

As A Church

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[0 : 00] As we said at the beginning of the worship service, this is the first Sunday in the season of the church calendar that we call Lent. I understand there are varying levels of familiarity with the church calendar here.

But Lent is essentially a season of penitence and of reflection, of introspection. And we ask questions like, who am I in the Lord?

Who is God calling me to become in Him? Questions about identity. And even as we are doing that individually during this season, we thought that this would be a really good time to ask these same questions as a community whole.

These questions of identity. And so our leadership team for the past several months has been spending a lot of time in prayer. We've been talking to a lot of people and hearing from a lot of people in our community.

We've been evaluating all of the different aspects of our common life together. And we've essentially been asking these two questions. Who are we now as a church?

[1 : 08] And who is the Lord calling us to become? Because after all, all of this belongs to Him. So it's His to do with as He pleases. But you may not know that Advent was started back in 2008.

And the way time moves, especially in D.C., that's ancient history. And a lot has changed in our community since then. And a lot has changed in our world.

The world is no longer what it was in 2008. It's a vastly different place, vastly different culture. And I think we feel that in D.C. And so we're reflecting on who we are now and who the Lord is calling us to be in light of those changes.

And so here, I want to put up on the screen, here is the statement that we believe really captures those two things. Who we are, it's descriptive, and who we hope to become. It's aspirational.

As a church, we seek the flourishing of Washington, D.C. By building gospel-centered communities that practice generous hospitality, spiritual formation, and missionary faithfulness in every neighborhood.

[2 : 08] And what we have in this statement is four things. We have our identity. We're a church. We have our vision, what we hope to see one day. And that is the flourishing of Washington, D.C.

And that's a word that comes from the Bible, Jeremiah 29, the welfare. The ultimate holistic prospering of the city by God's blessing. And that our mission for accomplishing that is building gospel-centered communities in every neighborhood.

And that we do all of that with three core values. And again, I think this really captures the spirit of the Church of the Advent. Three values that shape everything we do. Generous hospitality, spiritual formation, and missionary faithfulness.

And so what we're going to do throughout the season of Lent is essentially unpack this statement and explore together who we believe the Lord is calling us to be as a community in 21st century Washington, D.C.

The state of the culture being what it is. And so tonight, we're going to start with the first three words. We're going to look at these words as a church. And it may sound very basic to some of you who have been Christians a long time.

[3 : 13] But we have to begin with our fundamental identity. What does it mean to be a church? This sounds like Christianity 101, but there are a lot of different answers to that question out there.

And what you find is the way you answer that question will really shape and determine a lot of your priorities and how you spend your time and your money and how you constitute yourselves as a community.

And so we want to begin here and ask, what does it mean to be a church? And throughout this series, we'll look at some of the core formative texts from Scripture that really shape how we think about our identity here in D.C.

And so we're going to begin tonight with this question, what does it mean to be a church? By looking at Ephesians 2, verses 19 through 22. So if you have a Bible, you can open up to it.

But I'll refer back to it a couple of times. But essentially what Paul tells us in this passage is this. That here's what it means to be a church. The church is God's family built on God's word to embody God's presence in the world.

[4 : 19] The church is God's family built on his word to embody his presence in the world. That's what this passage tells us. And so let's explore that in more detail. And let's ask the Lord to help us.

Our Heavenly Father, we do ask that even as we are gathered here around your written word, that you would use this to speak to us with your voice through the power of your spirit.

That I and everyone here, our greatest need is to know you, is to hear from you, is to be more shaped by your truth. And so, Lord, we pray that you would do just that, that you would speak to us and tell us what we need to hear.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So Ephesians 2, 19 to 22, what is the church? The first thing we see in verse 19 is that the church is a family.

It's God's family. Let me just read verse 19 to you. He says, So then, which tells us that he's at the culmination of an argument. We'll cover that in just a minute.

[5 : 20] So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

So here's the first thing that we learn right off the bat about what it means to be a church. And this is one of the things that sets church apart from other institutions and other communities in the world.

The church is made up of people who at one time were alienated from God. And they were alienated from one another.

And a transformation has occurred. So that those people are no longer alienated. And through this change of identity, they have become brothers and sisters in the fullest meaning of the term.

They have a bond that is even stronger than blood. Stronger than DNA. They've become a family. And this is especially powerful if you think about the context of the Greco-Roman world.

[6 : 22] The society that this is written in was deeply divided along all kinds of lines. And Paul, earlier in chapter 2, is talking about what you might think of as the identity politics of the first century world in the Greco-Roman society.

