

How Big is (Your) Jesus?

Colossians 1:15-20

Acts 17:22-31

Colossians 1:15-20

Speaking of Jesus Christ...

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 rich, high calorie passage, spiritually speaking.

And theologically speaking. So, I'd like to re-read this from a different translation, which I think will open up some of what is being said here. This is the Message translation (which uses more common language):

“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 (which is a lot), this is a unique perspective about Jesus Christ. It's large, it's global, it's cosmic and universal! 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, 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! 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 and explainable. 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 this Jesus holds all things together, whether we can see it or not.

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 and me, 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, is encourage you to *know* this Jesus, *trust* this Jesus who holds all things together, *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. Paul seems to make Jesus that big. And we are, in this morning's readings and a few other places in the New Testament, invited to see him as that big.

This is 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 eternal Christ we're talking about heartfelt and sometimes life-changing *experiences*, where we see and come to know this eternal Christ pervading all created things, and persons. In addition to 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 struggles and pain.

The *eternal* Christ is who 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 eternal Christ is who we see and experience when we look into our 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 eternal Christ we’re talking about the Christ who is bigger than *Christianity*, and beyond Christianity.

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 for a time.

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, who holds all things together—the early church needed to hear that while under Roman occupation, and we need to hear that today!

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.” He said, for our modern needs, we need a big God! We need a Jesus as big as he really is. As big as the Bible tells us he is.

JB Phillips playfully names many of the small versions of God out there, which he calls destructive; and then turns to the constructive view, the adequate God, as he puts it. The big God.

One of the destructive and small versions of God he names is “resident policeman.” The God who is policing everything and everyone. And he tells the story of how in Nazi Germany this became part of their Christian nationalist propaganda: that God was sorting out the good from the bad, allies from enemies—not just Jews, but Slavic people, people with disabilities, political dissidents, gay people—according to a white supremacy reading of the Bible. And those who were bad in their eyes were labelled as infidels. No kidding. We commonly think that the word infidel is only used by Muslim terrorists, but that word (infidel) was first used by Christians, during the Middle Ages, during the inquisitions. Those who weren’t Christians were labelled as infidels—whether non-believers, or people who had a different religion and beliefs.

This is the problem, and the danger, with Christian nationalism: they have a small god... Who is *not* roomy or spacious, who does *not* hold all things together, who does not reconcile all things to himself, but a god who prefers to break things apart; with the use force if necessary. To quote JB Phillips, their God is too small. Their Jesus is not the Jesus of the Bible.

We’re going through books at home as we sort out what to keep and what to give away, and I came across Billy Graham’s autobiography. I thumbed through

it and remembered that at the end of his memoir, he confesses that he would do some things differently if he had to do it over. He said he would spend more time studying than speaking, and more time praying than preaching. And, he said that as he got older his faith became *simpler*, and he simply wanted to stay in a humble place about this eternal Christ and keep exploring more about the One in whom the fullness of God dwells. And do it from a place of wonder, and mystery, rather than a place of having to be right, or getting it perfectly right.

He also said this (now quoting from the book): “If I had it to do over again, I would also avoid any semblance of involvement in partisan politics... My primary concern in my contacts with political leaders has been as a pastor and spiritual counselor, not as a political advisor... And yet there were times when I undoubtedly stepped over the line between politics and my calling as an evangelist... Becoming involved in strictly political issues or partisan politics inevitably dilutes the gospel’s impact and compromises its message. It is a lesson I wish I had learned earlier.”

I respect him for these reflections on his life and work. Would that others in leadership do the same today.

Jesus the Christ is so much bigger than we tend to think he is, and there are so many good expressions of the faith out there in our communities, from high church to low church; formal and liturgical to informal and non-liturgical; from meeting in a dedicated worship space to meeting in house living room.

And, no matter which expression a human being finds most meaningful, the point is that the living 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—it sounds like quantum physics—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 eternal 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 *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 the only way to God, we can trust that God, through Christ, will reconcile everything in the end. In the words of another British Episcopalian, NT Wright—in a wonderful British way of putting it—“God will set the world to rights.” 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, which I quote here from time to time. It's Psalm 75:3, where God speaks and says: “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 God hasn't seen before, or handled before.

This is true in each of our lives too. It's *universally* true (in the universe, and on earth) and it's true *for each of us*. Jesus steadies us, he holds all things together for us and with us. The broken and dislocated pieces *of our lives* get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies.