

December 20, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Colossians 2:6–12](#)

TITLE: Living Your Lives in Christ

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

175 years ago, Henry David Thoreau went into the woods surrounding Concord, Massachusetts to build a cabin near Walden Pond. In his famous journal about his life near Walden, Thoreau said this: *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to [confront] only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*¹ Thoreau knew that life is precious and often too short; that is why he wished to study it and live as deliberately as possible.

In this Covid season of isolation and self-reflection, we could do worse than to take Thoreau as our guide. We too have been forced to stop many of the social activities that have filled our days up until now. Our homes and apartments are hopefully a bit more spacious than Thoreau's 10-by-15-foot, handmade cabin; however, having more living space doesn't automatically make our isolation any easier. The past months have forced us to boil life down to its essentials—and in our more reflective moments, to wonder what it takes to live a meaningful life.

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent and each week we've reflected on one central doctrine of our faith: the incarnation, the belief that in Christ Jesus the fullness of God dwells. So far we've looked at this doctrine from three sources in the bible: from [John 1](#) which says "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us"; from [Philippians 2](#) in which Paul wrote "Though Christ was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, being born in human likeness"; and then last week we heard from [Luke 3](#), in which a lengthy genealogy traced Jesus' ancestry all the way back to his being "the son of Adam, the son of God." These are three different approaches to talk about Christ: a [philosophical](#) approach (Christ, the eternal Word made flesh); a [psychological](#) approach (Christ didn't grasp equality but emptied himself); and a [biological](#) approach (Christ, the son of Adam, the son of God). Today we heard a fourth description of the incarnation – a [practical](#) approach from Colossians 2: *In Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him; [so] continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up and established in the faith, just as you were taught.*

That's good, practical advice. Like Thoreau it reflects a desire to live deliberately—to trust what you've been taught, trust what you've come to believe about Jesus, and then live each day accordingly. Trust in Jesus—the Christmas child born in the manger; Jesus the Word made flesh; Jesus, the one who left heaven to be born on earth; Jesus, the son of David, son of Adam, son of God. This is the tradition we've inherited from those who've gone before us. But sometimes it is hard to blindly trust tradition on faith alone. Let me tell an amusing anecdote to illustrate this point.

A new commander was appointed to lead an army base. As he was inspecting the place he saw two soldiers guarding a bench. He went over there and asked them why they were guarding it. They said, "Sir, we don't know. The last commander told us to do so, and so we did. I think it is some sort of regimental tradition." So the new commander dug up the phone number for his predecessor and asked him why he needed men to guard a particular bench. He too said, "I don't know. The previous commander had guards so I kept the tradition." Going back another three commanders, the officer finally found a 99 year old retired general. He called him and said, "Excuse me, sir. I'm now the CO of the camp you commanded 65 years ago. I've found two men assigned to guard a bench. Can you tell me more about this bench?" To which the old officer replied, "What? Is the paint still wet?"

I'm afraid church tradition has a lot in common with army traditions. Every year we preach about Jesus, born in Bethlehem long ago. We sing carols and send out Christmas cards celebrating this. For almost 2000 years we've lit candles, read scripture, and recited the Apostle's Creed—*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord*. We do all this automatically, almost without thinking. But how do we move from rote tradition to lived faith? How do we get from just saying the words "Jesus Christ" to deliberately living a life rooted, built up and grounded in the actual figure of the resurrected Christ?

If you'll indulge me, to answer these questions we need to go back long before Jesus to a wise Greek philosopher named Anaximander who lived in the 6th century BC. Anaximander looked at the world and wanted to understand it deliberately, intentionally. But he soon recognized that the world is not made up of a bunch of static things but ever-changing things. A cloud is not a thing. It is made up of ever-shifting water particles that are condensed and blown about in the sky. A wave is not a thing. It is moving water, flowing back and forth from the shore. A storm is not a single thing but a collection of meteorological events. A war is not one thing but a sequence of military events. A family is not a static thing but rather an evolving collection of human relations expressed over the years. And you and I—we are not things; we are complex creatures with physical, psychological, and social behaviors that also evolve over the years.²

Long ago Anaximander insisted that we can't understand life by studying things. Rather we understand life by studying change—"life in action" as it were. The cloud is not something captured in a photograph; it is the changing reality of water vapor condensing in the air and falling back as raindrops. And you are not something captured once and for all in a photograph. You and I are living beings, moving, interacting, stumbling, getting back up again, evolving creatures—or more precisely, evolving, beloved children of God.

That is why the starting point for thinking about Jesus isn't a portrait of him on a church wall, or a static doctrine of him handed down in theology books. The starting point must be the living Christ—the one whom we've encountered by God's grace, however dimly or partially, and most importantly the one in whom we live our lives. That's what Paul was trying to get across in his letter to the Colossians. He put it as simply as he could:

Live your lives in Christ. We are rooted in him—that means, in Christ’s story and by his grace, we exist. We are built up in him—that means we are to follow his example, growing and interacting with others in a Christ-like manner. We are established in him—amid a pandemic with our fallible and fragile bodies, we find something to believe in and deeply trust in Jesus Christ.

From Anaximander we understand that life is not about static things, but about changing, growing, and evolving into the fullness of our God-given human identity. From Thoreau we are convicted to live each day deliberately, confronting the essential facts of life so that when we come to die, we might not discover we had never lived at all. And from the apostle Paul we profess that the fullness of life’s meaning, even the fullness of God, dwells in Jesus—and not that we grasp this mystery once and for all, but that we choose to live into this mystery, intentionally walking with Christ into a fullness of life only possible with him.

Friends, isn’t that the ultimate message of Christmas? It’s not about things but about actions grounded in love. It’s not about presents, price tags and packages; it’s about the act of placing something in another person’s hands and wishing them well. It’s not about things like stacked gold coins locked away in grumpy old Mr. Scrooge’s safe; it’s about giddy old Ebenezer flinging wide the curtains on Christmas Day, sending a turkey to long-neglected Bob Cratchit, and admitting he was an old fool finally able to enjoy a Christmas dinner with his nephew Fred. The Christmas story in the bible doesn’t want us to focus on decorations, static nativity sets and inanimate crèches. It wants us to actively imagine shepherds leaving their fields, magi traveling across borders, and Joseph and Mary holding a child who would change and grow (just like us) and become the living representation of all God desires for us.

Advent began four weeks ago with John 1. It has wandered through Philippians, Luke and Colossians, and even conversed with old Anaximander and crotchety Mister Thoreau. Yet in this pandemic season of uncertainty, listen how the Advent mystery of incarnation pulls us back to where it all began four weeks ago: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. [Christ] was in the world and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own...and to all who received him, who believed in his name, [who lived their lives in him, they] became children of God—born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. The Word became flesh and lived among us—and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.* Trust in this good news. Go now receiving grace upon grace from the living Christ who is with you now and until the end of the age.

AMEN

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Signet Classic paperback, 1960, p. 66.

² Cf. Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, Riverhead Books, 2018, pp. 99-101.