**Ephesians 1**

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Skagway Presbyterian Church (10 am)

**Title**: Identity

**Other Scripture:**

 Father God, open our eyes…

 Jesus open our ears…

 Holy Spirit, Open our hearts…

Well First Presbyterian Church of Skagway, good morning! It is good to be together in worship today. I want to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to be a part of your congregation for the next several weeks. As you may know, your pastor Ryan and I have been friends for several years…we actually go back to when I was a junior in college and he was a senior in high school. I was attending the University of Montana in Missoula, and he was growing up in Bozeman. Our paths crossed during the summers at Glacier Presbyterian Camp on Flathead Lake in Montana.

At that time, neither of us had aspirations to enter pastoral ministry. Ryan was planning on being a teacher, and I was in the school of Business. So who’d have thought that 21 years later, both of us would be pastoring in Southeast Alaska!

But God has been known to do more unique things than that, of course. After ten years in the business world, God worked in both the hearts of my wife Holly and mine…moved us out of my career and toward seminary…and eventually to my first pastoral call in Juneau which I began five years ago. Holly and I have three kids: Kellyn is our oldest, she is 11. Andrew is 9, and Hannah is 6. They are each so unique and amazing in different ways. Kellyn in with me this week…I hope to have all of them up here at some point over the month.

Our family has been to and through Skagway several times. We truly enjoy this town…we love its uniqueness in Southeast. The dramatic transitions of summer and Non-summer population is fascinating. Of course your rich history is amazing. I’ve read several books on the exploits of George and Kate Carmack …and Soapy Smith. I read recently that in 1898, Skagway was the largest city in Alaska! Who’d of thought?

I remember being up here a few winters ago for a few days. I was staying at Ryan’s and all night long, I noticed snow falling and falling and falling. And I figured there must have been about a foot or so the next day. But when I looked outside, the ground was totally dry. It was only an hour later when I went outside that I realized what had been happening…Yes it was snowing, but the wind blew it into the water before it could stick!

When Ryan asked me to fill in for him over these weeks, there were a variety of ideas that we considered as we discussed this sermon series. And I’m really excited about where we landed. Over the next six weeks, we’ll be looking at the book of Ephesians. Ephesians is a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to an early church. It’s likely that this letter was read to not only the new church in Ephesus, but also to several other small and growing communities in the region. Read…and passed along.

It would be as though a letter was delivered to Presbyterian Church Skagway, and then y’all forwarded it to Haines…and it was read there. Then it went down to Chapel in Juneau, then to Hoonah, then to Sitka…and throughout the region.

And what the Apostle Paul was doing…is he was teaching these new congregations the basics of what it meant to follow Jesus.

So here is what we need to know and remember: The church of Ephesus is made up of brand new Christians. In fact, all churches of that time were made up of brand new Christians. There was no church history to fall back on. There was no structure in place…there were no denominations or ordination processes. There were no seminaries or Sunday school curriculum in place.

Everything was brand new.

In fact, even the Jewish history out of which Jesus comes, is pretty new to the church of Ephesus. These people were mostly Greeks! They were unaccustomed to the deep and rich tradition of the Jewish people.

So even THAT background was foreign to the people Paul was writing to.

And what that means, is that Paul is truly starting from ground zero.

What the people in Ephesus DID know, is that they individually and now as a small community, had some supernatural, spiritual experience with Jesus…so much so, that they were willing to give their lives to the Jesus Call…even though they had NO IDEA what that meant.

And now Paul is helping them discover, in fact, what it means to follow Jesus.

The language that Paul uses throughout the book of Ephesians…is the language of Growing Up! Paul recognized that faith in Christ had been birthed in the life of these people….and now they needed to Grow Up into that faith.

Now as Paul teaches this…Paul will help the people see that God desires them to Grow Up in two different ways. First Paul will teach them that they are to grow up in their individual faith….their personal relationship with Jesus (we might say.) And second, Paul will tell them that they are to grow up as a community too. The life of faith is played out in community. Christianity is a team sport!

Somehow…as we grow up in our unique individual identity, we grow together as a community.

So that’s a long introduction…so let’s get to it. I want to invite you to open up your bible to Ephesians chapter 1. We’ll read verses 1-14.

READ EPHESIANS 1:1-14

So the word I want to put in your mind this morning, is the word, “identity.”

IDENTITY. Who are you? At the very root…at the very core…before you are anything else, WHO ARE YOU? In your life, you probably hold many positions. You wear many hats. You may be an employee; you may be a student. You might be a son, a mother, a daughter, a wife, a father, a husband, a friend. You may hold positions in the community; advisor, member, coach, mentor. You may have a title here at church, Deacon, Elder, Sunday School teacher, Communion server.

But while these things describe aspects of your life, none of them constitute your core identity.

The language of identity is all around us, isn’t it? Young people are often encouraged to “Discover who they are.” There is a new and growing phenomena in the process of adolescence that is known as a Gap Year. Do you know what a Gap Year is?

A Gap Year is something more and more high school graduates elect to do before going to college. Instead of beginning college, they do something totally different for a year. They might travel to a foreign nation. They might volunteer for the peace corps. Perhaps they drive around the country and visit all the national parks. The idea is that they are looking for space to discover who they are.

