

“Alive in Grace!”

B, Lent Four; Ephesians 2:1-10

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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## **EPHESIANS 2:1-10; THE MESSAGE:**

**2** <sup>1-6</sup> It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

**7-10** Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ

Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

## **I. MOST ALIVE!**

When do you feel *most* alive? Most yourself? Most “on top of your game?” Anyone willing to share what they heard or said earlier—at the start of the service today?

“You are made alive in Christ.”

Such a simple statement by Paul in his Letter to THE Church at Ephesus, but so rich with multiple meanings—or *possibilities* of meaning anyway—that we could spend all morning just probing what that meant then, what it means now and what it might mean in the future.

Other translations bring additional nuance:

\*Made alive *with* Christ.

\*He gave us life

\*God hath quickened us together with Christ

\*God brought us to life with Christ. (Good news)

And this one—which I happen to think is the best of all: “God made us alive together with Christ”.

Alive. Together. Alive *together* with Christ.

Let's look at it now in context again. Remember—this is only the second chapter of Paul's letter. He's getting into the “big stuff” right off that bat. Big stuff like sin and transgressions; being human, after all; being made alive in Christ in spite of that very humanness. And then, the big G—word of them all: Grace!

Here Paul's greeting from The Message translation:  
(Read above passage)

## **II. ALIVE IN CHRIST! OPEN TO GRACE!**

What does it mean to be alive? Really alive! Not just breathing and eating and sleeping and walking— going through the motions? To feel and be most *you*? For, being alive in God, *to* God, clearly requires that we be alive to *ourselves*, first. Being alive *in* ourselves is intricately woven with, essential to, being alive in Christ.

Some thoughts from others who have pondered this very question:

Henri Nouwen: We all have dreams about the perfect life: a life without pain, sadness, conflict, or war. The spiritual challenge is to experience glimpses of this perfect life **right in the middle** of our many struggles. By embracing the reality of our mortal life, we can get in touch with the eternal life that has been sown there.

The apostle Paul expresses this powerfully when he writes: "We are subjected to every kind of hardship, but never distressed; we see no way out but we never despair; we are pursued but never cut off; knocked down, but still have some life in us; always we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus, too, may be visible in our ... mortal flesh" (2 Corinthians 4:8-12).

Only by facing our mortality can we come in touch with the life that transcends death. Our imperfections open for us the vision of the perfect life that God in and through Jesus has promised us.

Rev. Matthew Laney:

"Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:11)

Here's a truth we all know something about: it is possible to exist without being **fully** alive.

So often we stumble and bumble, going through the motions, mechanically punching in and punching out dragging ourselves through a caffeine withdrawal-like state. In those moments we can't even claim to be on auto-pilot because at least auto-pilots move with a sense of purpose and destination. We're more like zombies.

As far as God is concerned, you are dead to sin, freed from its power. Like the prodigal son who finally looked up from the pigslop to realize he didn't belong there, embrace your identity as a child of God made alive by Christ.

**Raise me up, God of life, from my bed, from my daily dread, and even from the dead.**

Thomas Merton reminds us that we don't have to have it all figured out ahead of time to live as ones "alive in Christ."

*"You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."*

— Thomas Merton

## **III. FINDING PURPOSE IN LIFE – Jean Brody**

Last week, as if dropped down from Heaven while this question of meaning and aliveness was hanging in the air—a fun and fortuitous thing happened in our family.

Miss Jean Brody (my dearly delightful mother-in-law), was interviewed for a podcast by her son-in-law, Rev. Dr. Steve Poos-Benson.

It was called:

**“Purpose at 86: An Interview with Jean Brody.”** It was actually the very *first* episode in a new podcast series that Steve has begun. (I will share a link so you can all listen for yourselves—it’s definitely worthwhile!)

Jean addressed in this interview this week, the very question we’re exploring today. What does it *mean* to be alive? Alive in Christ? Most alive that one can be? How does one keep “being made alive in Christ in God” as they age, face challenges and worlds and activities that are declining in some ways—or at least changing in significant ways.

I’ll share with you a few of the highlights: how Jean answers the question at 86 of how to keep “being made alive.”

#### IN JEAN’S WORDS

*Life is not without loss. You have to lose a lot. Scrape away a lot before you can even get to your purpose.*

*I had to lose everything that was dear to me.*

*We are the Lost and Found. Seniors here at Brookdale.*

*I lost one daughter. I never really got over that. Then I lost my husband. The home of my life—loved it with all my heart. We made it home.*

*I stopped writing for a short while when taking care of Gene. I’ve been writing my column for over 28 years in the Winchester Sun. People ask me all the time: “Well, what do you write about?” “I write about my life.”*

*I’d be stark, raving mad if I couldn’t write. That’s how I stay centered and have some sort of brain. Is to write my thoughts and feelings down.*

*Coming here—starting all over again. Not even furniture. Nothing. Starting all over again. I was just brand new. You can feel completely lost. You’re naked. Or, you can look for new clothes. New things to wear. New things to do. Others like you.*

*It’s the Last chapter of our lives if we live here. At least for most of us. I asked my daughter Phoebe. “Is this my last stop?” She couldn’t answer. I think she was crying.”*

*We’re all waiting. Waiting to die. That’s not everybody. But there are people here just like me—always looking for something new. To think about. To write about.*

*My body is betraying me. But my mind has stayed on course. Something changed when I moved here. The column had a lot to do with it. It makes me sit down every weekend and think. And not just think about stupid stuff—but meaningful stuff. Like silence—and thinking about where you are in life and what that means to you. Are you scared—do you want to talk to somebody? I see it as a new beginning.*

