

On this first Sunday of Advent we are beginning in this few-week series of reflecting on and looking at the work and the person of Jesus Christ. And this morning and for the next few Sundays we will have various readings as a part of this Advent season which will take us through the different Gospel passages: the birth of Christ, the prophecies of Christ. And while we will be having those readings from the Gospels during our service, the sermons will be primarily drawn from Paul's epistles on Christ and on his work.

For the Gospels declare the work of Christ and his impact and his calling of disciples, but the epistles of Paul talk of the consequences of the death and the resurrection of Christ, not only for the disciples, but for that entire world, and most principally through one who was once a persecutor of the church. And it is through the words of Paul that we then learn, as the Holy Spirit guided him, of the supremacy, the glory of God with us, Jesus Christ.

And so this morning we begin in Colossians 1:15-20. Hear now the reading of God's word.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. 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 and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 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.

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Heavenly Father, we pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would open our eyes that we would see the glory of Christ, God with us, and what you are doing. We thank you for Paul and for you drawing him and reconciling him; though he was a persecutor of your Son, persecutor of the church, your body, you drew him and reconciled him through the shed blood of Christ on the cross. That the resurrected Christ appeared to him and changed everything, and now we hear how your Spirit guided him to write to the church. So Lord, give us ears to hear the beauty of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

It is that season, where as some have said, belief comes out to play. But belief in what? Perhaps it's belief in Santa Claus or perhaps it's belief in Jesus, born in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. In our day and age belief is definitely something people talk about, but when it's related to Jesus--- even during the Christmas season, upon which really Jesus is behind it, the birth of the Son of God as the Christian church has taught---Jesus is seen as one of many to be believed.

This was most exemplified in the film a couple of years ago, *The Life of Pi*. I'm not sure whether you saw the film. It was an amazingly beautiful film, it was well done, the story was very well told. But at its heart it is telling the story of the fact that Jesus is simply one among many that is worthy to be venerated and respected, but certainly not the Son of God, not the one who is over all, not the one who is supreme, not God who is with us. I was interested in the review of A. O. Scott, the chief film reviewer for the New York Times. Not writing from a Christian perspective, he wrote about this film, *The Life of Pi*, and the way in which belief came out to play. And in many ways it reflects what we see in our culture. Consider these words from this reviewer writing of *The Life of Pi*. He says young Pi's existence and also that of the gentle professorial man who he grew into being is dominated by religion. Pi's story, the Canadian writer is told, will make you believe in God. And Pi himself is infused with a godliness that knows no doctrinal bounds. The Hindu deities, Pi tells us, were like superheroes to him. He recalls that at a tender age he began collecting heroes from other faiths, all around holiness. He was like a holiness fan, reluctant to declare any rooted interest in any particular team. He likes them all. After receiving a few quick lessons from the Gospels from a kindly priest, Pi offers up a prayer that summarizes his amiable, inclusive approach to the notoriously divisive subject of

theology. "Thank you, Vishnu, for introducing me to Christ." The reviewer says, no problem. He will go on to embrace Islam. study Kabbalah. Thousands of years of sectarian conflict, it seems, can be resolved with a smile and a hushed, reverent tone of voice. "If you believe in everything, you will end up not believing in anything," warns Pi's dad who is committed to the supremacy of reason and who is, as rationalists often are in the imaginations of the devout, a bit of a grouch about it. And then Scott summarizes: But this piece of paternal wisdom identifies a serious flaw in *The Life of Pi*, which embraces religion without quite taking it seriously, and is simultaneously about everything and very little, indeed. Instead of all, it gives us: *Aww, how sweet*.

And in many ways that's what Christmas is reduced to: *How sweet*. Baby Jesus, come to tell us of love, mercy. But Advent is about---at least for a moment---taking the Bible seriously about what it claims about *God With Us*. And there is perhaps no more beautiful a summary of the divinity of Christ, God with us, than Paul's poetic description in the first chapter of Colossians. For while it definitely will confront belief as it comes out to play, it will not allow us to settle for 'Believe in anything.' Rather, he means to exalt before us only one: The only redeemer, the only reconciler, the only authority in heaven and on earth, and that is Jesus Christ. And only through him can we know God. And that is the challenge to us, because he means not to leave us with sweet feelings or mild emotions, but literal awe at the glory, at the awful glory of Christ Jesus.

So let's look together as we see in these few verses packed full, and we could spend a year of Sundays and not fully unpack it, but I have one. So here's my try. These few verses give to us in verses 15-17 Paul's look at who Christ is by looking at what Christ has done across the cosmos. It's the look of Christ in cosmology. In verses 15-17 we see God revealed, we see the creator, we see his authority. But then in verses 18-20 Paul steps away from cosmology, and then looks specifically at soteriology, that is, the study of how that God has not only created all things, God means to redeem all things, and does so through Christ. And there we will see Christ's supremacy and that he is a redeemer.

