

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Colossians 1:11-20 (NRSV)

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully [12] giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. [13] He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, [14] in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

[15] He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; [16] for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. [17] He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. [19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, [20] and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

MOUNTAINTOP VIEW

When I served a small church in Virginia, one of my members was an elderly lady who faced many physical and personal challenges. But, despite her problems she was one of the most contented and jovial people that I have ever met. I visited her often not just because I was her pastor but because her sweet spirit gave me comfort and hope when my own life was in turmoil and pain.

During our long talks she would often smile and say, "I view life from a mountaintop." By that she meant that as she looked back over her life she could discern the grace of God at work. She could be content and at peace because in later life she saw the big picture.

Over the years I've thought a lot about Mrs. Massey and her inner spiritual strength. And I've wondered if perhaps we all might be a bit better off if we viewed life from a mountaintop.

Quite often we are so involved with the minutia of day to day living and the problems that are bedeviling our life at the moment that we forget the big picture. Instead of viewing life from a mountaintop we look at life from the valley.

CHRIST THE KING

Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the Christian Year. (Believe it or not next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent. How time flies.)

But, though the world is rushing to celebrate Christmas, the church asks us to pause on this final Sunday in November and look at our life and our world from a mountaintop. What is most important when it comes to our Christian faith? What gives us hope in a world that seems bent on destruction?

In a world troubled by the prospect of global warming, terrorism, war, religious fanatics and gas prices that are going through the roof, it often seems like we are being tossed about by evil powers that are beyond anyone's control. Today's text gives a challenge to those dark fears that seem to rule our life. The forces of evil will not win. There is deliverance for God's people.

Paul wrote to the Colossians that God has "rescued us from the powers of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son". (Colossians 1:13)

A COLOSSIAN WORLD VIEW

In order to understand the importance of Paul's summary of the Christian faith in this letter, we need to know a bit about the problems that were facing the congregation at Colossae long ago. The readers of this ancient letter lived under the grip of invisible powers that were beyond their control.

The once great port of Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake in 64 AD. The natural port was silted up by the event and was never rebuilt. Today we understand how and why earthquakes occur, but they are still fearsome events. Can you imagine how much more frightening such an event would be to people living in the ancient world, especially an event that totally destroyed the economy of a city?

It was a time of superstition and deep fear. The people of Colossae believed in a plethora of gods who determined their fate. The gods of the sea determined your success or failure when you took a voyage. If you were fighting a war, you better sacrifice to the god of Mars, the god of war.

They believed that there were invisible “principalities and powers” behind every event in the visible world. These invisible powers controlled the destinies of human beings, and no one could stop them. Disasters, either man made or natural were a sign that the gods were angry. And there wasn’t a thing that they could do about it.

We might say that we are more enlightened than these ancient peoples that we don’t believe in invisible powers that control our destinies. We don’t believe in a god called Mars or Venus or Zeus. We’re more sophisticated than that.

THE INVISIBLE POWERS TODAY

But, sometimes when I hear people talk about their lives and their world and how things are out of control it’s almost like they are talking about some god, some invisible power that is beyond their control.

For example, when some world event causes the price of a barrel of oil to go up we immediately are charged for that increase at the pump. Overnight the price jumps from \$2.80 a gallon to \$3.00 a gallon. But, when the price of oil drops, do we see an immediate decrease at the pumps?

You have to wonder what “invisible hand” is controlling the price of gas. We begin to suspect that it’s not the “invisible hand” of supply and demand but some more nefarious hand controlling the price of fuel.

We elect politicians to represent us, but quite often things go sour, and when we demand answers they say, “It’s not my fault. It’s the economy. The economy is to blame.”

Have any of you ever seen the economy? Does anyone including economists really understand it? No the economy is one of those mystical forces that affect us every day, and yet it seems to be beyond anyone’s control.

There are other invisible forces, principalities and powers that we talk about all the time. We use terms like terrorism or global markets as if we really understood what they mean. But, quite often we don't. We just say that those invisible forces are affecting what happens to us and the decisions we make.