You had the Jews who had an identity politics of chosenness. There are two kinds of people in the world. Either you are circumcised and you're born a Jew and you're circumcised and you live under the law and you enjoy God's special privilege and blessing.

Or you're a Gentile dog. There's either the Jew or there's everybody else. Now the Greeks, many of whom the Jews would call Gentile dogs, they had their own identity politics.

It was one of civility. Either you are a high-cultured, literate, civilized Greek. Or you're an uncultured, illiterate, barbarian subhuman.

And there's really just two kinds of people. There's the civilized people and there's everybody else. And you could draw this line all kinds of ways. Rich and poor, educated and uneducated.

[7 : 34] Male versus female. Deeply divided society. But when Jesus came, and this is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians. When Jesus came, he changed everything.

And Paul lays this out in his letter. Paul lays out the fact that regardless of race or socioeconomic class or level of education or background, regardless of any of those things, everybody has the same core problem.

That from the moment of their birth, they are alienated from the God who made them. They're alienated because of sin. Before they ever make a choice, they inherit that condition.

They're alienated from God. And then he says, at the same time, everyone has the same problem, but they also have the same singular hope. And that is that God is the kind of God who loves his people.

The kind of God who shows mercy. And so he's essentially loving the playing field. He says all of these ways that we define ourselves. Like I'm Greek, or I'm Jewish, or I'm a male, or female, or I'm white, or I'm black, or I'm any of the ways that we might define ourselves.

[8 : 45] He says the one thing that makes any difference is your status before God. That's what, you're all alienated. Apart from the mercy of God.

So what he's saying is that external differences, we notice those kinds of things. We tend to prioritize those kinds of things. But the real thing that we should be paying attention to is our spiritual status.

That spiritually speaking, we're all in the same boat. We all have the same problem, and we all share the same singular hope. And so Ephesians 2 talks about how Jesus came to deal with all of this.

He came to deal with everything that divides us from one another, and everything that divides us from God. And all of that was dealt with on the cross. All of it. When Jesus dies to atone for the sins of the human race.

And so then we ask, okay, well what does that mean for us as we're exploring what does it mean to be a church here in Washington, D.C.? Well it means that we no longer pay attention to external differences in the same way.

[9 : 51] Jesus doesn't do away with external differences. He doesn't eradicate race, or ethnicity, or social class, or gender. He doesn't, those don't cease to exist. But for the Christian, those things are no longer primary.

Right, so I used to be, you know, maybe I would define myself as I'm from North Carolina. And I'm, you know, these are my politics, and this is my race, and this is my background, and these are all the things that make me, me. Right? And by definition, I mean, try to think of a way of describing yourself that doesn't somehow define you against some other group.

It's really hard. And yet Jesus says all of those identity markers, they don't cease to exist, but they become secondary. And the new primary identity for the Christian is that they are children of God.

They are part of God's family. They're brothers and sisters in Christ. So you see Jesus, and this is Paul's argument, Jesus taking all of these divided fragments of humanity, right?

The Jews, and the Greeks, and the Scythians, and the Samaritans, and all of these people who are divided from one another. And he's knitting them together into a new humanity.

[11 : 00] He literally is creating a new humanity. And so, you know, the early church got this, and they began to refer to themselves as the third race. I'm no longer Jewish.

I'm no longer Greek. Right? That's a facet of my personality. But in fact, we've been transformed. We're something new, a new creation. The third race. A great example of this is the church in Antioch.

Some of you are familiar with this. You know, Antioch is famous because it's the place where Christians first started being called Christians. It was actually originally a derogatory term. But in Antioch, when they built Antioch, they didn't just build a big wall around the city, but they actually built lots of walls in the city.

And the idea was to create a quadrant for each of the ethnic groups in Antioch. And there were at least 18 walled-off ethnic ghettos.

Right? So everybody stuck to their section of the city, and there were big walls that divided. And that's the way it was for a long time until the Christians came. And for the first time in history, what did the Christians do?

[12 : 03] They went over the walls. Because their understanding of the gospel is that the gospel tells us two things. That we are all alienated from God, and that we all have access to the hope that comes through Jesus.

Right? And so they began to preach and teach this to everyone. And they began to grow and to multiply and to become incredibly diverse, like nothing the world knew at that time.

And the leadership team in Antioch and the church that you read about in Acts chapter 13 is amazing. Just imagine a church with this leadership team. You have Barnabas, who's a Levite from Cyprus.

You have Simeon, who's a black African. You have Lucius, who's from North Africa. You have Menaeon, who's from the court of Herod Antipas. You know, many would consider to be the enemy.

Right? And then you have Saul of Tarsus, who before he converted and became Paul, was one of the worst persecutors of Christians in history. That is the leadership team of your church.

