

Ephesians 1:1-10 The Praise of His Glorious Grace
John 1:10-14
January 4, 2026

When I was young, the Christmas season seemed always to be a long way off. Even in the fall it seemed too far away to plan over or worry about. Like the proverbial, “watch pot,” that never boils, it seemed like it would never arrive. Then it came and went in the blink of an eye, and the long wait for the next Christmas began. Now they come so quickly I cannot keep up. Here we are again in that same place.

To me the New Year’s Eve and Day was the end of the Christmas break, characterized by staying up to midnight, watching the ball drop in Times Square. Sometimes we would attend church at a, “watch night,” service, with food and games and fellowship. There would be a brief prayer service at midnight to pray in the New Year. Then the youth of the church were invited over to someone’s house to stay up all night, like a lock-in. I never thought much about its meaning.

The day after, life was back to normal. If it was a week day, then we went back to school. I remember a sense that the previous year was all over, and I was ready for another trip around the sun. That sense remains to this day. What follows, I hope, will offer something to think about as the new year begins.

Today is the second Sunday of Christmas. There are two readings for the day, one from the Gospel of John,

about the Incarnation, at least that is the name of the doctrine the church has given it.

It is accompanied by some notable lines; “He came to that which was his own, but his own received him not.” We are told about the right to become children of God,” that is, “children born not of natural descent, nor of a human decision or a husbands will, but born of God.”

Then comes the familiar refrain, “the Word has become flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth.” This is the foundational Incarnation text. There are others, but this one is central.

The reading from Ephesians also offers a few lines about the meaning of the gospel, we read, “For God chose us in him before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his children through him, in accordance with his presence and will, *to the praise of His glorious grace*, which he has freely given us in the one he loves.” I have always been struck by that line, “to the praise of God’s glorious grace,”

Everything changed that night and the reverberations echo down the centuries. Of course, the meaning of Christmas is true all the year round, like is Easter, and it serves us best if we are mindful of it long beyond the time of the year when it is emphasized.

As the year begins, let us consider what has been revealed to us in scripture, that God is in Christ

redeeming the world; that in fact, God entered history freely, at the time of his own choosing, and will bring everything to completion at the appointed time.

To what are we looking forward? Another year? If that is the case, let me suggest, our hope and confidence will eventually run short. Even if the problems we face can be solved, soon enough we run into the unsolvable problems, death and sin and emptiness.

As we move into 2026 we know that insofar as the world is in the hands of human beings, actual people like ourselves, making decisions, there *is* no hope because except in grace, people are not capable of visioning and carrying out a just and peaceful and eternal order. Without God's grace, we can do nothing.

There is a Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego quality about the spiritual life in Christ. They were living in the time of the Babylonian Exile, when King Nebuchadnezzar ordered everyone to bow down to worship his image, on the pain of being cast into a fiery furnace. When they refused, they were asked if they realized what was in store for them. The Book of Daniel describes their response;

“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, ‘King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. *But if not*, we want you to know, Your

Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.’”

It is a bold statement. But it reflects an unconditional faith, a faith no matter what happens, that God can provide and deliver.

It reminds me of Abraham when God asked him to offer his son Isaac, the child of the Promise, as a sacrifice, which means he was trusting the Providence of God, to keep the promise, even when for human beings it would be impossible.

Or I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, “Father, take this cup from me, nevertheless not my will, but thine.”

This kind of faith is our destiny.

I read online this past week about the necessity of hope in order to be healthy. Apparently there is a department of study regarding hope at the University of Oklahoma. They say that they have learned that in order for hope to be effective, there must be both a desired positive outcome *and* a realistic belief that someone, individually or as a part of a group, can achieve that outcome. There is some value in this observation.

The Christian hope, to the contrary, is unrelated to this kind of hope, which is of this world. For in Christ we are confronted precisely with the impossible situation,

where the hoped for outcome, if it can be imagined, is beyond reach.

The modern era of which we are a part threatens this, “but if not,” tells us that if we can’t save ourselves, no one can, and once we acknowledge our limits, offers no other solution; thus leads to despair, cynicism, sadness.

The gospel message is that, thanks be to God, we are not without grace, for we are not without Christ; the end is not the end, the humanly impossible situation is not impossible for God, and that we are in God’s hands. When the 131st Psalm tells us to put our hope in the Lord, from this time forth and forever more, it acknowledges the true source of our hope.

That is why we celebrated; stayed up all night and played games, and prayed. For what is beyond our reach, either in human history or eternity beyond, is within God’s reach, which covers the depths and the heights, the endings at the beginnings, and all that is in between. Just some thoughts to occupy us as the year begins, and don’t you agree, they are worthy of the exclamation; *to the praise of God’s glorious grace.*

Happy New Year! God bless you all.

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