



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## He is the Beginning

### Colossians 1:11-23

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November 20, 2016 – Sunday Next  
Before Advent

St. Paul begins his letter to the Colossians with a combination of praise and prayer. He's heard about them and how they've been transformed by Jesus and the Spirit. He's heard of their faith and so he thanks God for the work of grace that they reveal. The Good News is bearing fruit throughout the world and they're part of it. And so Paul says that he's been praying for them, right from the day he first heard about their faith. He prays that they'll keep growing in their knowledge of God's will, in spiritual wisdom, and that they'll keep on living their lives in ways that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him. In 1:11-14 he writes:

**[May you be] strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

In Jesus we've been made sons and daughter of God. Jesus' inheritance is now our inheritance. And we've been transferred from the darkness into the light. Jesus has brought us redemption from our bondage to sin and death. As the Israelites were subject to slavery in Pharaoh's kingdom and then passed through the Red Sea into God's kingdom—and it's worth noting that it was in the Exodus that the Lord called Israel his "son"—so we who were once subject to sin and death have passed through baptism and come out

the other side members of Jesus' kingdom and children of God.

It's at this point that Paul breaks out into the hymn at the centre of this morning's Epistle. If you're following along in your Bibles, some of them may show verses 15-20 as verse, some may not. It's one of those times when Paul wants to convey something really important and instead of just saying it, he gives them the words of a hymn. He might have written it himself, but it's more likely this was a hymn they already knew, which would have made it all the more powerful. Here's how it goes:

**He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation.  
For by him all things were created,  
in heaven and on earth,  
visible and invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or  
rulers or authorities—  
all things were created through him  
and for him.**

**And he is before all things,  
and in him all things hold  
together.**

**And he is the head  
of the body, the church.**

**He is the beginning,  
the firstborn from the dead,  
that in everything he might be  
preeminent.  
For in him all the fullness of God  
was pleased to dwell,  
and through him to reconcile to  
himself all things, whether on earth  
or in heaven,  
making peace by the blood of his  
cross.**

The hymn plays on the different meanings of the Greek word for "head". As head Jesus can be the "firstborn". He is firstborn of all Creation in verse 15 and in verse 18 he's the firstborn of all those who are to be reborn or resurrected from death. In verse 17 he is supreme or before all things. It's in him that Creation has its being and is held together and sustained. And, more specifically, in

verse 18, Jesus is supreme over the Church—as the head is over the body. And for Paul these aren't just abstract theological points. Too often we do theology, we study God the way we might study some abstract discipline in school without ever exploring or thinking about how it impacts life. For Paul, the fact that Jesus is "head" and "supreme" and "firstborn" these are all vitally important *theological* truths that work out very *practically* in the Christian life.

Brothers and Sisters, Paul's point here is the supremacy of Jesus. Actually, it's not *just* that Jesus is supreme in every way we can conceive of, but that his supremacy is *at the centre* of everything. That Jesus is supreme explains why things are the way they are. The more we understand the supremacy of Jesus the more we'll understand who God is. The more we understand the supremacy of Jesus the more we'll understand what he's done for us. The more we understand the supremacy of Jesus the more we'll also understand what it means to live *in* him and *for* him. In the next chapter Paul says that hidden in Jesus are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Through him everything makes sense. Through him everything is different.

The hymn we sang to open our service this morning makes the same sort of point. We sang, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation." That Jesus is the King of Creation, that's theology. What difference does that knowledge make? We sing, "O my soul, praise him for he is thy health and salvation. Join the great throng...sounding in glad adoration." We acknowledged the truth that "Over all things he gloriously reigneth". And because that is true we can also know and trust that "Safely his saints he sustaineth".

Jesus is at the centre of everything and when we understand that, when we grasp it, when we've worked through what it means, it changes everything. And yet this simple, basic point is so

easy to forget. Ask people what Christianity is and you'll get all sorts of answers. Some people will say that it's a way of being religious. There is a sense in which it is. "Religion" get bad rap these days, but religion itself isn't good or bad. Religion, in New Testament terms, is simply the service we offer to God. We can give him good service or we can give him bad service. But that's not the centre of Christianity. Ask someone else what Christianity is and they might tell you that it's about a certain way to be saved. Someone else might say that it's a way to live and to be holy. And while all these things have something to do with what Christianity is, what St. Paul is saying is that ultimately and far above everything else, Christianity is about Jesus the Messiah. If we make Christianity about any of these other things what we're doing is putting ourselves at the centre: our works, our holiness, our salvation. These other things and so many more radiate out *from Jesus* like spokes on a wheel. He's always the one at the centre and it's only with him at the centre that we'll get any of these other things right. I ran across a quote this week: "If your devotional, Bible study group, or conference is more focused on who you are than who Jesus is, it's time to pick up a new book or find another conference." Our fallen nature always wants to put self at the centre. Speakers and writers who want to attract a big following, sell books, and make money often appeal to our selfishness, but we need to remember: Jesus is the centre.