Then, they go to college or trade school to hone that identity.

 Now whether this is an effective practice remains to be seen, but I think the reason we as a culture are exploring ideas like this is because deep down we know that the simple accumulation of data… does not constitute maturity. Information alone does not lead to identity. We need situations…often challenging situations… that force us to apply information.

 When it comes to our faith in Christ, there is enormous difference between being able to recite facts about God…and allowing those facts to shape us into the people God created us to be.

 Growing up in our faith is not an intellectual exercise. It is a life-long process of allowing God’s truth to transform us.

 When Paul wrote this letter, he was in prison. And Paul was reflecting on the passion of his life, which was spreading the news of Jesus to the world. Paul was particularly excited about the spread of faith to non-Jewish people.

 As I mentioned, this letter is specifically to people who are not of Jewish background. They are Gentiles. And among other things, they are dealing with the fact that for centuries, the people of God had largely seen Gentiles like them… as outsiders. Israel was the chosen people…God’s people. Gentiles, by default, were not.

 But the Gospel of Jesus…is that the Good News of God’s Kingdom was not just for Israel, but for all the nations. This was new! Somehow, the Gentiles were to be grafted into the family of faith.

 Paul uses the word Adoption. Adopted to son-ship through Christ.

 So Paul is writing to this totally new group of people to the faith.

 In their new-ness, they were also falling into some traps. They were being pressured to not only accept the Gospel of Jesus, but also some Jewish-specific markers as well…circumcision, food laws, and religious customs were at issue. These people of Greek decent had become Christians…but some were saying they had to become Jewish as well.

 It was ultimately a question of core identity! And Paul is saying No. Those things (circumcision and dietary customs) were not the markers of core identity. It was fine that the Jews did them, and it was fine that the Gentiles didn’t. And then, having rejected these peripheral things as primary…Paul tells us what ARE the markers of their core identity.

From this passage of Paul, I want to suggest two words and one phrase that form and encompass the identity of the Christian believer.

 The words are “Blessed” and “Chosen,” and the phrase is “For the Praise of His Glory.”

 First Blessed. God Blesses. God has blessed you. You are a blessed person. Now blessing is a hard word to define. What we know is that blessings come from God. And what God gives comes out of who God is. So when God blesses us, God gives HIMSELF to us. We receive from God, who God is.

 So, We know that God is love. God gives God’s love to us. We know that God is power, so God gives God’s power to us. We know that God is gracious, so God gives God’s grace to us.

 And what that means, is that we live in the sphere of God. It means that God is with us. God is near to us. God is concerned about us. God knows, understands, and cares about every aspect of your life.

 The blessing of God is the presence of God. You are blessed. That is part of your core identity.

 The Second word we want to look at is Chosen. God Chose. Not only does God bless you, God Chose to bless you. Out of Freedom. God isn’t forced to bless you…God CHOSE to bless you. Paul says that before the creation of the world…before time even existed…God Chose you. It was an intentional decision. You are not an afterthought. You are not peripheral. You are certainly not a mistake or an accident of nature. No…before anything… God Chose you.

 This is a really hard concept for us to grasp. Because in being chosen, we have to come face to face with the reality that we didn’t work or earn our way into God’s blessing. “Chose” is a verb…an action word…but God is the one doing the acting…not us. Now we have the opportunity to accept that blessing…or not… but even before we say Yes to God…God had already said Yes to us.

 God Chose to Bless Us.

 Now the phrase. To The Praise of His Glory. This little phrase comes right after another little phrase, “In order that.” And when you put the two phrases together, you get the reason God Chose To Bless Us.

 God Chose to Bless Us in order that we might be To The Praise of His Glory. What does that mean? Well in his comments on this passage, Eugene Peterson says that “Praise is grateful celebration. Glory is the bright presence of God. This is our destiny, this is what we were made for; a grand celebration in the full presence of God.”

 We are people who worship God. The reason we exist is to give glory…to worship God. Our lives are intended to be lives of worship….lives of praise to God. And since this is our core identity, then everything else we do flows from it. If you are an accountant, your accounting work is an act of worship. If you are an engineer, then the plans you develop, ascribe glory to God. If you are a T-ball coach, then when you step on the field with your flock of 6 year olds, you hit ground balls to the glory of God.

 So let’s put this all together. Who are you?

 You are a person God chose to bless, so that you might live a life to the praise of God’s Glory.

 And, Who are we?

 We are people God chose to bless, so that we might live lives to the praise of God’s Glory.

 Now…if that is our identity…our core identity…then as I said, it should shape every aspect of our life. Now that’s tricky business, right? Some aspects of our lives don’t obviously lend themselves well to “a life of worship.” Could be a job, could be a relationship, could be how we fit in with the people around us.

 Over the course of this sermon series, we are going to follow Paul as he helps us understand HOW this core identity shapes us. It will impact us each in different ways…according to the specific vocation, or set of things to which God has called us individually. And… will impact you all as a congregation.

 But before we get to the How, we need to remember the Who.

We are people God chose to bless, so that we might live lives to the praise of God’s Glory.

**Let’s Pray:**