If you want to use a modern word to describe what the Bible is talking about when we use the term "principalities and powers" I think the proper term is "the powers that be". That's the word we use when we know that there are certain important decisions over which we have no control.

Why do young men and women have to go to war and leave their families? Why do we have natural disasters that leave thousands homeless? Why is the divorce rate so high? Why don't people respect authority any more? Why do I feel so empty inside?

We can give plausible answers to all of these questions of course. But, the answers often don't make us feel any better. There is something inside us that says it shouldn't be this way. There is a gnawing fear inside us that we are being controlled by dark invisible forces. We sometimes cynically think that our world is beyond saving.

VIEWING THE POWERS FROM ABOVE

If my only source of information was the evening news, I might be inclined to agree with that evaluation. I can always tell the church members who pay close attention to the news. They are the ones, who are always earnestly asking me,

"Pastor, what is this world coming to? Armageddon must be right around the corner."

Now I'm not saying that we should stick our head in the sand and ignore all the bad news that surrounds us. We should be concerned about the injustice and violence that seems to be rampant in our world.

But, I am saying that from time to time we need to look at that bad news from a different perspective. According to the Bible the "powers that be" will not be powers forever. In fact the decisive battle has already been won. The forces of evil are already on the retreat, and in a world filled with guilt

and destruction God has promised his children a world based upon forgiveness and reconciliation. (Colossians 1:14)

That is true. That is what the resurrection means. But, we must trust that truth. We must live like that is true. Because if we don't our lives will still be controlled by lesser "gods."

As one commentator put it, "If you refuse to practice sexuality under God, then Venus is all too willing to take charge. When business is done just for money and not as a gift from God, then mammon takes charge and all hell breaks loose."

Jesus came to challenge the world's way of doing things. Jesus came to challenge the powers that be with another way of being. So, I invite you this morning to come with me to the mountaintop and look at things from a different perspective. I invite you to view the world through the lens of Christ the King.

A NEW IMAGE OF GOD

First of all Paul tells us that Jesus is the very image of God. And the picture of God painted by the life of Jesus is quite different from the picture painted by the so-called gods of this world.

For example, the powers that be tell us (especially during this season of commercialism) to "live and die for the almighty dollar." Mammon tells us, "Get up at 4 AM so you can struggle to get a digital TV at Wal-Mart." Jesus tells us, "You can't serve God and mammon."

The powers that be tell us that the only way we can protect ourselves is to have a big gun and use it. Jesus tells us that those who live by the sword die by the sword.

The powers that be said that "Caesar was Lord." The early church at risk to her very life proudly proclaimed as the church's first confession, "Jesus is Lord."

The powers that be tried to whip the people into line with threats and military force. Jesus redeemed his people by dying for them. Pilate had it right when he put the sign above the cross of Christ. He was the king ... not

only of the Jews but of the whole world. He was a king who ruled from the cross.

At every turn the image of God as revealed in Jesus stands in stark contrast to the images of power that are given us by the powers that be.

One preacher wrote, “The powers rule by the illusion that they have everything under control. So if someone breaks loose, speaks of a different world, an alternative rule, they get nervous. The powers nailed up above his head the charge of which he guilty; he acted like he was in charge when they were in charge.”

The powers thought that they had defeated Jesus. They humiliated him in public. They crucified him. And the religious and political leaders paraded by him in triumph. His crucifixion was supposed to be living proof that nobody beats the system.

But, listen to the rest of the story. Later in Paul’s letter to the Colossians Paul describes how the resurrection toppled the powers that be and turned the world upside down. In Colossians 2:15 we read, “He stripped the powers naked; he made a public example of them: he celebrated his triumph over them.”

This is the great surprise of the gospel. The cross was not the defeat of Christ by the powers that be. On the cross the bankrupt nature of the powers were exposed for all to see.

And that’s still true. On the cross the standards of this world are still turned upside down. On the cross what seemed like ultimate defeat was turned into ultimate triumph. The One who appeared to be powerless was in fact the One who was the powerful Creator God with us. He is the one who is really in charge.

MADE IN HIS IMAGE

Paul tells us that Jesus is not only the image of God; He is also the head of the church. Jesus is the one who calls us together as a community of faith. Jesus is the one who leads us.

