

“A Christmas adoption”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 1:5-14 and John 1:10-18

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In 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered massive tsunamis throughout South Asia and the eastern coast of Africa. If this is sounding familiar, that’s because I’ve shared this story with the children before.

That day, a family of hippos was playing in the Sabaki River in Eastern Kenya. When the tsunami hit, the hippos were swept out to sea. Only one survived, a baby. He was washed ashore, wet, scared, and tired. He didn’t know where he was, and he couldn’t find his mother. Some locals found the baby and took him to a nature reserve, where he was given the name of Owen. He was very lonely. He missed his mommy. And then he saw something. Something large like his mommy with a domed back. Something brownish gray like his mommy. So “he staggered over and snuggled next to it,” falling into a deep sleep. When he woke, he found that he was nestled up with a 130-year-old giant male tortoise named Mzee. But the fact that he was a tortoise, and a male, didn’t seem to bother Owen, who had decided Mzee was going to be his mommy. For the next two years, Owen never left Mzee’s side. They slept together, swam together, and ate together. Whenever Mzee would get up to walk—very slowly, mind you—Owen would follow, right behind.

The story was later turned into a children’s book called *A Mama for Owen*.

I think we’re a lot like Owen. That is, if you don’t mind being compared to a hippo!

We’re all orphans of one kind or another. Perhaps we feel abandoned by our changing culture. Perhaps we went off to war, and came home feeling like a stranger. Maybe we lost our family—through abuse or addiction or illness or just the slow distancing of time. Maybe we were orphaned by racial and economic systems that dehumanized and oppressed us. Perhaps we feel alone—I know many of us have felt lonely ever since COVID-19 hit. Maybe we just wish we had a friend. Maybe we just wish we could know for sure that God’s out there and loves us.

We’re all scared little hippos, searching, wanting to belong somewhere, to someone.

In the time of Jesus and the early church, if a child lost their parents or their city (say, because of plague or war or poverty), that child was often sold into slavery. It was a dangerous thing in ancient Rome to be on your own. And it’s a dangerous thing still.

I think that's why a sense of belonging is often compared to a sense of safety. I remember the first time, outside of family and church, that I experienced that feeling. It was in the woods, in a grove of trees near my house, and a creek bed of polished stones, clay walls, and clear, flowing water. I felt happy. There, in the birdsong and the light through the leaves, I felt like the world finally made sense. Speech impediments didn't matter here. Neither did bullies or loneliness. Here, everything was connected. Everything was God and love and me.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians today, describes that feeling as adoption, and not just a feeling but a state of being.

Paul says that God has found us, orphans all, and claimed us as God's children. Paul says this repeatedly in his letters. In another letter to the Roman church, Paul says, "You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (8:15-17). We get to call God *Abba*, the Aramaic word used by children for their father: "Daddy." An intimate word, used by Jesus, who is now our brother.

God, Paul says, has adopted us into the divine family: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We get to be a part of it. We get to be loved. It shows up right there also at the beginning of the Gospel of John: we are proclaimed God's children. God has adopted us.

The Christmas story is about more than the birth of Jesus. It's about how, when God looks upon that baby in the manger, God doesn't just see Jesus; God sees all of us. That day, more than 2,000 years ago, nestled in the straw, God chose to create a new family.

The New Testament didn't have to use this language of adoption. It could have talked about new birth, as it does elsewhere. But throughout Paul's letters is this persistent language about adoption—the idea that, though we were lost, God found us, loved us, and called us co-heirs with Christ. Think about the power of that statement.

God gives us a place to belong. The best place!

In Roman society, when a child was adopted, that child had the same legal rights and same inheritance as biological children. And now Paul tells us that we are given the same rights and inheritance as Christ himself, God's only Son.

What would this mean for your life? Right now, today? How would this change how you see yourself, how you see others around you? Maybe you'd take a chance on that dream you've been bottling up inside for so long. Maybe you'd tell someone that you love them, or stand up for someone being treated as anything other than an equal child of God.

This concept of adoption changes everything. It means everything that's been holding you back every day of your life is a lie. You are a daughter of God. You are a son of God.

God begins this adoption on Christmas Day, with a family that breaks every convention: an unwed teenage mother, a baby born in a barn, a father who has no biological ties to this child but chooses to adopt this child as his own, an uncle and aunt (Zechariah and Elizabeth) who struggle with infertility and whom everyone says are too old to be parents, a group of shepherds and foreigners from the east (the magi) becoming their chosen family. As he grows up, Jesus will extend this family to include tax collectors and fishermen, widows and prostitutes, people with disabilities and Roman centurions. And us. In a world where status and blood meant everything, God creates a family where love means everything. We belong, not because of our blood ties or what we've accomplished; we belong, because we were chosen. That is the Christmas miracle.

Therefore, if God has created this diverse, crazy adoptive family, we have to throw out all our assumptions about what it means to be family and embrace a new openness that transcends race, sexuality, gender identity, and all the ways we define and confine each other. It means chosen families, birth families, foster families, friends, church, justice movements, schools, even the saints in heaven. Anything where we are adopted by love.

It's why we take care of each other in this church. It's why, when you're struggling, whether financially or spiritually or emotionally, we try to be there, to love you. It's why, despite all our differences, we are all members of one church. Because we're family. Not family, in the earthly, biological sense, not family in the way so many families betray our trust or hurt us... but a divine Christmas family, an adopted family, a people brought together not by our similarities but by our love, born of God's love.

So today, on this final Sunday of Christmas, my encouragement to you is to see yourself as adopted. You now carry the family name, Christ's name. You are a Christian.

You don't have to be afraid anymore. You have a place where you belong, and a Person to whom you belong.

In the end, all of us are just little hippos resting our heads on the back of an ancient Tortoise, an unexpected Mommy. **Amen.**