

“In Him all things hold together.”

Last week Pastor Steve started a new sermon series on the book of Colossians, Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae. Colossae was a real place at the bottom of Mt. Cadmus which is in present day Turkey. And last week Pastor Steve took us through the first part of this prayer at the beginning of the letter. And extensive prayer at that. And then Paul breaks into this beautiful description of Christ and our relationship with Christ in a very poetic way. This passage is often called the “Christ hymn” because of its stanza structure and poetic language. This is one of the most beautiful things written by Paul. Everyone calls Romans his masterpiece, but I think this passage at the beginning of this letter is stunning.

Some of you know this, but I have been sick most of this past week. I am happy to report I was tested for Covid-19 and am negative. But it was a rough week of being sick. And if I currently owe you an email or phone call back, I am working on catching up. Please bear with me. But earlier in the week Pastor Steve was kind and generous enough to offer me the weekend off, which I probably should have taken him up on. But I knew what passage I was assigned to look at with you this morning and my first thought was “and miss preaching on the Christ hymn? No way!” I love this passage too much. So, let’s read Colossians 1 beginning at verse 15.

“15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of^[g] your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”

Now, this beautiful passage can be broken into three sections. But before I get into those I need to ask you if you see any similarities between this passage and the Proverbs 8 passage we read earlier? In the Proverbs 8 passage it is wisdom that is there with God at the beginning. It is wisdom that is there in the heavens delighting in the presence of God. Now here, in verse 15 of Colossians 1 it is Christ that is there at creation. So what is going on here? Does Paul not know his OT scriptures? Or does he know them really well? I think he knows them really well and is making an intentional connection. In Jewish tradition wisdom was believed to indwell and renew human beings. Here Paul is making the claim that Christ now indwells and renews. Christ is

not just the image of the invisible God, Christ is also wisdom incarnate. That's why the passages are so similar. Paul wants his listeners to hear the connection and I wanted to point that connection out to you as well.

So, I said this Christ hymn is in three sections. The first section is verses 15-17. Paul writes that the Son (Christ) is the image of the invisible God. That is a funny thing to say. How can something invisible have an image? Well, it depends on your understanding of what an image is. In Greek philosophy, which was going around during the time of Paul, an image was part of the reality of what it represented. An image was not separate from what it revealed. It wasn't just a representation. It was part of it. So Christ is part of the reality of God. All this is a fancy way to say that in Christ we learn everything about what God is like. Not what God looks like, but what God *is* like. In the person of Christ we see that God is loving, God is merciful, God wants us to listen and obey, God is sacrificial, and God hates Satan. If we are not sure about the God of the scriptures, we can look at Jesus Christ for our clues.

And in these first three verses Paul defines this for us. Let's read verses 15 through 17 again: "15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." This passage says that Christ is creator, immortal, and powerful. But more than that, that everything is created by him, for him, and it all holds together in him. In other words the universe is not self-sufficient. God did not create and walk away. The universe and indeed individuals are all connected to Christ. We can be rebellious and pretend that we aren't connected. We can fool ourselves in to thinking that we are self-sufficient. But we aren't. All of creation from the beginning is held together by the power of Christ. Now, does it feel like things are holding together these days? On a daily level, no. We have a pandemic, we have contentions in Washington DC over what seems like everything, we have racial tensions, and we have a lot of people wondering how they are going to pay their bills. It doesn't feel like things are holding together. But, that is the point of this letter. To encourage the church that Jesus Christ really is as powerful as we need him to be. If Christ can sustain the whole universe, Christ can sustain us.

The second section of this hymn is verses 18-20. And if you remember the first section started with creation. With all that is created being created by, through, and for Christ. Here Paul brings back the creation theme with the church and the work of the cross signaling new creation. Let's read verses 18-20. "18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." So, not only is Christ what holds the cosmos together and everything in it together, but specifically that powerful Christ is the head of the church and has chosen to save us through his blood. Christ, the all-powerful Christ we read about in the first three verses, is going to see out his intentions for creation through the church. The church, of which Christ must be the head, will accomplish what was intended from creation. To put it simply, what we do here needs to be about a lot more than just you tube on Sundays. One commentator put it this way which I thought was a good reminder; "The church does not exist to meet the needs of its members or to insure its institutional survival, but to fulfill the redemptive purposes of Christ, it's head." Think about that for a minute. We are not just here to fulfill the needs of our members, we are not here to survive as a Presbyterian church, but we are here to do Christ's redemptive work with him as the head. That statement made me cringe a little bit at first. It is constantly drilled into pastors that

we are to meet the needs of our members. And indeed we want to. But what that commentator is reminding us is that that cannot be our purpose. An outpouring from being a Christ-like community is that we hopefully do meet each other's needs. But our purpose, our purpose, our reason for existence, is to carry out the redemptive work of Christ in the world. That's your purpose, that is my purpose.