Jesus defines who we are and what we should be and believe. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and we have been created to conform to His image.

Several months ago someone visited my home for the first time. She looked at the family photographs on the bookshelf and said, “Oh that must be your father.” I asked her how she knew, and she said, “You’re the very image of your father.”

When Carrollyn and I were on our cruise, we had several pictures made. I don’t know about you, but it always seems odd to look at a picture of myself. It’s almost as if I’m seeing myself through the eyes of another person.

But, as I looked at those pictures I could see what my friend saw. I am in many ways the image of my father.

That’s true for lots of us to a certain extent. It’s not just how we look; it’s also how we speak and act. There is a family culture, a set of norms and attitudes that make us into the person that we are today. We are all to a certain extent a reflection of our fathers and mothers. We are in more ways than one made in their image.

The Bible tells us that this is also true in our relationship with God. We are made not only in the image of our parents; we are made also in the image of God. In Genesis 1:27 we read that God created humanity in his own image.

Many scholars think this passage from Genesis was written when God’s people were in captivity in the land of Babylon. Think about how this affirmation must have changed them in this situation. They had suffered terribly. They had lost their sense of identity. Their connection to the past had been severed. They thought that they were nobodies. And then they read this word of hope and promise, “You were created in the image of God.”

That promise can help us as well. Think about all those TV ads that tell us we have to look a certain way in order to have the right image. Maybe we need a Bowflex body or a makeup makeover. Everywhere the message is the same, “Your image is not right. You need to change your image in order to be happy.”

But, the Bible tells us, “You are made in the image of your Creator. You are made in the image of God.” We don’t have to do anything different to be someone special. We’re already someone special.

REFLECTING THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

We were made in the image of God, and Jesus reveals what that image should be. In Jesus we not only learn what it means to be God; in Jesus we also learn what it means to be truly human.

So, in order to be truly human, to be who we were called to be we need to reflect the image of Christ. What exactly does that mean? The last verse of our lesson for today summarizes it very well. In verse 20 we read, “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

The ministry of God through Christ can be summarized as a ministry of reconciliation. It was a way of making peace that was very costly. Indeed, it cost him his life. And if we are to conform ourselves to the image of Christ, it seems to me that we must follow him on that costly path.

There’s an Old Testament story that gives us insight into how God helps us conform to the image of God. It’s the story of Jacob and Esau.

You remember that story. Jacob stole Esau’s birthright through trickery, and Esau got so mad he swore to kill that no good brother.

Jacob had to leave home to escape his brother’s wrath. In fact he left for many years. He raised a family and became a wealthy man. But, finally the time came for Jacob to return home.

Jacob was afraid that his brother Esau might still be angry with him so the night before they were to meet Jacob sent a procession of family members and gifts across the Jabbok River ahead of him. Perhaps this would soften his brother up a bit before they would meet again the next day.

That night by the Jabbok River Jacob wrestled with an angel of God (and I think with his own conscience as well). Jacob had to face the fact that he had wasted his life looking for salvation in all the wrong places. The turmoil of that conflict left Jacob with a limp, but it also changed him for the better.

The next day Jacob limped across the Jabbok River and met his brother Esau for the first time in many years. And what did Esau do? Esau embraced him and kissed him and welcomed him home.

And then Jacob finally found what he was looking for in the face of his estranged brother. He said to Esau, “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God for with such favor you have received me.” Jacob saw the face of God in the brother with whom he had been reconciled.

Like Jacob most of us walk with a limp. Most of us have looked for love and fulfillment in all the wrong places. But, by the grace of God, we finally come home and find the face of God in the face of our brother or sister.

Jesus always took his disciples to the mountaintop in order to see the face of God. It was not the mountaintop of power or domination or material blessing. It was that mountain on which former enemies once again become brothers. It was a mountain where peace overcomes war and love overcomes hate.

Can you view life from such a mountaintop?

Just for a moment this morning I would like you to try. Try to imagine a world where all of us looked at everyone and said, “Why I’d know that face anywhere. It is the very image of the God who made us all.”

Amen.