

"True Fullness"

Second Sunday of Christmas
Ephesians 1:3-14
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Consider a beautiful snow fall. It's easy to do, living in Minnesota. And especially after the December we had, when there seemed to be an inch of fresh powder falling every other day.

There's nothing quite like a day sitting snuggled up by the fire with a warm drink and watching the snow fall in big, beautiful flakes. Wednesday was such a day.

Recall the childhood joy of waking up on a snow day. Normal routines, like school, altered, and instead you bundled up and went out to play—building a snow fort or snow persons, organizing a neighborhood snowball fight, heading to the closest hill for sledding. Some of the best delights of childhood are those wintry days.

The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa wants us to think about snow. And how snow is the perfect example of something we do not control. He writes,

An unexpected gift. Falling snow is perhaps the purest manifestation of uncontrollability. We cannot manufacture it, force it, or even confidently predict it, at least not very far in advance. What is more, we cannot get hold of it or make it our own.

A snow fall is the perfect antidote to one of the diseases of the modern world—our attempt to control everything. A snowstorm can wreck all our best laid plans. It can grind normal life to a halt. Which is why we also find them so frustrating. Beautiful if we can stay indoors by the fire or fun if we are kid wanting to play. But annoying and frustrating and often even dangerous. Snow evades our control.

And we moderns like to be in control. We like to make plans with the assurance that we can see them through. We don't like for little irritations to get in the way. We don't want to feel uncomfortable. Rosa says that making the world "controllable" is "the driving cultural force" of modern life.

But, this is a sickness. An unhealthy approach to life. As he writes, "A world that is fully known, in which everything has been planned and mastered, would be a dead world." The more control we try to exert over the world, the greater is the likelihood that we will create monstrosities.

And, so, for our own health and well-being, for our emotional and spiritual growth and maturity, we need to surrender our attempt to be in control of everything and learn,

instead, the uncontrollability of the world. Rosa writes that, “It is only in encountering the *uncontrollable* that we really experience the world. Only then do we feel touched, moved, alive.”

A beautiful snowfall is the ideal example of this. We must surrender to it. And, at our best, we surrender to it as a joy and a delight, taken in by its beauty or excited about the playfulness the snow invites us to.

Today is the second Sunday of Christmastide, the 11th day of Christmas. Imagine 11 pipers opening our service. That would be something.

And it’s the Sunday closest to the Feast of the Epiphany, when the nature of Jesus is more fully revealed to those around him.

Plus, it’s also the first Sunday of the new year. Happy New Year! When we turn our focus to resolutions and goals and making plans. A chance for a fresh start.

So, a lot of liturgical weight for one Sunday to carry.

For our scripture lesson today, I chose the epistle reading, from the letter to the church in Ephesus. Some commentators consider this an early Christian hymn that celebrates our life in Christ together, almost from a cosmic perspective. As Lisa Fishbeck writes, “In Christ we have been given a part in God’s eternal plan, and we are swept up in a hymn of praise to the glory and wonder of it all.”

William Self writes that in this passage “God is beginning . . . to make clear to us the divine purpose in the world, the plan of the ages and how we are a part of it.”

And Johnny Hill concludes from this passage that “There is something incredibly important about celebrating the ways in which Christ redeems our reality, creates new spaces of meaning, and establishes alternative paths toward hope, healing, and community.”

These commentators all emphasize the ways in which Ephesians invites us to see ourselves as part of some grand, even cosmic, mission of God. And that our participation in this work contributes to our flourishing.

A great text for the new year, as we set our goals and establish our routines, and recommit ourselves. What will it mean for us to live *in Christ* this year? How can we more fully participate in the mission and work of God?

I’ve often been drawn to this phrase “the fullness of time.” *Time* is one of my favorite topics to explore. I enjoy reading the latest speculations on time by cosmologists and astrophysicists. I dig into philosophical and theological explorations of time. I’m also deeply interested in the more experiential and subjective aspects of time—how we

measure it, use it, waste it, enjoy it. How our work culture tries to impose certain time schedules upon us. How our experience of time interacts with our memory and emotions like regret and heartbreak. Time, to me, is a deeply fascinating topic, an endless well of contemplation and experience.

What might “fullness of time” be?

Well, I assume you can recall a moment in life when time seemed full. One of mine was most definitely the birth of Sebastian. Being in that room as he entered the world, being the first person to hold his hand, being surrounded by our family and friends in this moment of joy.

There are also moments of simpler pleasures. Sitting beside the lake, watching the sun shine on its stillness, listening to the birds singing. In moments like that we can lose track of time, and ourselves, because the moment is so full.

Fullness of time seems to be related to those moments we when are most attentive to what is happening, in the zone, experiencing flow. And, most often, they are moments of true delight.

They are usually also moments where we have very little control, other than surrender ourselves and our attention to the moment. As Hartmut Rosa teaches, they are resonant moments because of their uncontrollability.

Which leads to that interesting paradox about modern life—we are most likely to have our best moments, when we surrender our attempts to be in control.

Here's how Lutheran Seminary professor Andy Root explains it:

We long to find a true fullness that draws us not through time, into some future, but more deeply into time itself. We long to live so deeply in time that we hear and feel the calling of eternity. We yearn to find once again the infinite in time, to find the sacred in the present, and therefore to be truly alive.

Gosh, I love that passage. Don't we all want to be fully alive?

And, yet, we too often live our lives in a hurry. Over-scheduled, too busy, running from one thing to the next. Setting ourselves expectations and to do lists that more often generate anxiety than anything else.

This is part of the scarcity mindset that has been drilled into us by modern, capitalist culture. We never have “enough time.” Even on vacations, we often rush around trying to see and do everything. Some people find it nearly impossible to relax, to sit still, to just be.

Our work culture teaches us that a “good day” is one in which we did a lot, but we also know from experience that that adage simply is not true. Some of the best days of our lives are days when we accomplished very little. They were most likely days we spent leisurely with people we love, or doing something that brings us true delight, or participating in something that mattered--something that was bigger than us, but that filled us with a sense of meaning and purpose.

The church father Irenaeus taught that the glory of God is a humanity fully alive. God desires us to live in fullness, to flourish and thrive, to live lives of enjoyment and delight. That includes experiencing the fullness of time.

God desires for you to have the kind of experiences that Andy Root describes, “to find the sacred in the present, and therefore to be truly alive.”

Let this be your New Year’s invitation then to live more fully in Christ.

And how should we do that?

Surrender our attempt to control everything.

Be mindful and attentive of the moment.

Slow down. Don’t become anxious over your to-do list.

Take the time to rest.

Waste time. Make sure that a decent amount of your time is not accomplishing anything.

Defy the algorithm.

Do the unexpected. Be spontaneous. Surprise someone (in a good way).

Do something silly.

Laugh.

Play more often.

Be willing to look stupid and then laugh at yourself.

Be less critical. Extend people far more grace than you think they deserve.

It really isn’t worth your time, or theirs, to get negative about other people. Let it go.

Express gratitude. Write thank you notes (and not as a chore).

Approach the world with winsome delight.

Act like a toddler on a walk. Notice every wonderful thing.

Spend genuine quality time with the people and the pets you love.

Do that thing you always enjoy.

Do that thing which fills you with meaning and purpose.

God has graciously filled with world with blessings that are ours to share and enjoy, so, enjoy.

Maybe that's the simplest and most direct advice—enjoy everything you can.

And, then, you'll experience the fullness of time.

You'll be fully alive.

And God's glory will shine through you.