our God *could do under the present circumstances*.

Because in the act of creation God also created the possibility that we could live in harmony with our Creator or *not*. A partial analogy might be a pregnant mother. During the pregnancy the child goes with her wherever she goes, eats whatever she eats. They are inseparable. But at the moment of birth, the possibility is instantly and irrevocably created that the child will either go with her and share a life together with her *or not*. So God, in creating rational human beings raised a possibility that we could either live in perfect union with him *or not*.

And our choices in this regard determine the impressions we leave on our world. Sometimes the fruit of those choices comes back to haunt me (I fail to look after my body, I get sick). Sometimes the fruit of my choices affects others or their choices affect me (a relationship suffers or even breaks; we spoil the environment, squander our resources and every human being on earth shares in the suffering I create by that choice).

The famous carols we sing each Christmas time have left an indelible impression on our world. But the question we must ask today as we sing them is, what impression will we leave on our world?

Paul in Ephesians 2:1-10 paints a picture of humanity that is both bleak and beautiful. . .

Sing: In the Bleak Midwinter 151

The bleak part of Paul's picture of humanity portrays . . .

Life controlled by death 1

When he looks back at his old life, as religious as it was, he now sees it for what it is: a state of spiritual death, a state of meaninglessness, a life not even worth living. Despite his religious zeal he realized the futility of it all because that life was still haunted by mortality. (See Phillipians 3: 5-9.)

For the apostle, death is a tyrant that dominates our unredeemed humanity, both in the present day and then hounds us into the grave. No matter how spectacular our achievements, without an invasion of life in Jesus, death still controls our every moment of our existence, clouds our every thought, distorts our view of God, ourselves, our neighbours. If every in aspect of one's life, death is somewhere lurking in the background, what kind of impression will one leave on the world?

Think of the suicide rate, the enormous problem with drugs and alcohol as people seek

some momentary escape from that sense of mortality. Life is short. Think of lack of meaning that plagues so many lives, the terror, war, poverty that haunt our planet.

Yes, it's *bleak*. It's true: "you were dead," says Paul, "in trespasses and sins." "Seems rather depressing, but it does capture the essence human the condition: vast numbers of people, whole populations living in the shadow of death – no wonder the world is a dangerous place.

But that's only if we continue to live . . .

In the box 2

Paul describes here a path in life on which people can walk only within certain rigid boundaries. It's a path that can only lead in one, certain direction. It's life in the box. Where *do* you walk? What is *your* sphere of influence? What social and spiritual environment shapes you? For the Ephesians, that sphere had radically changed. They are now out of the box, in another place in their lives. Their sphere has been altered.

Several years ago when the Winnipeg Covenant church didn't own a building yet, they worshipped in a TV station in a non-descript building in an industrial section of the city. After a worship service one time I began snooping around down the hall and there in the next studios was **Fred Penner's Place**. Remember the show? How it would always begin with Fred walking through the woods, they he'd come to a hollow log, throw his back-pack in the log and then crawl through the log and come out in this wonderful PLACE. I've been there! I saw the very place where Fred did his stuff, where there puppets and friends and music and love. And I know it was just a TV studio, but I was so moved because I was literally standing in the very place where Fred Penner sent out the love to the kids. Then, yes, I had to go back into the so-called "*real world*," back through the hollow log, back into the box. Didn't I?

Paul reminds the Ephesians of their former path, where they *were* going in their lives. They *used* to be in the "world," he says. "*The World*," in this context, means that part of creation, that part of human existence, that global system, that either leaves God out of the picture or is openly hostile to God. The "world" is one huge box. But it's still a box. That *world* is where they *used* to walk. They *used* to follow, "the ruler of the power of the air". ("Air" is realm between heaven and earth where the ancients believed Satan roamed.) But now they had gone through the log to be in Christ, to life in a different place. Why would they want to go back? The Ephesian believers needed to be reminded that they are no longer in the box. But nor can they become smug, because. . .

3 The inward curve of humanity

Paul's readership in Ephesus are not an especially evil bunch. So to call them "children of wrath" may seem a bit harsh. But he is simply reminding them that they not only lived *among* the in-the-box people, but they lived *like* them. And they shouldn't blame the devil for this or the society. They need to place the blame squarely on themselves. It is human nature want to live in the box. Human nature always swerves us back towards what has known, always curves us back towards some form of *get-back-into your box* –back to life controlled by *death*. They were once like that, these Ephesians. They hadn't gone through the hollow log to the other place. That's a problem because our fallen nature places us squarely in the path of God's displeasure and his reaction against sin. Again, it's a bleak picture. But here comes Good News: God refuses to stay out of the picture, refuses to leave us in the box. Even if we want to stay there. But how can he get us to go through the log to the other place?

Sing: Good Christians All 173

4-5 Mercy and Love and Grace

In this sentence, there are three mighty, massive musclebound linebackers giants that are running us down: Mercy, Love and Grace. Each of these words has a slightly different meaning, mercy love and grace. But when all three of these three-hundred pound linebackers pile on top of you, who's to say which one squashes you the most? They *overwhelm* us all at the same time: Mercy, Love, Grace. They all pile on to express in human language the awesome care and commitment God made to us in the cross of Jesus.

Because, you see, we are tricky little folks to tackle. Because often the line between what we bring on ourselves and what is brought upon us by others is not easy to draw. So we can easily shift the blame to others. We can weave our way up the field dodging the blame. Doing good *good* things. But we can only dodge those three big bubbas for so long as we can, try to make the touch-down prove that we can make it on our own and not admit we need God.

Because in all honesty, who can claim to be innocent of contributing to the world's suffering. We live in a broken world and we contribute to the brokenness.

