In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this sermon is from our Epistle Lesson, Galatians 4. St. Paul speaks of “adoption as children.” He writes this:

4But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Galatians 4:4-5, RSV)

This is the point of Christmas for St. Paul: adoption. Paul says that the wonderful thing about God sending his Son, born of Mary, is that it opens a new and sublime spiritual status for us: It permits us to be adopted as children of God. Our holy God remains three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet Christmas opens up a kind of fourth part in God — by way of adoption.

It works by way of Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that our relationship to Jesus can be and should be so close and personal, that it can be said of us that we “abide in him.” That is language from St. John. In John 15, we hear Jesus calling upon his disciples to “abide in me”:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (John 15:4, RSV)

Again, our relationship to Jesus can be and ought to be so close and personal, that it is said of us that we are “in him,” and he “in us.” St. Paul speaks of himself that way. He speaks of a kind of blessed confusion in which it has become hard for him to distinguish himself from Jesus:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20 RSV)

Again, our relationship to Jesus can be and ought to be so close and personal that it can be said of us the Spirit of Jesus has come into our hearts. Indeed, this morning’s Epistle Lesson says exactly that:
And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6, RSV)

You know what it is like in this world for people to have a mean spirit, or an ungrateful spirit, or a sulking spirit. But set all of that aside. We are speaking of the very Spirit of Jesus. If we are moved by that Spirit, if God has “sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,” then we will resemble Jesus, even in the eyes of God Most High.

When we abide in Jesus, and when he lives in us and we in him, and when we enjoy something of his own Spirit, then God welcomes us into his family. This is the dramatic thing I am trying explore this morning. St. Paul is speaking of adoption into a holy family. Adoption into any good family is a wonderful and holy thing on earth. But we are not talking about adoption into just any good family — not even adoption into a royal family. Rather, we are talking about adoption into God’s family. And so I read again our text for this morning:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Galatians 4:4-5, RSV)

I am quite sure that being in Christ and he in us has much to do with the church. If we neglect the church, we thereby starve and diminish ourselves, straying from the very One in whom we are adopted as children of God.

But that is not my focus this morning. This good morning is the start of a new year: the year of our Lord 2018. What I want to do is simply to take St. Paul at his word and to rejoice in the idea that through Jesus, you and I are “adopted as children.” We can go through this new year as adopted children of God. We are not orphans in this universe. We have somewhere we belong. We belong in church. And we have Someone to whom we belong: we belong to Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are kin to them, the three divine persons of Almighty God. Not by nature, but by grace, we are adopted as children of God and inheritors of eternal life. Friendship with Jesus gives us this high status. So, I want us to be encouraged as we face this new year before us. This new year is dealing with important people, you and me! We are not triffles. We are not negligible. We are not inconsequential. Rather, let us take the apostle at his word: we are adopted as children of God. Let us go through this coming year, then, with our heads up and with our hearts set on our noble status: friends of Jesus, adopted as children of God.
A little while back, my wife, Carol, enjoyed a Netflix series called “Anne with an E.” The series is based on the novel *Anne of Green Gables.*¹ Theologian Gilbert Meilaender says about that book that it “may be the most engaging novel ever written about an adopted child.”² It is about a girl, Anne (with an E), who is adopted by an elderly brother and sister on Prince Edward Island, Canada. They had wanted a boy, to help them on the farm, but do not have the heart to turn the girl away.

There are great passages in the book about Anne’s longing to belong somewhere on this earth. On the ride home from the train station, Anne chatters away to old Matthew, who cannot bring himself to leave her at the train station: “Oh, it seems so wonderful that I’m going to live with you and belong to you. I’ve never belonged to anybody—not really.”³

And then there is the scene about Anne gazing at the picture of Jesus and the children. Marilla, the elderly sister, has sent Anne into another room to fetch something, but Anne is rather scatter-brained and does not return. After ten minutes, Marilla goes to check on the child and finds her looking at the picture of Jesus and the children. Anne says this to Marilla:

> I was just imagining I was one of them—that I was the little girl in the blue dress, standing off by herself in the corner as if she didn’t belong to anybody, like me. She looks lonely and sad, don’t you think? I guess she hadn’t any father or mother of her own. But she wanted to be blessed too, so she just crept shyly up on the outside of the crowd, hoping nobody would notice her—except Him. I’m sure I know just how she felt. Her heart must have beat and her hands must have got cold, like mine did when I asked you if I could stay. She was afraid He mightn’t notice her. But it’s likely He did, don’t you think? I’ve been trying to imagine it all out—her edging a little nearer all the time until she was quite close to Him; and then He would look at her and pat His hand on her hair and oh, such a thrill of joy as would run over her!”⁴

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¹ By L. M. Montgomery, first published in 1908 and set on Prince Edward Island.
Well, it is not only children who can long for a sense of belonging. Sometimes, life so works itself out that having a good family and a sense of home, where we always belong, can save us from discouragement, even from danger. We can wander far in this world, and take on many adventures, if we know that we have a family that loves us and that we can go back home.

My friends, as we set out of the adventures of the year of our Lord 2018 now before us, I want us to know that we have been adopted into a wonderful divine family and that we are meant for heaven as our eternal home.

Please know this on New Year’s Day: If you have given yourself to Jesus, then know this: you belong to God. You belong to your brothers and sisters in the church. If life should ever conspire to make you feel unimportant this coming year, then shake off that discouragement and say to yourself, I belong to God and to the Church. Why! I am adopted as a child of God and inheritor of great things.

The great gift of adoption is that the child now knows where he or she belongs. Christmas means that you and I belong in this world! We belong to this world’s Maker. Just as baby Jesus belongs to Mary and Joseph, so you and I belong to God. We have a home. Our existence is not a mistake or some random accident. We belong to God!

Through thick and thin this coming year, throw in your lot with Jesus. It will make for a good year — perhaps the most satisfying of your life so far. And besides all that, throwing in your lot with Jesus brings you adoption into God’s family, and how amazing is that! Through the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.