So together, then, let's go to verse 15, *God Revealed*. Verse 15, he says again: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." That phrase, 'He is the image of the invisible God,' is itself one of the most important pieces in all of the Bible's teaching about the incarnation...God made flesh, God with us---when he says Jesus is the image of God--- because the idea of the image and image itself is an important biblical theme from the beginning to the end. Consider for just a moment. The Christian faith teaches that God the Father is invisible, and yet the image in the ancient world was still important. Because why? Images in the Old Testament often represented different gods. Even Nebuchadnezzar had a statue, we learn in Daniel, of himself. In fact, many of the images or the idols that we read of in the Old Testament were fashioned into miniature statues, images of the gods which they worshiped. Stretching all the way to the book of Revelation we have this word *image* appearing ten times, and it refers to the beast who seeks to displace God with an image.

But these idols and these images and these statues are not God, they are distortions of God. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't use *image*. Think about it for a moment. In the earliest verses of the first chapter of the entire Bible, Genesis chapter 1, we read this: that God made man in his own image. So that you and I, walking around in the flesh, reflect in some way God's design, reflect who he is---but we are not God. We are not his actual image, his representation. But we are made in his image, fashioned after and designed after who God is, because we were meant to be in relationship with God.

But because of sin, we are alienated from God. Therefore God sent his Son, Paul tells us here, who is the image of God. He would reflect this again in chapter 2, when he writes these words: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority." So Paul moves from image to what that means for those who believe, but in this idea of image he says he's the fullness of Deity.

Our own confession as a church, the Westminster Confession, speaks of God in this way: There is only one living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory. And then the Confession says this: Most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

What Paul is saying when he says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, he's saying: You want to know what God looks like? Look to him in his all-loving nature, his gracious patience, his forgiveness of transgressions and sin. And yet he is also God, for he is from God, he was in the beginning, he is eternal. We cannot see the Father, but Paul says, here is Christ. And it would be Christ who would say to his disciples, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father. God is not done with image. The problem was our images come from sinful hearts. God's image is Christ in the flesh, born to us of a virgin under the threat of execution. This is God in the flesh.

But not only is he God Revealed, he is also Creator, verse 16 tells us. He says: For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. And I remember as a young Christian, the first time reading that. Why? Because I thought it was God the Father who created. Well, he did. God created. But it was through the Son, co-eternal with the Father. And the Bible also tells us that the Spirit was there as well at creation. But here Paul focuses his attention on Christ through whom, who is the word of God, we learn in the Gospel of John. That God speaks, and his speaking is revealed through Christ's creating.

This is a remarkable thing, because not only is he naming the fact that Christ in all of his power and glory is the creator of all things, he's also telling us something about his power---that this creator is one of great power; that Christ, along with the Father, has great, immeasurable power, a power over sin and death. Because notice what Paul is saying here in verse 16. That when he says that he has created all things...and look what it is for. He's created all these things, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities---all things were created by him and are for him. That is a remarkable statement for a Jew to make, because it is saying that Jesus didn't just die outside of Jerusalem and was buried in a grave, for all things were created by him and for him. That Christ is no longer in the grave; he was raised on the third day. And it was the resurrected Christ that greeted Paul and transformed his life. And now he is saying what he has learned at the feet of Christ and from the other disciples, that it is this: that it is Christ who has created all things, and with all of his power, all of it is because of his doing. And it was all created by him, and oh, it is all directed to him, who is seated at the right hand of God. Because remember, he is the image of God, and God is eternal, Christ is eternal. Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father. He is the one who has created all of these things.

And it is that power that transformed Paul. And Paul would become a preacher to the Gentiles, through the Gentiles, the Roman Empire, the diaspora of Jews. And as we learned earlier this morning in one of our adult Sunday school classes, within the first hundred years somewhere between fifty to sixty thousand converts in the first hundred years, and slowly but surely would change the world. It's this one....God with us, creator.

But he's also one who is invested with great authority, verse 17, when Paul says: He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is before all things, meaning he is the one who is the head of all things, he is the one in whom God has invested his authority. For Jesus declares at the end of Matthew: All authority in heaven on earth has been given to me. Jesus is the one to whom God has given authority, not only in creation, but in upholding all things, the working out of God's eternal, unchangeable will.

Now think about that for just a moment. In the garden Adam and Eve were given authority. God delegated to them the authority to cultivate the ground, to be fruitful and multiply, to live in relationship with him, to trust in him, and to follow in his ways. But instead of taking that authority that they were delegated and given, instead of bringing it and living it out unto the Godhead---the Father, Son and Holy Spirit---they believed a lie, and directed that authority and its power to themselves, because they wanted to be like God. So man's authority never wants to be invested in anything outside of ourselves. We want to be able to say: This, thus, and so. This is the way things ought to be.

