

Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹ 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.

This is the Word of the Lord

Christ the King Sunday

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we join together with thankful hearts to worship God. It's a time of year where we have recently paused to thank God for all that we have been given. It's a time when we realize how too often we take even the simple things like food, water, shelter, family, and friends for granted. It's a time when we pause to remember those living around and amongst us who are without—without food, shelter, without a special loved one in their life.

It is also the time of year when our focus comes to rest on Christ. Christ the King Sunday marks the move in the Christian calendar from Ordinary time (which is around Mother's Day until now) into the Advent season (which begins next Sunday). It is a day we set aside to explore and re-examine the sovereignty of Jesus Christ our Lord. Simply speaking, the idea and the hope is that we will take today's focus on the sovereignty and Lordship of Christ along with our expectation and anticipation of Christ's second coming into the Advent Season with us. So that at Christmas we have much more than a baby Jesus. What we have is a sovereign Christ that allows us to exclaim "Joy to the World! The Lord has come: Let earth receive her King."

In our world, we live in the midst of the already. We view and experience everything with the knowledge that Jesus Christ has already been born into this world. Christ lived, died, and has been raised from the dead.—Hallelujah! We experience the seasons of Advent and Christmas much differently than Mary, Joseph, and their friends and family. We know and eagerly await the birth of our Lord and Savior. But we do so in the tension of the "not yet." Christ has not yet come again. So today, as we focus on Christ, as we begin our preparations for Advent and Christmas, our preparations for the birth of baby Jesus, we are also preparing ourselves and eagerly awaiting the second coming of Christ. Today I hope that each of us will remember and re-connect with Christ living within us. Christ lives within us as individuals and within us, Emory Church, as the body of Christ.

The Colossian Story:

We will use the Colossians text to begin our journey.

Colossae, located in the region of Phrygia (fer-gee-a), was a “cosmopolitan city in which diverse cultural and religious elements met and mingled.”¹ It was an area known for its fascination with all things magical and mysterious.² Within this highly traveled and diverse city, was the newly formed Colossian church, who had recently lost their founder Epaphras to imprisonment. As the Colossians attempted to discern the so called “Christian” way of life, they were quickly led astray by others offering means of greater perfection and more maturity. Without their teacher, the newly formed church in Colossae began listening and responding to outside sources. We don’t know exactly what the outside teachings were, but we do observe a sense of tension around Christ. What exactly has been accomplished by Christ? Are the believers already liberated “from the powers of the universe?” Do they have “proper access to God?” or must Christians observe special holy times and worship celestial powers as a means of gaining access to God?³ The new teachings seemed to emphasize that Jesus was only a starting point for complete maturity and perfection. Such that for one to fully understand God, for one to truly have knowledge and access to God, they must also observe specific holy times and rituals. They must work to achieve new levels of spiritual status. In other words for them, Christ was only the beginning in the path to maturity in God.

Paul, while in prison with Epaphras, the founder of the Colossian Christian community, hears about the troubles and struggles within the young Colossian church. I imagine Paul’s face slowly turning various shades of red and purple as frustration and anger boiled within him. He was outraged. How could anyone lower the status of Christ!? Christ is everything, Christ is all they need. It is pointless and downright dumb to create a new law, to create new rituals that people must follow, to begin to cast people out of the body of Christ because they have not obtained a certain spiritual maturity.

Paul writes to the Colossians with a sense of urgency. He desires to help them know and re-realize the truth and grace of Christ. Paul does not want them to become tangled in the nonsense and never ending struggle of needing more to obtain God’s love, truth, and mercy. Paul writes with as much love and encouragement as is possible. He writes to the Colossian community giving confidence and assurance in their own faith and knowledge of Christ. (and not resorting to the teachings of others). Paul writes giving praise and thanksgiving for the Colossian community. He says, (Col 1:3-6) “In our prayers for

¹ Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1992) 82.

² Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 395.

³ NRSV Colossian Introduction

you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.” Deedra’s paraphrase- I am so thankful for you and your faith that you have shown amongst yourself and amongst others—you have the truth of the gospel, you know the truth, it lives within you. It always has. Please don’t get side tracked by these other teachings. Truly, you have all that you need. You have Christ!

Paul continues, recalling and reiterating who Christ truly is. Paul says,

God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, of whom we call Christ. It is in Christ we that we have redemption. In Christ we have the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ **Christ is the image of the invisible God**

Christ is **the firstborn of all creation;**

¹⁶ **In Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, all things have been created through Christ and for Christ.**

¹⁷ **Christ is before all things, and in Christ all things hold together.**

¹⁸ **Christ is the head of the body, the church; Christ is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that Christ might come to have first place in everything.**

¹⁹ **For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,**

²⁰ **and through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to God’s self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of Christ’s cross.**

In essence, Paul is saying, Christ is all you need. You will grow and mature in Christ through an ever-deepening recognition of what you have already been given and who you already are.⁴ *Pause and Repeat.* You will grow and mature in Christ through an ever-deepening recognition of what you have already been given and who you already are. Yes, Christ is a mystery. Christ is a paradox for our human minds. Christ, the one who redeems us and reconciles us with God, was also present at creation.

