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Ephesians 2:1-7

But God...

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Life is demanding. It doesn't matter if you are young or old, married or single, wealthy or poor - there is a lot expected of your life. The hardest part of bearing all of these demands is that they are not integrated. Each of them pull us in so many different directions. Trying to keep up with the demands of work, family, friendships, church, kids' schedules, the house, and maintaining health, we eventually get discouraged because it is hard to succeed in all of these areas at the same time. How do we hold onto all the things we have to carry through life?

When I go the grocery store, I often make the guy-mistake of thinking I don't need a cart. (I always tell myself I am just going to get a few things.) A while back, when I was trying to carry too many groceries to the counter in my arms, I dropped the loaf of bread. While reaching to grab it, I dropped the milk, the butter, and the cheese. As I lunged for those things, the oranges fell out of their bag and went rolling down the aisle. A woman walking by me saw all of this and said, "It's a metaphor." She's right. As we reach for success at work, we lose time with family. As we stretch to grab family, we lose our grip on work and our volunteer commitments. And then because we are trying so hard to hold it all together, our sanity starts to roll down the aisle away from us.

We often assume that this is a problem of contemporary life, and ancient people enjoyed a quieter and simpler existence. But that clearly isn't true. The ancient city of Ephesus was a hopping place. It was a busy seaport town that served as the gateway to Asia Minor. Its people were businessmen and tradesmen, many of whom belonged to guilds or trade unions. They had schools, commerce, civic projects, lots of construction. The Apostle Paul spent three years there and so he knew how demanding and conflicted life was in the city. He also knew how hard an unintegrated life is upon the soul.

So when Paul wrote his Epistle to the Ephesians he begins by making it very clear that our lives can hold together only in Jesus Christ. He is the integration of all life's demands. In the first fourteen verses of chapter one, Paul uses the phrase "in Christ" nine times. In 1:10 he claims that it was always the plan of God to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. Or as he tells the church in Colossae, "In Christ, all things hold together." This really means all things: things at work and at home, conflicting things and things that seem to be falling apart, secular things and holy things, things we have done and left undone, all things in heaven and earth hold together in Christ.

Now Paul isn't saying that Jesus will help you cope with your demanding life. He is saying that apart from Jesus you don't really have life at all. He begins the second chapter by reminding the church, "You were dead" because you had followed the course of this world that kept telling you to construct your own life. That is why we knock ourselves out to meet all these demands. We're trying to build a life. But all of the effort at creating our own lives separates us from the true

Creator of life. The soul cannot stay alive apart from God, and when the soul dies, so does the rest of us - from the inside out.

In verse three he claims that the legacy of finding ourselves out of communion with God is that we have become angry, “children of wrath.” Most of the destruction we create in each other’s lives is caused by this wrath. It is a wrath that emerges because we have lost our souls trying to save ourselves.

It has been a hard week as we all watched the events unfold in the aftermath of the horrific hurricane. First came the storms and terrible winds that destroyed so much of the Gulf port cities. Then came the breaks in the levees that flooded New Orleans. Then the breakdown of all social and public services and the delay of federal assistance. And then came the stories of looting, rape, death, lawlessness in streets flooded with chaos and shelters flooded with desperation. As the *Wall Street Journal* stated Friday, “It is as if the moral and civic levees, too, were overwhelmed by the torrent.... We have to ask why so many stooped so low as the waters rose so high.” But I wonder.

I wonder if this is really that much of a puzzle for us to understand. Could it be that the extreme desperation of that city only unleashed a wrath that all of us know, but keep contained as long as life appears to be working? In more subtle ways do we not all push to get on the next bus that will take us to a better place in life? Is that not why we hustle to get into the best schools so we can get the best jobs and afford to live in the best neighborhoods so our kids can go to the best schools? And meanwhile we leave behind the poor who have no place to go just as they did in New Orleans. In more subtle ways do we not lash out at the very people who try to help us, or grab the loot we want in life? Of course we do. This is not just about them but about us. But it is not because we are intrinsically mean. It is only because we are trying to hold onto life as the winds of adversity pull it apart. The more desperate the wind, the more wrathful we will become.

After watching the fall of Rome, and all the horror it unleashed in the city streets, St. Augustine claimed that the cities of earth are all filled with self interest and we have only to witness the destruction of the city to see this self interest turn to wrath and death. You may never have to face what the citizens of New Orleans are now enduring, but in your soul you know the anger of not being able to hold all things together by yourself. You may even know that if you stay angry, it will kill you.

After describing this death, in 2:4 Paul then says, “But God....” Paul loves that phrase. Often he uses it to describe the gospel. First he will explain the desperate condition of humanity: we cannot construct life well on our own, the things we have turned to for help cannot hold us together, as a result it feels like we are spiritually dying. “*But God*, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, has made us alive together with Christ.” Notice, he doesn’t say “but then I got a new job, or fell in love, or graduated from school.” No, the gospel turns on the phrase “but God....” That is how we understand the drama of our lives.

“We are,” Paul concludes, “what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus.” So it has never been about what you create by your own hard effort. That is just what leaves you stressed and angry. It has always been about what God is creating of your life. And the way he is creating your

life is not by giving you instructions or advice, but through his Son, the risen Christ Jesus who lives and works within you.

Christ is not just a historical figure who died for your sins, although we sometimes present him that way. “Look,” we say, “at what it cost Jesus on the cross. Now demonstrate your gratitude by living a holy life.” But that reduces salvation to being only a second chance. And we need a lot more than that. We need a risen Savior who has ascended to reign at the right hand of the Father and who by the Holy Spirit is still at work holding together all things in heaven and earth. Even your life.

By the end of this last week more than one social commentator asked the old question: “Where was God in New Orleans?” As the prophet Elijah discovered on Mt. Horeb God is not in the storm, but in the still small voice that appears afterwards. God is in the work of the charities who are desperately trying to get into city, in the hundreds of millions of dollars that have already been given, in the hospitality offered by neighboring cities, and in the homes of countless families who opened their doors to strangers. God was also on the roof tops with frightened families who were trying to escape the waters. He was also with those who did not escape. He was with those who slept last night on a bus, or a stadium floor, or in a Red Cross shelter. God was with those who lost everything just as he is also with you, gathering up all the things that have slipped out of your grasp.

It may appear that the storm and the floods have overcome our cities, and at times, your life, but God has just begun his work. That is what the Apostle Paul is teaching us to say: yes, we are torn apart by the wrath of nature, the wrath of others, and the wrath within our own souls. “But God...” Yes, the torrents of adversity will try to tear your life apart, “but God” is still at work putting life back together in ways you never imagined. Yes, the waters will rise high some days around your neck, “but God” is in the waters with you and will not allow you to be overwhelmed. Yes, we have hurt others and hurt ourselves trying to get the life of our dreams. Yes, we have done damage to our souls, separated ourselves from God, and were spiritually dying. “But God” came into the mess we created, “made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up in him, and seated us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

That is exactly the mercy we experience every time we gather around this table. The Spirit of God meets us at this table and spiritually lifts us into the heavenly communion the Son enjoys with the Father. Here you remember that you too are the beloved of God. And here we remember that the God with whom we commune in worship is also communing with us in every ordinary place where we live our lives. Yes, at times the torrents pull on our lives and the waters rise high around us, but at this table we remember... We remember but God is with us, and we will not be afraid. Amen.

Benediction: Anyone who has learned to say “but God” has found a hope that can never be swept away. Now may the Lord God bless you and keep you. The Lord God make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

