

Colossians 1:11-20

“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.”

THE POWER OF DARKNESS

Have you ever experienced the “power of darkness?” Paul mentions the power of darkness in verse 13 of today’s lesson. He tells the Colossians that God “rescued us from the powers of darkness.”

What was he talking about?

Darkness did threaten to overwhelm that little congregation to which this letter was first written. Politically those first Christians had little power. In fact they were persecuted and martyred for their faith.

Most people lived with a sense of fear and foreboding in those days. The prevailing philosophies in Colossae taught that the world was filled with evil spirits. If you failed to appease the spirits you opened yourself to the misfortune of disease and poverty.

The Christians in Colossae lived in a superstitious and uncertain world. The Christians in Colossae were in competition with many different philosophies that were essentially negative.

And so the Colossians wanted to know how to live a Christian life in such a hostile and diverse situation. What did they believe that would make a difference?

JESUS IS LORD

Paul said, "Don't get bogged down with philosophies devoted to darkness. You have been saved from the darkness. You are people of the light. You have inherited a new hope and a new life that changes how you look at everything."

You see, Christians don't just try to fit in with the other philosophies of the world. Christians believe that Jesus enables us to transcend these philosophies. Christians believe that the light of the world can be uniquely seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus is not just a first among equals. Jesus is not a way among many ways. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Jesus is authoritative revelation of the Creator. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords.

That's why we're reading this passage today. Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday in the church year. Next week we start the church year all over again with the first Sunday in Advent.

But, this week we look at a year's worth of messages from a grand mountaintop. This week we proclaim with the early church the most basic of creeds, "Jesus is Lord."

THE POWERS THAT BE

You may remember that this early creedal statement had political overtones. In the Roman world citizens of that kingdom were forced to say, "Caesar is Lord."

But, much to the chagrin of the government Christians would not say that about Caesar. That title was reserved for Jesus alone. Jesus was Lord. Jesus was their king.

Our world is quite a bit different from the world of the Colossians. We have no king. We do not believe in evil spirits that fill the air. But, there are still many dark philosophies that threaten and tempt the believer in the modern age.

We do well, for example, to fear the power of greed, the power of hatred, the power of prejudice and the power of addiction. There are still many politicians who want us to give unqualified and unthinking endorsement of their policies.

All of these things and many more can make us captive to the darkness. Sometimes we act as if the Powers that Be are more powerful than the plan of God.

RESCUED FROM THE POWERS

But, today we celebrate the fact that this is not so. We need not be captives. We are people of the light. We have been rescued from the powers of darkness. We have seen the glory of God in Jesus, and that is a game changer.

Today we lift our eyes up to that holy hill where the death and resurrection of Jesus created a whole new world. We are no longer held captive by our guilt, our fears, and our weaknesses.

Instead we rejoice in the light of grace and forgiveness.

Today we give thanks for a salvation that is above us and beyond us. Today we refuse to call anyone king but the one true king, King Jesus.

THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

And what do we learn about God in King Jesus?

First, he is the “image of the invisible God.” There are many that do not believe in God or they believe that is impossible to know if there is a God.

The more that I look at creation the more I find it incredible that people don’t believe in God. Two weeks ago I spent some time on a cruise ship. We had 16-foot swells that tossed our huge cruise ship like it was some kind of toy boat.

I enjoy the rough ride, and I spent one morning walking on the deck and experiencing the power of the waves and wind. As I looked into the deep blue waters that churned beneath us, I marveled at the power of God’s world.

How could anyone look into those deep blue waves and not believe in God?

LITTLE FISH IN A BIG OCEAN

Perhaps we don’t believe because we are arrogant. We want to be at the center of the universe. We want to be in control of our lives and our destiny.

We believe that if there is a “god” god resides inside of us, a “little spirit” that we nurture and control. In fact this is a popular belief among moderns who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious.

Spirituality is defined as sanctifying what we already are and what we already want. We are in control. We are the masters of our fate.

I find such a view to be totally out of line with what I observe on a daily basis. We are little fish in a big ocean. The creation dwarfs us. As the Psalmist put it, "The heavens are telling the glory of God."

But, the heavens also tell us that we are not god-like in any respect. Over against the enormity of nature, we are tiny and insignificant.

THE FIRSTBORN OF ALL CREATION

If nature were our only guide to God, then we might respect the power and size of creation, but we would have to conclude that we really don't know who God is and what God had in mind when He decided to make this world.

But, Christians believe that nature is not our only guide to God. God has chosen to reveal himself in Jesus. Jesus is described in our passage as the "firstborn of all creation."

In other words in Jesus God reveals to us what we could have never guessed on our own. In the man Jesus we see that creation was not an act done by a far away deity. Creation was much more than just a big bang that echoed down the halls of time and space.

Creation was an act of love. Creation was an act of grace and redemption.

When Christians look at the wind and the waves, the stars in the sky at night and the smile of a newborn baby, we see more than just the wonder of creation. We see the firstborn of creation. We see a God who is good, a God of light who is gracious. We see a God who creates and cares for His creation.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the power behind all throne is the power of God's grace as revealed in Jesus. According to this passage, Jesus, the firstborn of all creation holds all things together.