I think we can boil Paul's hymn down to three main points. The first is that Jesus reveals God. Paul writes that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God". No one's ever seen God. Down through history people have come up with proofs to deduce that God must exist. Philosophers have come up with cosmological and ontological and teleological arguments for the existence of God, but as Karl Barth, one of my favourite

theologians, points out: while these arguments may prove that *a* god exists, none of them can actually make God known to us. And so God himself speaks. He makes himself known through his Word. By the Holy Spirit he spoke to the prophets and to the Apostles and they recorded that Word in Scripture, but even that wasn't enough for human beings to truly know God. And so the Word became incarnate; he took our human flesh on himself, becoming one of us and he came into the world and through him and in him we can finally know God—not just know that somehow and somewhere *a* god exists, and not even know the truth about who the one, true God is and what he is like, but we can truly *know* the living God, the one is "I am", the way we can know another human being. And that's because Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

As we look at Jesus and especially at the way in which in him God humbled himself for our sake, lived for our sake, was rejected for our sake, and died for our sake, we see that God is a God of never-ending and sacrificial love. Paul inserts this hymn where he does because he's just said in the verses before that his prayer for the Colossians was that they would grow in their knowledge of God so that in that knowledge they would have a source of strength and joy as they faced tribulation. Brothers and Sisters, God's love for us—and the knowledge of God's love for us, strengthens our faith. His love reveals his perfect goodness and his perfect faithfulness. The more we meditate on Jesus and what he's done for us the better we will know the height and depth and width of God's great love and the more we plumb those depths of love the more we'll be moved to praise and to sacrifice ourselves—the knowledge of God in Jesus gradually transforms us from the inside out.

So, first, Paul tells us that Jesus reveals the living God and makes him

known to us. Paul's second point here is that Jesus is the centre of Creation. God's Word doesn't just make God known; *God's Word gives life*. The Word was the agent of Creation in the beginning. That's what Genesis is getting at when it says that God spoke and everything that is came into existence. Whether God literally "spoke" or not, the point is that his Word is his creative and life-giving agent. And as God's Word is good, so is his Creation.

People struggle with this. Many of the Greek philosophers taught that the physical world was bad. They saw death as a positive thing that freed the "good" soul from the "bad" and decaying body and from the evils of the material world. One early Christian heresy taught that the world was created by what it saw as the evil god of the Old Testament, but that Jesus came to free us from this evil world as an agent of the good and loving God of the New Testament. A lot of modern Christian teaching is still stuck in this old, pagan way of looking at Creation. It sees the world as bad and passing away and it places the Christian hope in being saved by Jesus so that when we die our souls or spirits can go to heaven for eternity. But Paul's hymn is very clear: Everything that is—as we say in the Creed, everything seen and unseen, visible and invisible—whether our realm of earth or God's realm of heaven, was not only created by Jesus, the Word Incarnate, but that it was all Created *for* him too. That's what Paul writes in verse 16.

The beauty of this world is a manifestation and reflection of the goodness and the love and the beauty of God in Jesus. There's ugliness and sin and death in this world too. That's what the pagan philosophers saw and tried to explain. But Jesus is the one who makes sense of it. Sin and death are *our* fault and they came because of our rebellion against God, because our rejection of his love. And yet the

Word who gave life in the beginning hasn't abandoned his Creation. It was created by him and for him. It *is* his and he's not going to let it go to hell. And so the very one who gave life in the beginning came again as one of us to restore the life of God to his Creation and to set it to rights. Jesus is not only the firstborn of all Creation—and that's a sermon and a half right there that we don't have time to get into this morning—he's not only the firstborn of Creation, he's also, Paul writes, the firstborn from dead. Again, Jesus is at the centre of everything. He stands between and as the cause of creation and re-creation.

And that brings us to Paul's third point. As the firstborn from the dead, Jesus is the model for what it truly means to be human. Jesus is the head of the body, the head of the Church. Jesus is the first to rise from the grave. Jesus is the one through whose brutal and humiliating death God has dealt with our sins. Jesus is the one who, at the cross, has brought us peace and reconciliation with the God we once rejected. And Jesus is the one through whose empty tomb God has begun the work of new creation. The old philosophers struggled with the problem of evil and sin and pain and suffering and death. "How could the world be good if it's full of all these things?" they asked. And Jesus is the one who makes sense of it all. Creation is good and always has been good. We were the ones who made a mess of it. We were the ones who rejected our true vocation, our calling to live and to work and serve before the face of God. And it's Jesus who dealt with our sin and our rebellion, who began the work of bringing God and human beings back together, and who shows us what it looks like to truly be the men and women he created us to be in the beginning. It's Jesus who forgives, who washes clean, and who calls us back to our God-given vocation. Again, he's at the centre of it all and the more we focus on, think on, and meditate on Jesus at

the centre the better we'll understand everything else.