Even at Jesus's feet, his disciples struggled with this idea. When Jesus began to unfold what he was about to do in giving his life, they said: Say it can't be! It's not going to happen that way! Or when they were on the boat in the Sea of Galilee....the storm comes up, Jesus is asleep, they're like, Wait a second! There's a storm! We're going to die! And so man works up his fear and anxiety because we feel at the center of our being that maybe, just maybe, we don't have the final say, we don't have the final authority. We can't control things, all things are not of our doing. And as this passage tells us here: And in him all things hold together. I can barely hold my schedule together.

But God has invested that power and given the authority to Christ. What an amazing thing that he says it is Christ who holds all things together. Who is Christ? God with us. Who is Christ? He was given the name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. If he is the image of God, then he is mercy, he is love, he is forgiveness. Isn't it amazing that the one whom God says---Jesus---has the authority, it is Jesus who does not wield that authority in a selfish way. He wields that authority by holding all things in all of our lives together in his hand. Now maybe you don't recognize that, maybe you don't believe that, maybe you, too, are in a storm. The disciples certainly were. The disciples were there at the cross. They saw him nailed to the cross. They're like, this can't happen, this is not...this is not a good thing. They couldn't see from their vantage point what God was doing.

I was reminded of this week the kind of authority our Father has versus our understanding, when I was reminded of my mother, who's here visiting with us for Thanksgiving with my father. And I was reminded of the days which I would play with Hot Wheels on the floor of our home. My mother, back in the 80's and when I was young and in the 70's still did cross stitch, and I don't think she still does, but she did then. I remember as a boy it was incredibly boring to me, but somewhat interesting. But I would be on the floor playing with my Evel Knievels and my Hot Wheels, and I would look up at my mother sitting in her chair, and she was doing cross stitch. She had that paper with all the holes in it, and I know it's not paper...fabric, whatever it is with the needle. And I would look at it from the floor and all I would see were various and multiple colors of string that did not look anything interesting. And I would sit there with my Hot Wheels, thinking, What are you doing? How can that be interesting? That looks like a mess. But slowly but surely she would tie off the loose ends, cut off the long pieces, wrap it around a board, have it framed, and that would be a beautiful tapestry in our dining room. What I couldn't see from my vantage point, what looked like a complete mess---she knew exactly what she was doing.

We look around the world, we open the newspaper or turn on the web. We look at our own lives, we get up and we look in the mirror. Maybe you....it's a mess. We look around. How in the world can God ever be in control of all of this? That's the mystery. From our vantage point we can't see the tapestry of what God is doing by an authority shaped by love and mercy, of just what he's doing in the midst of our storms. But it is an authority that can be trusted, because it is given to one who is supreme.

You see, that's where he goes next. After he moves away from cosmology and all things hold together and all of the universe created through him and he being the image of God, Paul then moves to verse 18 to talk about something else that Jesus was doing. Not only did Jesus create all things by him and for him, he was also doing something else. And that was he was going to start a new community, a new race of people called the church. Look at verse 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 supremacy.

In that verse he goes....birth of Christ, and even before that and him holding all things together.... being before his birth, and then his resurrection for what purpose? To be the head of the church. A pastor is not the head. Elders are not the head. We are simply servants in Christ's body. He is the head of the church. And not only is he the head of the church in his person and his authority and his creating, he is the head of the church because of his Word. What he has spoken is our ultimate authority. It is here that we learn who Christ is, what he is about, what he has done, and where are we to be in relationship to him, and how we are to receive his love. This is the Word, where I am merely a vessel that by God's grace alone brings any truth and glory to him, for he is the authority.

And he is the head, and what does the head do? What does the mind do for our human bodies? The turkey we have enjoyed, the stuffing that we have stuffed ourselves with, the enjoyable things we've experienced over these last few days---all have been made possible because we have brains that give us the ability to enjoy life, to take it in. Christ is the head of the church, and our ability to enjoy him, the animation of our worship, how we worship, what we believe, how we are to live---all of that is brought on by the supreme head, Christ Jesus. And it is through him that we learn that he is Christ, who has come to begin a new people. Just as he was creating all things from nothing, here, too, through his death on the cross and his resurrection victory over sin and death, all those who come to believe in him are made part of his body, the church, of which Columbia Presbyterian Church is a small part of what God is doing through his Son in building the church around the globe, even as we speak this morning. God never sleeps. His kingdom is growing, because it is invested in the supreme head, the powerful, glorious Christ.