This is the doctrine of Providence, and it is perhaps the most radical article of the Christians faith. In a world that seems to have gone to hell in a hand basket, we insist that this is our Father's world.

In a world filled with uncertainty and grief, we believe that God will bring redemption and hope. In a world that is so very dark at times we believe in the light of the world, the one who chases away the darkness.

REDEMPTION THROUGH THE CROSS

It's on this very point that agnostics and atheists often criticize the Christian faith. If God is so good and so involved in the world, why is the world filled with so much that is bad?

For example, why would a good God allow cancer to exist? Why do we have natural disasters? Why would a good God allow man's inhumanity to man to reign unchecked for so many years?

The answer to those questions is found at the foot of the cross. God does not redeem us from our troubles. God redeems us through our troubles.

Just as God brought the hope of resurrection through the seeming tragedy of the cross, so God brings us unexpected hope and comfort in our hour of need. In the midst of evil and tragedy God still offers an eternal word of hope that will not be silenced by the darkness of this hour.

What was written on a sign above Jesus as he was crucified? The sign read, "King of the Jews." Christ was king, and his rule began from a cross. Jesus still rules from the cross. From the cross Jesus still proclaims a word of forgiveness and hope.

Christians and non-Christians alike have a hard time understanding this. How could a cross, truly the "emblem of suffering and shame" become a symbol of faith and hope?

I have never liked any cinematic portrayals of the life of Christ. Perhaps it's because any movie portrayal inevitably leaves out some important point.

For example, Mel Gibson's movie, the Passion of the Christ with its unrelenting violence left me feeling uneasy. For the most part the movie was an accurate portrayal of a crucifixion. And yet in some respects it didn't ring true to the gospel message.

What was missing? As I reread the gospel accounts of the crucifixion, there is a sense of God's power being made manifest even in the most god-forsaken situation a person could imagine.

For example, in Mark's gospel the evil of the crucifixion reaches an awful climax. Those who crucified Jesus taunt him. He cries out in seeming despair,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
He takes his last breath.

But, what happens next is totally unexpected. The Bible tells us that the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom and the centurion who saw the agony of Jesus' death from the foot of the cross says, "Surely this man was the Son of God." (See Mark 15:21-38)

In the midst of all this agony and pain, the centurion is able to see the power of God. The centurion is an enemy who is supervising the crucifixion. And yet this enemy is able to see that Jesus truly is the King of kings even at the moment of his death.

I find this to be the pivotal moment in the gospel story. And the power of this moment is reflected throughout the writings of the New Testament.

The cross is not an emblem of suffering and shame. The cross is a throne from which King Jesus reigns. The cross becomes a means of salvation instead of a means of destruction.

Our lesson for today gives a good example of this. In verse 20 we read, "... 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 the cross."

Even the widest, wide-screen theater is too small to convey the importance of this moment. All of eternity hinges on this one moment on the cross. Everything is changed forever by this one act of salvation.

All of creation is changed. Peace and reconciliation come into the world through the blood of the cross.

A SONG IN THE DARKNESS

Many scholars think that this passage was originally part of an ancient hymn. We can't see it in our English translations, but it is more apparent in the original Greek. The phrases spill together into one grand and glorious hymn that celebrates the lordship of Christ.

In a world that was coming apart at the seams Paul gave his people a hymn to sing, a hymn that proclaims that Jesus holds all things together. (Colossians 1:17)

I think that is instructive for the living of our days. When our lives come unglued, when we kneel at the foot of the cross, perhaps we too should sing a hymn to the glory and power of God in Christ Jesus.

In the coming Christmas season we will be singing many hymns. Many of us will once again listen to Handel's glorious piece of music, the Messiah that proclaims

Jesus the King of kings and Lord of lords. We will soon be talking about the one who was born a King, the Prince of Peace.

That message was proclaimed in a world that was far from perfect. It was a world of radical and violent political leaders. It was a world where people were taxed too much and valued too little. It was a world where religious leaders talked about God but did not really know God.

In short that ancient world wasn't all that different from the world that we live in today. But, nevertheless the angels sang and proclaimed Jesus King. Nevertheless, shepherds on a lonely hillside heard good news.

And God's great "nevertheless" continues to be heard even today.

Several years ago, Marj Carpenter, who was then the moderator of the General Assembly, visited Christians in the war torn areas of what used to be Yugoslavia. The delegation wasn't supposed to be in that part of the world. It was too dangerous. But, they went anyway.

They set out on a cross-country trek in the middle of the night without approval from the powers that be.

The church in that area did know that she was coming, but as the hour grew late she wondered if anyone would be there to greet them when they arrived.

Her fears proved to be unfounded. There were people waiting when they arrived. She said that there was a crowd of people out in the cold with candles burning to show her the way, and they were singing hymns.

I think this is a good example of what the church is called to do in a world that is coming apart at the seams. We are called to go out into the darkness, light a candle and sing a hymn of faith.

We are called to proclaim Christ King of kings and Lord of lords.
What a comfort it is to sing a hymn of faith in our time of need!

Let us sing together.

Amen .