But at this point we might feel a little overwhelmed. "Okay, Paul," we might say, "I understand. Jesus is at the centre of everything, of creation and re-creation, of heaven and earth, but what does that mean for me right here and right now? Where's my place in the story and what does it mean for me?" And so in verses 21-23 Paul shows us where we're at. Think of the map along a hiking trail that shows *this* route going off here and *that* trail going off there, and *behind* you is the trail back to where you started, but until you see the map with the big red dot that says "You are here" it's hard to picture exactly where you are right now.

So to begin with Paul says that before we met Jesus we actually weren't even on the map. God was working out his plan for Creation, but having rejected him we were on the outside. In verse 21 he says:

**You, were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...**

God was at work reconciling his Creation to himself. He called Abraham and his family, Israel, to be his agents in the world. They were the ones who carried his promise. They were the ones called to be salt and light. But these Gentiles in Colossae were a long way from Israel. They had no knowledge of the true God. They worshiped idols. They worshiped Caesar and Aphrodite and Mammon and Mars and their minds were set on the very things those gods represented, on power and sex and money and violence. But, says Paul, something changed for these pagan Greeks. They heard the good news that Jesus is the world's true Lord and they believed and it put them on the map. They've been incorporated into God's family and now he's working through them to work out his purpose

for redemption and new creation. He goes on in verse 22:

**[But Jesus] has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.**

At the cross Jesus accomplished our reconciliation with God. God created us to live in his presence. His Creation was a temple. He is the source of life. And we rebelled. We chose death over the life of God and so we were cut off and cast out. But at the Cross, Jesus took humanity's hate for God, rebellion against God, strife God—everything that separates us from our Creation—Jesus took on himself. Paul says in Ephesians 2:16 that Jesus took the brunt of our hostility with God at the Cross and in his death he killed it. And so in Jesus human beings and God are brought back together, are reconciled. In Jesus we are now free to come into the presence of the living God, having been washed clean by the blood of Jesus.

This is good news, but Paul also warns us: Just because Jesus has brought us into the presence of God doesn't mean there's nothing left for us to do now. He goes on in verse 23:

**Continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven.**

Continue in faith. The Greek word Paul uses has the sense of standing firm and of persevering. Jesus has freed us from our bondage to sin and death, he's poured his Spirit into us to renew our hearts and minds, but we have to take responsibility for working with his grace and growing in our faith and in bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Christianity isn't just being baptised or saying a prayer and then going on with life the way it always was. No, it's

about *daily* striving to live before the face of God. It's about persevering and living in hope of the good news that Jesus is Lord and that his life is being unleashed into the world.

Paul says that this good news isn't just something that they heard. It's not just something that you have heard or I have heard. The good news is something that *has been* proclaimed to all creation under heaven. Brothers and Sisters, think about that. When God raised Jesus from the dead he declared him to be Creation's true Lord. When Jesus burst out of his tomb on Easter it sent a shockwave throughout Creation. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead and if he's the firstborn, that means that others will follow. Jesus is bringing life and healing and reconciliation into the world, not just us, but his entire Creation. New Creation is here. It began that first Easter morning. And it's the Good News of God's new creation that we proclaim, it's the good news that his king—Jesus—has come and that his kingdom is here. And it's as we believe that proclamation that the shockwave of new creation overtakes us and Jesus makes us new.

And that brings us back to the map. We were at one point lost in idolatry and not even on the map. But the blood of Jesus has washed us clean and in him we've been brought into God's family—the family given the task of making God's goodness and faithfulness known to the world. Paul talks about being “ministers” or “servants” of this good news. The Easter shockwave has already gone out through Creation. Jesus has begun the process of making all things new. Our calling now is to go out as royal heralds to proclaim to the world what is happening, what God has done and what he is doing today, and—most important of all—to make known that Jesus is the King through whom this new life has come.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we prayed in the Collect, stir up our wills. Where we have been complacent about our faith, where we have failed to preserve, strengthen us. Give us grace to strive after you daily and to avail ourselves of the means of grace you have given. Remind us, Lord, to steep ourselves in your Word, to be always in prayer, and to be walking with each other in love and good works. Cause the life of your Spirit to bear fruit in us that everyone around may see our good works and give glory to you. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.