*How do you find a purpose at every stage of your life? Even in Senior living—after you’ve lost everything? You make a choice. You can just sit here and die. Or you can ask “What am I doing here? What is my purpose?”*

*I would just get sick and die if I didn’t do this very intentionally.*

*The Purpose for me is this: I’m not living for myself. There’s a reason I am here. I’m 86; oldest person here is 102.*

*“Young chick on the block!” I’m thriving. I have a sense of purpose—helping the other residents—that’s why I’m thriving.*

*And they think I can do things. Get things discussed rationally. Things that the residents want to see done. We have problems with the laundry and the dining room and the food stinks! My purpose is helping the folks here in the assisted living.*

*I’ve been careful to be a friend to people who don’t seem to reach out and be a friend. It’s hard to move in here. You feel you’ve been put here. You have a chip. To turn that around*

*and find out why you're here—to figure out that everyone is dealing with something too.*

*Hardest thing here: Consistent loss. People dying around me. Very sensitive. "I usually know ahead of time." People are getting near the end.*

*I always go to see them. I've learned not to fear death. If I don't fear it, I don't project fear. I'll sit up all night, hold their hand. Some of them don't even have family here.*

*I'd rather be here in these last 4 years than anywhere. I'm different now. When I lived on the farm, I did everything: I mucked stalls; took care of the horses, ran the house. Now here my focus is other people. Not my own stuff. My furniture or my belongings. I have nothing.*

*Finding my purpose evolved. I didn't go actively searching for a purpose, it came to me. I'm supposed to be here. I feel that God has brought me here to fulfill this purpose. And, I have had a more intimate relationship with my God since I've lived here and because of having a sense of purpose.*

*When asked what she would tell others—much younger folks—who seem to be flitting around, unsure of where they belong and what they're about, Jean said,  
"I would tell them: 'You have to lose before you gain.'"*

*Hmm.... That sounds kinda like something Jesus said:  
"To find yourself you have to lose yourself."*

*And Jean's key message for all of us—her manifesto that she's recited for many years?*

*"Don't go toward the grave with a fit body that's perfect and you've done everything you wanted to do and blah, blah blah. But skid in there sideways with chocolate and merlot and have a ball and say, "I've had a wonderful ride!"*

[INTERVIEW WITH JEAN BY STEVE POOS-BENSON](https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-jqh2f-8c5f83)  
<https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-jqh2f-8c5f83>

#### **IV. LIVING ALIVE IN THE THIN PLACES**

Being "alive in Christ" means seeking, in every stage of life, to be alive with purpose. To find that place where your passion and the needs of the world intersect. Your "calling at the crossroads."

It also means being alive—attentive—to the places, times, experiences where Christ is evidenced to *us*. Made known, revealed—in life-giving and love-filled "aha moments."

Celtic spirituality has this notion of "thin places". As David Lose describes it, "those places—often but not always mountaintops or other beautiful natural settings – where it feels like the distance between our finite and material world and God's eternal and spiritual reality collapses and becomes thin."

"It might be a favorite location or place where significant insight or development occurred. But *every* place has the capacity to be a thin place because God's presence in Jesus is set loose in the world.

When we are attentive to the "thin places" we claim the promise, "that God is available to us 24/7 absolutely anywhere we are. And that 'anywhere' is both geographical and spiritual: In church or out, at work or in school, at a spiritual highpoint or desert, when in the company of loved ones or desperately alone, in times of joy and sadness, when changing diapers or running errands. In all these "places" and more, God is present, working always to comfort, encourage, strengthen, heal, restore, and send."

Any place is sacred ground, for it can become a place of encounter with the divine Presence.

(BR. DAVID STEINDL-RAST)

## **V. ALIVE WHEN NOT FEELING LIVELY**

I had some pretty major dental surgery this week, and had quite the “chipmunk look” going. And feel. You all were very sweet, *and* very polite, when you saw me on Wednesday! And, you were helpful when people at Grace who didn’t know me needed to be informed: “She doesn’t always look like this.”

Anyway, the reason I mention this, is I was pondering this sermon all week on “being *alive* in Christ! Being alive in grace. What makes you feel most alive?!” And....well. I was feeling anything *but* lively. The surgery knocked my energy down pretty hard, and I wasn't a very industrious chipmunk storing up nuts or nuggets of wisdom for a Sunday message!

But that's where the Grace part of all this comes in. We are “made alive in Christ” but we are “saved by grace.” That’s the core nut of truth here in these wise words from Paul.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

These aren’t “spiritual marching orders” to “be lively” all the time. Because sometimes you just don’t feel like you’re very alive in Christ! Right? “Momma told me there’d be days like these.”

Bruce Epperly has a nice take on grace:

“God’s grace revives us, *restores* us, and inspires us to do good works. Grace does not depend on our perfection, but grace comes to us by God’s good pleasure, apart from our moral or spiritual achievements. God’s grace is prior to our efforts, and comes in spire of our imperfection, challenging us to be graceful ourselves.

And that is the good news, most of all, in all of this, thank God! We are “made alive in Christ,” but we aren’t “made alive by

ourselves” –by the force of our own strength or energy or willpower. But alive in grace. *By grace.*

We sang it earlier:

Some may call it foolish and impossible  
But for every heart it rescues it’s a miracle  
It’s nothing less than scandalous  
This love that took our place  
Just call it what it is  
Call it grace

When are we most alive? When we are basking in grace—however impossible life seems at the time. We are alive in Christ when we are at the top of our game *and* when we are needing to just be held, rocked in the arms of grace—letting Christ’s love take our place.

Amen.