

The Cosmic Christ

Colossians 1:15-20

Acts 17:22-31

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15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for 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. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He 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. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and 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!

Heady stuff, huh? This is a passage that is dense with calories, like good fruitcake; and like fruitcake, there's a lot of stuff in there! It's a rich, high calorie passage, spiritually speaking. And theologically speaking. So, I'd like to re-read this, but from a different translation, which I think will open up some of what is being said here. This is the Message translation (which never disappoints):

“We look at this Son, and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of human authorities and angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence, and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he’s there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.”

I love that translation. Especially the phrase, Jesus is spacious; he’s roomy. And that all of the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe get fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies. That’s beautiful!

Taking all of what is said here, this is a unique perspective about Jesus Christ. It’s large, it’s global, it’s cosmic! And more theological in nature than most of what’s written in the New Testament. Normally Paul would refer to a specific teaching of Jesus, or a principle of Jesus’ life and ministry, and apply it to the church, or to a conflict in the church, and how God’s people therefore need to live. This power-packed passage, however—phrased almost like a poem or a song about the eternal Christ—is global in nature. Paul goes big, in a hurry! This is grand and lofty. And beautiful.

What impresses me in this, is that Paul does not ‘downsize’ Jesus. In fact, he does just the opposite: makes him bigger. He doesn’t try to make him fit into some neat and tidy little package that makes him tame. Paul says that Jesus is

it—he is *everything*, from beginning to end. And everything—Paul names thrones, rulers, dominions, powers—everything, is subject to him. There is nothing that *isn't* subject to him. Think about that! Whether the one occupying the throne is called Prime Minister, or President, or Queen or King, supreme leader, or CEO, or pastor, everyone and everything is subject to him. This Jesus is big!

And so, this morning, I'd like to ask the question (again): how big is our Jesus? Or, perhaps the question could be put to us the way Jesus put it to his disciples; Jesus asks: who do you say I am? This is worthy of reflection from time to time, as we check in with ourselves about our faith: Who is Jesus Christ to you? To me? What difference does Jesus Christ make? Not just to you, personally, but to the world?

Now, I'm not going to do what many pastors are tempted to do when we get to passages like these from the New Testament: I'm not going to present you with a 15-point doctrinal lesson about Jesus Christ, and tell you you'd better stick to it. You know, so we don't have to send the theology police after you if you don't get it just right. I don't want to do that.

What I do want to do, rather than give you a list of doctrinal statements and beliefs that you are expected to adhere to, is encourage you to *know* this Jesus, *trust* this Jesus, *follow* this Jesus, and *receive* the essential things that Scripture teaches about Jesus and from Jesus. I want you to discover for yourself, who the living Christ is to you, and for you. And for the world. Maybe even the universe. After all, this is the cosmic Christ we're talking about! And we are, in this morning's readings and a few other places in the New Testament, invited to see him as cosmic!

By 'cosmic Christ' we mean the Christ who existed before creation and at creation; the Christ who makes cameo appearances in the Old Testament in the form of an angel, or a visitor to people like Abraham, or in the book of Daniel to his companions in the fiery furnace where it says that someone "like a son of man" appeared in the furnace with them. And of course, we're talking about the resurrected and ascended Christ who, in the book of Revelation says, "I am the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the living one."

When we talk about the cosmic Christ we're talking about heartfelt *experiences* of Christianity and of spiritual practice, where we see this eternal Christ pervading all created things, and persons. Compared with the *historical*

Jesus who lived on earth for a time as a human being and said personal things like, “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” That’s the historical Jesus. The personal Jesus. The human Jesus, who ate real food and needed real sleep and got his hands and feet dirty, like all of us, and related to us in our humanity—including our pain and struggles.

The *cosmic* Christ is what we see and experience when, for example, on a dark clear night away from the city lights we look at a sky full of stars and go “wow,” and something in us shifts/changes. And the cosmic Christ is what we see and experience when we look into dear dog’s face, and they look back at us, and we go “wow”; and something in us shifts/changes. Or we look at the beauty of a flower in bloom, or the magnificence of the Olympic mountains and go “wow,” and something in us shifts/changes. This is Christ, in all created things. Including people. When we talk about the cosmic Christ we’re talking about the Christ who is bigger than *Christianity*, and beyond Christianity (I’ll come back to this in a moment).

Think of it this way: we’ve known and followed *Jesus* for 2,000 years. At birth, he was named Jesus, and we’ve known him as *Jesus* since then. However, the *Christ* has existed from eternity. Every Christmas eve we read from John 1,

where it says: *“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God... all things were made by him and through him...”* That passage concludes with: *“and the word became flesh and dwelt among us.”* What John is saying is, this is the eternal cosmic Christ becoming the human Jesus, entering history.

This is all to say that “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name! The Jesus we know is *Jesus the Christ*.

What Paul is doing here in Colossians 1 is inviting us to occasionally look above and beyond the historical Jesus to get a glimpse of the magnificence of the eternal Christ in whom the fullness of God dwells, the co-creator of all that is. This gaze into the bigger picture saves us from thinking small and having too small of a picture of Jesus. Too limited and limiting a picture of Jesus.

British Episcopalian JB Phillips wrote a book in the early 60’s titled, “Your God is Too Small.” For our modern needs, we need a big Jesus! We need a Jesus as big as he really is.

Pastor and author Brian McLaren, who was born in the mid 1950’s, talks in one of his books about the “Seven Jesuses I have known.” The seven Jesuses he has known, through his experience in his family growing up, and through his

school years, and college, and adulthood; and because of his work and his close relationships that have introduced him to more Jesuses. He lists the seven Jesuses he has known as: the conservative protestant Jesus, the Pentecostal/charismatic Jesus (college), the Roman Catholic Jesus (grad school), the Eastern Orthodox Jesus, the liberal protestant Jesus, the anabaptist (Baptist tradition) Jesus, the liberation theology Jesus (from travels to south America).