⁴ Johnson, 395.

Christ is both on the side of the creator and on the side of creation because it is in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ that all things were created, yet Christ is also the firstborn of all creation.

The truth of the gospel message, the basis of our faith, is “centered in Christ. It is not dependent on the feelings or efforts of humanity.” It is “not confined to the perspectives of this world.”⁵ Paul exclaims to the Colossians that the gospel message is adequate. Nothing else is needed. In fact, Christ is more than adequate. Christ is our all in all.

Our Story The message to the Colossian community is a good reminder for us today. We live in the big, diverse cosmopolitan city of Atlanta. We, like the Colossians, are striving in a lot of different ways to seek God. We, also have many distractions, and many “new truths” and “ways of enlightenment” coming at us every day. We are entering into one of the busiest times of the year. A time that was originally intended to be solely focused on the birth of Christ is now filled with its own specific rituals and holy times that we feel obligated to perform in order for Christmas to happen. And almost even for Christmas to happen correctly. Nothing, not the number of perfect presents that you give or receive, not the decorations in your home or in your yard, not the food that you will prepare and eat, not the countless parties and special events you will attend. Nothing you do is going to make Christ come and be part of your life. The truth found in the gospel message, the truth of Christ is not dependent on any doings of humanity. Paul would remind us, as he did the Colossians, that maturity in Christ does not come by taking on mounds of extra tasks and rituals, but rather the maturity we seek comes with the increasing awareness of the gift already given to us by God in Christ. The Colossian community only needed to “realize their new identity and translate it into appropriate behavior within their community.”⁶ For the Colossians, the very thing they had been seeking outside of themselves (the church community) was actually being created and shaped within the community itself.⁷ So in other words, God is already present with us. What we are being called back into is an awareness that Christ has been incarnated into our lives. When we tune into that awareness, when we realize our identity in Christ, that is when the growth occurs.

⁵ Andrew Lincoln. “The Letter to the Colossians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” The New Interpreter’s Bible V. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005) 394.

⁶ Johnson, 400.

⁷ Ibid.

Today, as we've talked about Christ, we've limited our conversation to the Colossian passage. I'll put words into Paul's mouth and say that yes, Christ is revealed to us in this passage as Christ is in all things. But just as Christ is before all things and all things hold together through Christ, we know that Christ is not limited to this passage alone. From other biblical passages we have heard and experienced Christ as the lamb of God, the light of the world, the vine, bread, good shepherd, friend, servant, Emmanuel and so on. Remember, our main objective on this Christ the King Sunday is to remember and re-connect with Christ living within and amongst us so that we can begin to prepare ourselves for the Coming of Christ.

This morning I give to you a gift. It's the greatest gift that I have to give. In the busyness and chaos of our lives, I want to give you a few moments of silence, so that you can refocus and reflect on your image of Christ. Even if you have zoned out and not paid a lick of attention the whole time, please take and use this gift now.

On and in your pew, you will find paper, pencils, and crayons. I invite you to take a moment to reflect on your image of Christ. You are free to reflect as you feel comfortable. You can draw a picture, write a poem, write down words or phrases, or simply sit and reflect in the silence, feeling the presence of God in you and surrounding you. The pieces of paper located in your pew, also offer additional questions for you to consider.

So together let's pause the busyness of the world. Find a comfortable sitting position, take a deep a breath, and slowly let it out. I invite you to focus your awareness on your image of Christ.

Pause for Reflection

Additional Questions to ponder: (found on the paper in the pews)

Who is this Christ you serve? What images come to mind when you say or think of the word Christ? What is your source of knowing Christ? What does it mean to you that Christ is being/has been born into the world? What does it mean to you that Christ will come again? Where do you see Christ at work in your life? Where do you see Christ at work around you?

As you bring your focus back to present moment, I hope and pray that you have been able to begin the exploration of your image of Christ. I also sincerely hope that your reflection doesn't end here. Please take these questions home with you and continue to ponder them throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons. The questions will also be available on the website in the sermon section. As your awareness of Christ grows, I also invite you to share this with the church community. One great time to do this is at the Chrismon service on Dec. 12. During the Chrismon service the youth and children will be sharing both the traditional symbols and images of Christ as well as their own. They will sing songs and display images, poems, artwork, and much more. (Just let me know if this is a time in which you would like to share)

In closing, I reiterate that God is already present with us. What we are being called back into is an awareness that Christ has been incarnated into our lives, which means Christ lives within us and amongst us. When we tune into that awareness, when we realize our identity in Christ, that is when the growth occurs for us both as individuals and for us as the body of Christ.