

January 3, 2021, the Second Sunday after Christmas (Year B)

Act as If

Ephesians 1:3-14

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord

People: Thanks be to God.

We are told the Jewish people replied to Pilate, "We have no king but Caesar." That pleased him because he was convinced that Caesar was in charge. For centuries people could point to examples of sovereigns whose wish and whim were carried out. The average person could not say to some lackey, "make it so," but the king could. Across the pond there are still people who embody the power of the state. It amuses me to see tabloids in the check-out line speculating on who Queen Elizabeth will chose to succeed her. Because we have no examples of royalty we have lost touch with how they operate. Unlike Pilate's Caesar the Queen is a creature of her government. She might get to decide what dress to wear, or maybe not if it's a state occasion.

The people who wrote our Bible were all very familiar with a more despotic kind of rule. Their kings were not above the law, they were the law. The odd thing about Israel is a declaration that God is king. Any ruler of that nation was just a stand in for

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God. The English system sort of carries on that idea. The United States rejected it. No one thought God should put the crown on George Washington's head. If anybody ordained his ascent to power it was the people. A majority of the people, not God's will, decides who's number one.

Our faith was not born in a world where such things could happen. Sure the Greeks of Athens toyed with letting a small number of the rich and famous elect their leaders, but that was all in the past when Jesus came along. The first Christians got into deep trouble because they used the model of a Caesar and applied it to Jesus. Caesar did not like that sort of disloyalty, and to tell him that he was Emperor because some God he never heard of made him was cause for the thumb to turn down.

Today's passage has been debated not on the merits of its blessing but the implications of its curse. Kingship has never been an adequate image of God because there are no adequate images known to humans. We can say God is like something or someone but never make the mistake of our ancestors who worshipped statuary. God may be like a work of art but God is not a work of art. If, as Ephesians tells us, some of us were chosen for salvation before the footer was dug for all creation then what of those who weren't chosen?

One down side of our spiritual ancestry is that Calvinists – the Reformed and Presbyterian circles thought of God as the kind of king who rules in absolute power and can condemn as well as save. Some, through no fault of their own are destined to spend eternity in hell. Others, through no merit get to strum harps in the golden city. As American developed this image of God faded and we are for the most part agreed that

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God is more like a president who is selected by us rather than the other way around.

Both images are far from what God is really like so what can we do?

I had an ethics professor who answered the problem for the class. If you are predestined to damnation nothing you do will change that so you might as well be as bad as you can be. If you are predestined to spend forever and a day with Jesus, then no amount of nasty doings can keep you from that sweet by and by. But, what if you are free? If God is not a dictatorial sovereign then you may be held responsible for your actions. Even if you aren't free you should act as if you are. That's the safest way to go through life. It has the added bonus of making the world a better place and making you feel good about yourself. We may be free to balance the blessings found in Ephesians with another expression of Saint Paul

Galatians 5:1 "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." There are implacable things in this creation that we inhabit but our reaction to them is laced with creative solutions and choices of how to respond.

Concluding Prayer: Almighty God, you have filled us with the light of the Word who became flesh and lived among us. Let the light of faith shine in all that we do; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.