Perhaps in your lifetime you've had several Jesuses that you've known over the years (maybe not 7, but more than one).

Brian McLaren never said there is one he thinks is right or best—because they all contain good and true parts of the Jesus story and have some good and right expression in and through the church. They all bring something unique to the table of the Jesus feast.

Brian McLaren said his faith has actually become *simpler* as he's gotten older, and he simply wants to stay in a humble place about this cosmic Christ and keep exploring more about the One in whom the fullness of God dwells. And do it from a place of wonder, rather than a place of having to be right, or getting it perfectly right.

And he makes it clear that he doesn't think it's a good idea to just combine all the Jesuses he has known (all the good parts of all the different Jesuses, traditions and denominations), like putting them in a blender and combining them into a Jesus smoothie (blech). Each expression and each tradition needs to find its best self, so to speak, and live it out with integrity, and with humility, and with kindness and understanding, acceptance of and cooperation with others, while trying to keep the big picture.

And, no matter which expression a human being finds most meaningful, the point is that Jesus Christ is at the center of it. That's the point. Christ is at the center, and at the edge, and above and below and all around. I had a seminary professor who used to say: "Christ is both the center and the circumference of everything." That messes with my mind, but I like it. That's what Paul is saying in Colossians: Christ is both the center and the circumference of everything. So, let's keep the big picture (along with the personal).

Keeping the big picture of the cosmic Christ helps us with interfaith dialogue and understanding. Because we see the Christ beyond Christianity; who is bigger than the tribal Jesus—you know, the tribal Jesus who is only *for* a small group of people, and *against* others, maybe even warring with others. In Paul's

words: “He is before all things, and in him *all things* hold together.” Which would include other religions, in my view. He is spacious, he is roomy. Everything finds its proper place in him, without crowding.

The apostle Paul himself is a good example of someone who, in the book of Acts and in his letters, is not threatened by other religions, or who sees Jesus as a tribal Jesus who is against others. Rather, the apostle Paul looks for the kernels of truth, and essential expressions of God and Jesus, even in other faiths. And, he is looking at the longings of the human heart and how Jesus the Christ fulfills our true longings. Acts 17 gives a great example of this, as we heard. When Paul observes all these shrines in Athens, including one with an inscription that says, “To an unknown God,” and he attempts to proclaim the bigger picture and point to Christ: here is what you are searching for. Here is the one who is the fulfillment of human searching for meaning—why the world is here, why you and I are here. He is the creator of it all (co-creator).

I don’t want to say that all religions are equal, or that they’re all the same. That’s kind of patronizing to adherents of each religion, to tell them that their faith is no different than another, that they’re all the same. I *do* want to say that Jesus the Christ, who is *above* all and *before* all and *after* all and *in* all,

mysteriously and lovingly holds all of it together. And, to use Paul's remarkable words, God, through Christ, reconciles to himself all things. So even if we wrestle with whether or not Jesus is the only way to salvation, or to God, we can trust that God, through Christ, will reconcile everything in the end. It's not our job to judge others or categorize others, but to bear witness to what we know, in Christ, to be true and meaningful and beautiful. And, it is our calling to be ambassadors of reconciliation. And to have peace, and be people of peace! Knowing that God, in Christ, has things handled. When I need to be reminded of that I consistently go back to a line in the Psalms that helps me keep the bigger picture. It's Psalm 75:3: "When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants, it is I who keep its pillars steady." God steadies the world, and steadies us, through Christ who is with us always.

When I read about this cosmic Christ from our passage this morning, and how all things were created for his purposes, and how he holds all things together, and (to quote the Message translation) "...not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies"—when I read that, it gives me hope! Hope that this big God, in Jesus the Christ, holds the entire world, and us, in his hands. No person, nor politics, has the last word. Only Jesus

Christ, who holds it all together. There isn't anything he hasn't seen before, or handled before.

I had a friend in seminary—Heidi and I went to Fuller seminary, in southern California—who grew up in Los Angeles. And the LA bowl is huge and that world was his life. He hadn't really travelled outside of LA. He loved it there and loved his life in southern California.

One day during an Old Testament theology class we're studying Abraham, and God's call to Abraham to become the leader of a new people, father of many nations and all that. And Abraham, like many people God called, was reluctant at first. So part of God's convincing Abraham to go on this adventure was to take him outside at night and have him look up at the stars (think of how brilliant the night sky would've been a few thousand years ago!), and God tells him, "So shall your descendants be—as numerous as the stars in the sky." What a promise!

Well, my friend Tom said he always thought that promise was lame, because in LA, back in the 1970's and 80's, whenever he looked up at the night sky he could count maybe 10 stars (those were the days of intense smog and a lot of light pollution). He said, somewhat jokingly, "So Abraham's gonna get about 10 descendants. Big deal." I said, "Dude!" (he was a surfer, so I had to speak his

language), “You need to get out of town more. Come up to the Pacific Northwest, or at least drive east to the desert or north to the Sierra Mountains.

Long story short, he did. He went camping. He came back and said, “Dude, the universe is, like, massive.” Yup! He had an experience of just how big this triune God is, who made heaven and earth. And it began to transform him.

And we all need experiences like this from time to time, to get us out of our heads, and away from the headlines and all the shiny objects, to catch a glimpse of the eternal, cosmic Christ. It doesn’t have to be nighttime stars. It can be the brilliance and complexity of one flower in bloom that makes us say, “Wow.”

And this vast, amazing, invisible God becomes knowable through what is visible—who is both mysterious and magnificent at the same time. Worthy of our gratitude and praise, and wonder.

Immortal, invisible, God Only Wise