[13 : 04] That's amazing diversity. And it's because they understood the gospel transforms alienated people into a family. Right? So as we think about this for us, we reflect on this fact that when we say we are a church, as a church, we're saying that we are a family.

That this is a family. Right? And for us at Advent, this is more important now than ever, because quite frankly, I think you would agree, we live in a culture that is deeply divided.

At least, if not more divided, than the society that this was written in. Right? We say on paper that we're one nation, but we're actually lots of many nations.

And it's been interesting over the years to see the increasing siloing off of groups. Right? The separating of people from one another.

The establishing of ghettos. Now, we don't have walls built throughout our country like Antioch did. At least not physical walls. But there are walls.

[14 : 10] Right? Just go on social media, and you will bump up against those walls of who people associate with, and who people listen to, and who people believe, and who people ascribe credibility to.

Right? There are these silos that exist in our culture. And so what does this mean for us if we really take seriously what Paul's saying in Ephesians chapter 2? It means that we're the ones who have to go over the walls.

We cannot wait around for somebody else to do it. You can't wait around for your family to do it. You can't wait around for your friends and co-workers to do it. We're the ones who go over the walls.

By definition, that's what a Christian is. We cross the lines. We understand the implications of the gospel for everyone. We understand the power of the gospel to unite humanity in a way that nothing else can.

We go over the walls. And that doesn't just happen out there. It's something that has to happen in here. Advent oftentimes exists with invisible walls. Right? We don't call them walls.

[15 : 08] We call them cliques. But they exist. Understanding that we are a new family in Jesus Christ, means we don't just spend time with people who are like us.

We don't just relate to people who we know that right off the bat we're going to get along with. It means you look around and you look past all of the external markers of identity, whether it be the kinds of clothes that somebody wears or the kind of job that they have, and you look deeper and you begin to see people for who they are spiritually.

Brothers and sisters. We go over the walls, right? So being a church in the 21st century means being a peace-building institution, not just out there but in here, a community of ongoing reconciliation, a family in Jesus Christ.

This is the first thing. We're a church, which means we're a family. As we move on in Paul's passage here, we get to verse 20, and that tells us that we're a family with a very specific foundation, that we are built on God's word.

And this is in verse 20. It says this, Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.

[16 : 20] So we are members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone. Now what does that mean? Well, first of all, it talks about Jesus being the cornerstone.

Now when we think of cornerstone, I think there's one around here in this building, we think of a little ornamental thing, right? It's like a little square and it has a date on it. 1865. Right? That's true. And it's kind of a little decoration, right?

Well, that is not the kind of cornerstone that this has in mind. The kind of cornerstone that existed in this society was normally a massive, heavy stone. When you were going to build a building, it was the first stone that you picked out, and you took great care to do it, was the cornerstone.

Why did you take great care? Well, because the cornerstone had the job of defining all of the lines and the angles of the building. So when you lay a cornerstone, you're essentially determining the shape and the orientation of the entire structure.

Everything is going to be built off of and line up with this stone. So it has to be just right. So he's saying that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. And then he's saying that there's a foundation that is built around the cornerstone, right?

[17 : 30] So that the cornerstone determines the shape. And then the foundation reflects the lines and the angles of the cornerstone. And then it determines the shape of the rest of the structure. So what's he saying?

Our foundation is that Jesus Christ, his life, his ministry, his death, his resurrection, his teaching, all of it, who he is and what he said, that that determines the entire shape of the church.

It determines how we live in the world. It determines our entire orientation toward life. And that the job of the apostles was to receive the teaching of Jesus and then to pass it on.

You know, the word apostle comes from the root that means a cargo ship. A cargo ship. A good cargo ship does what? It delivers its cargo.

A good apostle delivers the teachings of Jesus. And then the prophets were people who were empowered by the spirit to expound upon the teachings of the apostles. And apply them in ways that would pierce hearts.

[18 : 39] Right? So you have the cornerstone and the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And this, as the apostles began to get older and older and got close to death, they began to write all of these things down.

And that became a body of written work that became what we call the New Testament. So that's what the foundation of the church is, is this body of teaching that was delivered by the apostles that originated in the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

So the implications of this. Think about Advent. Our church is shaped by all kinds of things. Lots of things weigh in on. Some very ancient things, right?

I love the fact that some of the prayers we pray date back to the first couple of centuries. You know, when we say, you know, we lift our hearts to the Lord, it is right and good to give Him thanks and praise.

When we say that, that what's called the surs and corda, lift up your hearts, we lift them up to the Lord. That dates back to 150 AD. Christians have been saying that a long time, right? And then we also engage and think about and ponder and wrestle through the most contemporary issues of the day, right?