And then this second section takes quite a turn. We have been told about the Christ that created the heavens and that has the power to hold the universe together. And that Christ holds all the fullness of God. God's Spirit and glory all dwell in Christ. We go from this to the last sentence of verse 20. We go to the depths. It says "by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." This mighty Christ chooses to shed his blood which is a violent act. And he chooses to hang on a cross which was the most shameful death you could die. Wow. I was loving the beauty of this passage until we got here. But this does really put the crucifixion in perspective. Christ who had all the power of God, the power to create and sustain the universe died a painful and shameful death. It wasn't just another crucifixion. It was the event that reconciled heaven and earth. And that is what Paul has described here.

Now, before we go to the last section where Paul will break from the poetry to address the church, I want to point out that in those two stanzas we just read, Paul has established everything that is true about Christ in order to then address everything else that follows in the rest of the letter in the weeks to come. Stay tuned. I think we may be coming back to this passage as a reference. For example, in chapter 2, the early church is being told that they have to follow other human rules and popular philosophies of the time. But we know from this chapter, Paul has made it clear that Jesus Christ is all you need. Everything from creation to salvation is found in him. Scholar Michael Gorman puts it this way: "Colossians tells a story of Christ's wisdom, power, and sufficiency. Nothing reveals more of God than does Christ, nothing is more powerful than...Christ, and nothing more is needed than Christ." And Paul warns later, don't let the human world add anything else. Christ really is all you need. So the truths in this passage are critical for understanding who God is and who we are and that is why they precede the rest of the letter.

The last section is an address to the church. Paul encourages them and warns them. He writes starting in verse 21 "21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of [g] your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— 23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant." Reconciliation with God is possible because of what Christ has done. We can all be recipients of this reconciliation. Paul writes to the Colossians in verse 22 "But now he has reconciled you." He makes this personal. Back in verse 20 God was reconciling all things through Christ. But now it is less cosmic and more personal. God is reconciling the Colossians. God reconciles individual people through Christ. But, there is a catch. There is a responsibility on the part of the church in Colossae. Paul reminds them that they will be reconciled "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel." In other words, they can't let the world pull them away from what is true about Christ. And this will come up again in this letter.

Now we have this beautiful hymn and then Paul's exhortation. But what does this mean for us? This was written to the early church almost 2000 years ago. What does it have to with the world we are in right now,

with a pandemic and division and the worst financial crisis in our country in 80 years. What does this mean for us? It means everything. First it reminds us that despite all of our scientific accomplishments, our ability to clone animals and genetically alter plants and go to space, Christ still holds all of this together. In fact Christ will reconcile and restore all that we have messed up. In a world that feels like it is falling apart, we need to hold on to Christ who holds it all together.

It also means that we need to hang on to our connection to Christ more than ever. If there was ever a time to get closer to God, now is the time. Psalm 42 says “as the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you O God.” Panting. When was the last time you panted, when you couldn’t get the air in fast enough. You longed for it. It might have been a while since you had that feeling. For others of you, you might pant every time you go up the stairs and you know the feeling well. But that is how much we should long for Christ in our lives. Don’t try to live in this craziness on your own. Don’t rely on yourself for anything. You were not designed to live through this on your own. You were created by God and for God. Take the connection to Christ with you everywhere. And remember that catch about being reconciled IF the Colossians continued in their faith and stayed firm in the hope of the Gospel? Could that be any better of a reminder for us now? We need to continue in our faith, continue means still moving forward. Still drawing closer to God at whatever stage of life you are in. Continue in your faith. And we need to stay firm and not move away from the hope of the Gospel. This means when the evening news tells us that the world is a mess, and it is, we don’t let that move us away from the hope we know to be true. We don’t let the world scare us. If Christ can create everything we see, Christ can take care of us now. We need to keep on being His church.

That brings me to the last point from this passage for us. This passage also reminds us of what we are supposed to be doing. At the end of this passage Paul says “do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” We are supposed to be servants of the Gospel. When Paul says that it has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, he does not mean that everyone has heard the gospel. We know that is not the case. It wasn’t the case then. Paul went on to more missionary journeys because people had not heard the good news yet. What Paul meant here is that the good news is no longer a mystery. The cat is out of the bag. The answer has been found, it is Christ. And we as servants of that gospel need to get it out. Paul is basically proclaiming the mission of the church.

Brothers and Sisters, in this crazy time can you imagine anything more important that we could be doing than sharing the gospel with people? When I look at the amount of human suffering all around us, I think those people need to know there is hope. They need to hear about the hope of the Gospel. They need to hear that conflict and pandemic and uncertainty are not all there is. That there is actually something so much more wonderful that is going to make it right one day and we can be there and that eternity starts now. This is the perfect time to share this with people. Their complacency has been taken away. No one is in their comfort zone right now. People are listening for hope. Let’s share it with them. In Christ, all things hold together.