But this supremacy, this beauty is seen principally through the fact that he is Redeemer. Verses 19 & 20: For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 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 a cross. In picking up on the thoughts of the supremacy of Christ over the church as the head, in verses 19 and 20 he tells us exactly how he did it. He tells us. He tells us in verse 15, we learn he is the image. 16, he is the creator, he has all authority, he has all supremacy, and here he is the reconciler.

How does God build his church? Through his Son, who came in the flesh like you and me, and yet fully God. And when he was born, he was born under the threat of execution. His family escapes, and irony upon irony that they would not catch him according to their will when he was an infant. He would be raised, and when he would go into his public ministry he decided when he would lay down his life. He willingly gave himself over so that he might die to do...what? To reconcile you and me to our heavenly Father. When we are given authority, we abuse it, we misuse it. Why? Because we are sinners. We want to direct it back to ourselves.

As a father I know I do this more times than I care to even confess. I'll go to my daughter and I've I told her, I've asked her to do something maybe once, maybe twice, maybe three times, and I go in and check one more time. And so what do I do. I come in that third or fourth time, and I say, okay, here's the deal. I'm in charge here. You're not. Get it done. That's when I'm being nice. Other times I get really emotional about it, and I use guilt. I don't know if you parents use guilt....I can use guilt. I can't believe how many times, in other words, I'm trying to insult her. I'm saying you're not smart enough to hear me, in hopes that somehow using guilt is going to be a motivator. See, that's my sinful heart and what I do with my authority. But really what I'm doing, I'm just mad that's somebody's in my way. It's not that my daughter or any other child doesn't need to obey....they absolutely do. But how oftentimes am I trying to get them to obey because quite frankly, they're offending my authority.

But I am a sinner and I dishonor God's authority all the time. And yet God in all of his authority comes down into the mess that is the world, comes down into the dust, made a man, yet fully God. Sees our

sin, gets into the mud---is not a sinner himself, and yet makes us clean, because he takes it from us. And he dies on a cross, and then he's raised on the third day. You see, the irony is that he came as an infant that he might die as a savior. And that isn't to be cuddly and warm. It's meant to be stark and real. That God who has all authority doesn't come down to wag his finger, to get us to obey, to motivate us by guilt. Rather, he comes to demonstrate his glory, to say all of his acts, all of his glory, all of who he is, is seen through his Son, who in reconciling supremacy died on our behalf with an authority that is shaped and empowered by love.

The question is, have you received this love? Do you know that mercy has now been enthroned? At the birth of Christ, God was doing a new thing, and this mercy was made flesh, this love was made flesh, this forgiveness of God made flesh, and walked among us, and he means for us to receive it.

And so this morning I want to simply ask you to consider four things. Number one: Receive *God With Us*, Christ himself---the supreme, glorious love of God in Christ this morning. But you might ask, how do I receive it?

Let me begin by giving you a second 'R.' Begin by reflecting on it. And what I mean by reflecting is...take these verses this afternoon, this week. Read them, reflect on them, contemplate them. Whether you scarcely understand all their depth, but read them. And as you reflect on what it says about what God has done to reconcile us as sinners to him as our Father, through the shed blood of Christ, the resurrected, glorious Christ---and as we reflect on that, I am sure as I'm standing here, you can't help but at least ask the question, is it worthy to receive?

So you receive. You begin by reflecting. But there is another 'R,' and I think the way you begin to reflect on it and receive it is to do this: to begin to repent. What do I mean by repent? I want to borrow the words of one of the Puritan preachers, John Owen. And I'm paraphrasing here. He said one of the worst insults we could ever give to God is to reject the truth that Christ died for us, because God so loved the world. Where we begin to repent are the ways in which we have rejected his love.

When you're worried about circumstances and you can't see, and you begin to fear and become so anxious that you are no good to those around you, when you are shaken by criticism, or when you are simply waking up in the morning wondering what is today going to bring---that in of itself---those kinds of situations are ways in which we are forgetting that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. The way we begin to receive his love is by reflecting on it, and repenting when we have rejected his love.

But the final 'R' is to relate to him. (I didn't have a better 'R,' sorry, but it's the best I've got. But relate.) What do I mean by relate? It's worship. How do we relate to this God? We relate to him by crying out, by singing out, by praying, by worshiping. Because if all things were created by him and for him, we have been re-created through the death and resurrection of Christ to be reconciled to our Father for the purpose of worshiping, relating to him.

Receive, reflect, repent, and relate---for God has come clothed in flesh. Love has walked among us, God with us.

Let's pray. Father, help us, we pray, to see Christ in all of his glory, in all of his supremacy, as he is told to us through this, your powerful Word. But Father, may you this morning enable us to receive what you have given, that we might be in awe of who you are. We thank you and we praise you for *God With Us*, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.