[19 : 47] So lots of things shape the life of our church. But what this is saying is that we only have one foundation. That when it comes to the ultimate shape of our common life, Scripture is primary.

It's the thing that determines the shape of our common life. So everything, right, from how we think about our budget to how we think about what happens here on Sunday to how we think about and the desire that we have for our core groups, right?

Even to the way we think about the most controversial issues of the day. All of that is ultimately determined and shaped by the foundation of Jesus and the apostles and the prophets, that body of teaching that we have in Scripture.

So, you know, a lot of times people will ask me, well, what's your stance on this issue? Or what's your stance on that issue? And a lot of times I just want to say, who cares? Who cares?

Well, you want to build an institution on my personal preferences about how the world should be looked? That's utterly wrong. Right? The church has a foundation. It has a source that shapes who we are, how we see the world, what our values are, what our priorities are, where we think all of this is going, the story within which we live.

[21 : 08] All of that is shaped by the foundation that has been given to us, right? It's a core part of what it means to be the church. And what happens if you build on something other than the foundation that has been laid?

You know, I almost experienced that firsthand. You know, my wife, Mara, and I were checking out this old ramshackle cabin. And we were – and it was kind of elevated off the ground on the stilts.

It was pretty high up. And we were just kind of walking around and looking at the different rooms. And I saw this porch, this stringed-in porch. And I said, oh, cool, a porch. And I go walking out on the porch. It's pretty high off the ground. I go walking out on the porch.

And the whole thing goes – it starts to sag. And I just sort of froze. And Mara said, get back in, get back in, get back in. And so I very easily walked back.

And luckily it didn't fall. We go outside to see why I was sagging. It had no foundation. Somebody had added a porch onto the side of this cabin, not put any stilts under it. And it was just sort of attached. Right?

[22 : 05] So if I had been any heavier, if I had done this now rather than a few years ago, I would be a dead man. Right? The whole thing would have come crashing down. And that's the reality. Whenever you try to build a church community on anything other than the foundation that has been laid, you're essentially sticking something, an addition, onto the side.

And it can't bear any weight. It won't last. Eventually it will come crashing down. And what this is saying is essentially this. Here's the implication. Right? When churches veer off of this foundation, when Jesus Christ is no longer the cornerstone, when the teachings of the apostles and the prophets are no longer foundational, when they're no longer determining the shape, they really cease to be churches in anything other than name.

Right? So this is something we have to be very clear on in terms of our hopes for Advent. That regardless, we would always stay on this foundation. And there's a reason why all of this is so important.

Right? Why did God take such great care to build a unified family at such great cost to himself? And then why did God take such great care to lay a foundation that would be passed down through the generations to us?

Why do all of that? Well, it's because of God's ultimate purpose for this community. And what is that? Verses 21 and 22.

[23 : 29] In whom the whole structure, meaning the church, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Paul is talking about the church and he's using the image of a temple, which is a very powerful image. If you lived in Ephesus, most of his audience were people who had lived in Ephesus. They were Gentiles, most of them, formerly pagan.

And a lot of them were new converts to Christianity. And they were coming out of a very heavily occult culture, a lot of occult practices. But Ephesus was also known for one of the seven great wonders of the ancient world, which was the Temple to Diana.

It was this huge, massive temple, right? And the Jews would have thought about the temple in Jerusalem, right? Again, a beautiful, impressive structure.

But what's the function of a temple? It's to be the dwelling place of the presence of God. And even though the God of the Bible is a God who is omnipresent, meaning that he's everywhere.

[24 : 39] Throughout the history of the Jewish people, God's special, unique presence had always been in the temple, right? First in the tabernacle and then later in the temple. What we call God's Shekinah glory, right?

His unique, manifest presence was in the temple. So what is Paul saying about the nature of the church community?

We have to understand the significance of what he's saying here. That there's a reason he takes such great care to build it correctly and to make sure that it's unified. It's because the whole purpose of the church is to be the new temple, the dwelling place of God on earth.

This community. This community. When we gather. So what does this mean for us? How does this shape how we think about being a church?

There was a survey in 2013 by the Barna Group. And they asked over a thousand American adults, what do you think about going to church? And you had some people who said, love it, I always go.

[25 : 48] You had another small group that said, I never go. I think it's totally irrelevant to life. But the biggest subset of people said that they were ambivalent. And so the surveyors asked a follow-up question.

Why are you ambivalent? What's the source of your ambivalence? And the majority of people who answered said, well, I really find that I find God elsewhere. I'm not really sure what the purpose of church is.