The amazing thing is that God enters into our suffering. In Jesus, God took on flesh and knew the joys and pains of life and death. God takes to the field of our lives promising to bring good out of evil and joy out of suffering. It doesn't matter if it's caused by us or by others the big bubbas are on the field, thundering down the turf, leaping into the air, Mercy Love, Grace . . . But after the tackle, when we get up and shake our heads, we find we are in a different place.

Sing Angels from the Realms of Glory 159

6 Raised with Christ.

The raising up is a past tense thing. Paul is not speaking of the future resurrection at the end of the age, when the dead will rise, but the resurrection Jesus experienced after three days in the tomb. Paul makes the extraordinary claim that *you and I* were raised *with* Jesus. We were somehow included in the redemption that took place at the Cross and then included in the resurrection to new life. How this actually took place is not explained. But if spiritual death was our problem, then the solution could only be a resurrection to spiritual life. So the Holy Spirit imparts to us the very same life-giving energy that caused Jesus to rise from the grave.

And, not only have Christians been raised with Christ, Paul says we are *seated* with him in the heavenly realms. So imagine yourself sitting with Christ on a throne in a place of honour privilege and responsibility.

Sing Away in a manger 164 Verse 3 only

Demonstration of power cf 1:21; 6:12; 3:10

We are seated far above all cosmic powers that battle the control of hearts and minds. The "heavenly realms" are not separated from this world but interact with this world. There is a thin line between them. Actions in the heavenlies determine actions on the ground. Being seated with Christ gives us a unique place of influence. What it means is, now, rather than serving the tyrant of sin, we are free to serve God. From this place of empowerment, Christ's body the Church, engages the dark powers and stands against them in prayer. At times, God directly

intervenes to counteract evil. Why God does not do this *all* the time is a mystery that belongs to the purposes and plans of God. But is our life on this earth, making it last, making it pleasurable, the ultimate value? Or are there not virtues like perseverance and courage and faith that can only be demonstrated by people who resist evil even to the point of death?

Some of the perplexity we have with the evil we see and experience around us is related to our own distorted values. We all must live with our own brokenness. God's purpose is one with *foresight*. He foresees what is to come. He acts, not just for us in our present situation, but so that so looking back at our lives in ages to come we will receive a clearer picture of who God really is. And we will give him praise and glory. Theoretically, the Gospel getting even better with every century that passes, because it gives a ever increasingly revelation of who God is as each generation bears witness

We Three Kings Verse 4 only (Glorious now . . .)

8a Saved by grace

Grace is the word that changed the world. No other word so encapsulates the entire message of God to humanity. Grace is the key ingredient out of which everything else flows. Grace is the completely undeserved, loving commitment of God to us. For some unknown reason, hidden deep in the mind of God, he reaches out to us and set us free. No human solution could be found, so God connected himself to us through the cross of Christ..

We are saved "apart from our works" But there's an interesting dynamic between grace and works. How do works and grace exist in a dynamic?

Grace is my mother's middle name. She has always been a gracious person. But her first name is Elizabeth and she is *queen*. Her word, in our house, was *Law*. But her middle name is Grace. As I entered my teens, I gave my mother quite a bit of grief by drifting towards destructive behaviours. She knew when I went out that door I would likely be down in the ravines, beer drinking beer and smoking pot and hanging with girls. The more evidence of this drift in my life, the higher her anxiety level became. So our conversation would go like this:

"Can I go to a movie."

"Yes. But be home by 10."

"But Mom," the movie isn't over until 9:30, and even if I run out of the theatre, and the bus is right there waiting, and I get off at the corner and run all the way home, I can't promise to get home by exactly ten."

"Then don't go."

It didn't seem to me at the time like my mother was showing me any grace. But looking back, I can understand her anxiety. It's just that at that time in my life, her grace towards me consisted in laying down the *law*. So what I needed to do was act to alleviate her anxiety: Being home on time, phoning if I was going to be late, not drinking too much. . . ect, etc. And the more I did those things, the more gracious my mother seemed to become. But my actions weren't making my mother more gracious. My actions were simply letting her middle name show through more often.

It Came Upon a Midnight Clear 153 verse 3&4 only.

9 No one can boast

As we discover the works God has prepared for us to do, we discover at the same time the enabling grace to actually DO those things.

But Paul is addressing a universal notion. The notion a human being can by their own efforts can lay claim acceptance with God. No way. No body. Not ever.

So here's the BIG QUESTION: If we are people who are no longer controlled by death, if we are people who are indeed raised with Christ, seated in heavenly realms, people with kingdom authority over dark powers, *should we not leave a very different impression on our world than people who are still in the box, whose lives are controlled by death and the spirit of this world?*

Joy to the World 146 verse 3&4

It's a BIG QUESTION and the answers is, of course. Because of what Paul concludes in verse 10

We are God's handiwork 10

Life outside the box is not about earning God's love by extraordinary acts, but about fulfilling God's purpose. Spiritual maturity comes from discovering the work God has created ME for, and letting that work become my way of life. It's about leaving. . .

Impressions

Think about our world. I have here a "world" made of wet clay.

Each day each, each of us will leave an impression on the earth beneath our feet: footprints, tire tracks. But we also leave our impressions in the hearts and minds of people. Heal them, wound them. Bless them, curse them.

As we sang these familiar carols, what impressions have we left on this "world" of wet clay? Press your finger into it, take a stick and inscribe a word or symbol that tells God what *you* want to leave behind.

What will be left of us when we've left?

When we're gone down into darkness and our bodies have returned to this lump of clay and we are but a memory?

When this "dust" and "ashes" have shaken themselves back down to clay, will this miraculous interlude of these few years when this clay was living leave a lasting impression?

What will be left of us when we've left?

What traces will we leave?

Will the evidence be compelling that we were raised with Christ, seated in the heavenly places, That we were created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life?

Hark the Herald Angels Sing 157