I find God elsewhere. When I listen to great music, I find God. When I go on hikes and see the beauty of nature, I find God. When I'm with people that I love and care about, my family and friends, I find God.

Those are all ways that I experience God. Why would I go to church? It's a lot of trouble. It's people that I don't know. It's across town. There's no traffic. You know, it's at a horrible time of the day. There's no parking.

Why would I do that? Right? They're ambivalent about it. It's becoming more and more common, I think, for Christians, especially with the kind of plethora of online sermon podcasts that are available and music and all that, to sort of simply see church as a kind of add-on, but not really necessary or central to the Christian life.

[26 : 56] And it's interesting to reflect on why do we gather every week? I mean, what's the purpose of this? You know, what's the purpose of doing this at 5 o'clock every Sunday? Are we coming to this like a gas station?

You know, is this a place to get spiritually topped off for the week? You know, do we come to be entertained? And some of the things that we do aren't necessarily very entertaining.

Right? Is that why we're coming? You know, do we come to learn helpful principles for living? You know, we just got married, and we just want to get some tips for how to love each other better. You know, do we come because it's therapeutic, and we know that this will help us work through our personal issues?

You know, so why do we come to church? It's a question worth asking. And some of each of those statements is true. At times it can be entertaining. At times it can be therapeutic. At times we do learn things that are helpful for life.

But we need to understand that what Paul is saying is not just nice poetic metaphor. Oh, you're like the temple. He's saying you are the temple. So very literally, when Christians gather in Jesus' name, when we gather and the gospel is preached and the word is open, when we go to our knees and when we pray together, when we confess our sin and hear God's declaration of mercy, when we participate in the sacraments and see people baptized into the body of Christ, when we come to this table and share the bread and the wine, when these things happen, the Shekinah glory of God is here in a way that it is not present in other places, that we are here partaking of a unique manifestation of the presence of God.

[28 : 35] Yes, God is omnipresent. But the Bible says there is a unique way that God is present when his people are gathered in his name. Ministry is happening here and not human ministry.

God is at work. He's like a surgeon who is at work in our hearts, even as we are gathered here. And it happens every time. Right? So this is why the early church in Acts continued meeting, right, every day, right, devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, right, and the fellowship and the breaking of bread and the prayers, right?

This is why they did that. This is why in Hebrews chapter 10, it says, Let us stir one another up to good works, not neglecting to meet together as some people have done.

Why? Because God is here. He's present. He's living and active among his people. The walls between the heavens and the earth are thin here.

This is a thin place. Right? There's a commingling of the temporal and the eternal. There's a commingling. We are touching and tasting and glimpsing eternal cosmic reality here and now.

[29 : 56] That's what happens here that doesn't happen anywhere else. Right? This is why, by the way, our central mission is to build gospel-centered communities in every neighborhood.

We'll talk about that in a couple of weeks. Why? Because we believe that yes, a new church is great at reaching people. Yes, a new church is great for serving and meeting needs in the community.

Yes, a new church is valuable for all those things. But quite literally, when people gather in Jesus' name, the presence of God, his Shekinah glory is manifested. So if you want to fill a city with the presence of God, what do you do?

You plant churches. And together when they worship, they proclaim and manifest and embody the presence of God. So what is a church and what does it mean to be a church?

When we say as a church, what does that mean? It means this, that we are a family. In Jesus Christ, we're God's family. It means that we're built on the specific foundation of the apostles and the prophets.

[30 : 57] With Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. And it means lastly that among all of the good things that happen in our community, the greatest thing of all is that when we gather like this, the glory of God is manifest not only to us but to the world.

The Lord is with us. I'll end with a passage from Eugene Peterson's wife. He's kind of a hero of mine. And his wife, Jan, is also a hero and amazing.

And here's a statement from her, and I'm kind of repurposing it for this. Being a church member is a vocation, a way of life.

It means participation in an intricate web of hospitality, living at the intersection of human need and God's grace, inhabiting a community where men and women who don't fit are welcomed, where neglected children are noticed, where the stories of Jesus are told, and people who have no stories find that they do have stories, stories that are part of the Jesus story.

Being a church member places us strategically yet unobtrusively at a heavily trafficked intersection between heaven and earth. Let's pray.

[32 : 13] Our Father, apart from you, these would be merely words. But you have promised from ancient times that you would be a God who dwelled in the midst of your people.

And so now we pray that you would fulfill that promise, that above all things, this community would be known as a community where you are present and living and active, where we would come face to face with the reality of the living God.

And we pray that for all churches who rest on the foundation of Jesus Christ and the prophets and the apostles, that you would fill them with your presence and so fill this world with your glory.

We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen.