

The Cosmic Christ

Colossians 1:15-20

Mark 8:27-33

Mark 8:27-33

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Christ.' ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Next, Colossians 1. This is one of Paul's prison letters. For proclaiming the gospel of Jesus, he was unjustly imprisoned and accused of disturbing the peace and undermining the authorities—religious authorities and state authorities.

Colossians is an interesting little epistle. Unlike Philippians, with whom the apostle Paul had a very close and affectionate relationship ("I am grateful for your partnership in the gospel... I long for all of you...") ... unlike Philippians, Paul did not know these people. This little church in Colossae was most likely founded and led by Paul's companion and partner in ministry, Epaphras. Epaphras visited Paul in prison, sometimes delivering letters to him from the surrounding churches,

sometimes delivering letters to the churches from Paul (as is likely in this case, with Colossians).

Paul's purpose in writing this little letter is to affirm the centrality of Jesus Christ in the life and faith of the early church. And to affirm the central truths about who Jesus Christ is. From the first days of the church's forming, false teachers had arisen who were leading the people astray with bad teaching, or, they were money grubbers who were trying to use the newly established Christian faith, which was spreading like wildfire, for personal gain. Prosperity gospel preaching isn't a new thing; it's been around since the very beginning!

So, Paul is taking the opportunity now, in a brilliant little letter that is both intellectually sharp and personally warm, to remind the first believers of what they heard and received from the very beginning.

I'll be reading verses 15-20 of chapter 1, but Paul opens this letter, like he always does, with prayer and affirmation of the people. He tells them, I hear great things about you; and please know that I constantly pray for you—for spiritual wisdom and insight, that you would grow in the knowledge of God, and that you would have inner strength from the Spirit as you bear fruit in every good work. Then he says this, speaking of Jesus Christ...

Colossians 1:15-20

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? Heavy stuff, too! 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 cool!

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 practically as a concise doctrinal statement, or even 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 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 your 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 excommunicate you or something like that. Send the theology police after you. I don't want to do that.

I will say that, rather than a list of doctrinal statements and beliefs that you are expected to adhere to, I want you to *know* Jesus, *trust* Jesus, *follow* 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." Revelation is the best source for understanding the cosmic Christ.

When we talk about the cosmic Christ we're talking about the more mystical experiences of Christianity and of spiritual practice, where we see this eternal Christ pervading all created things, and people. 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 and drank and needed sleep and got his hands and feet dirty, like all of us.

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 I saw and experienced when I would look into my sweet old dog’s face, and she stares back at me, and I go “wow”; and something in me shifts/changes. Or we look at Fran’s dahlias in the church landscaping, or 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: “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, much like he did in Ephesians 1 (it’s worth reading that too), 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” (After reading it I thought, your book 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 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 some 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. (like Philip Yancey in “The Jesus I Never Knew”)

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 get 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 liquefying 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 and acceptance of 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.

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. Read Acts 17 for a great example of this. 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, to be ambassadors of reconciliation (as it says in our assurance of forgiveness from 2Cor.5)

And so I have to ask myself, is Jesus threatened by, say, Islam (true Muslim faith)? Is Jesus threatened by Buddhist teaching? Jesus taught many similar principles. I think the only thing Jesus might be threatened by, if you will, is a hardness of heart on the part of people who name him as their Lord and Savior, who then judge or condemn others, when that's the cosmic Christ's job, when all is said and done.

Here's a silly little story (I've used before) that perhaps illustrates this. Years ago, as a newly ordained pastor, I gave a sermon during Advent, and made the comment that Jesus is not threatened by Santa Claus. I talked about the origins of Santa Claus in the 4th century in a man named St. Nicholas in the Greek Orthodox tradition. The following week I got a letter from an earnest church member who reacted fairly strongly to that statement that Jesus is not threatened by Santa Claus. Among the other things he found offensive about Santa Claus, this person said that you could rearrange the letters in the word "santa", and it spells "satan." And therefore, the logic went, to promote Santa Claus would be invite satanic influence.

Well, that was a startling letter to receive as a young pastor. But I thought, I could rearrange the letters in many words and have them represent something different. For example, if we rearrange the letters in the word Presbyterian it spells Britney Spears. That MUST be a sign from God for us... On top of that, both Microsoft and Google don't like the spelling of my name, Hallack Greider, and it's first suggestion for correct spelling is "hellcat greedier;" that sounds sinister! (that's my sinister alter ego name; put me in a crime novel...). So, it's silly. And almost 30 years later I stand by my statement that Jesus is not threatened by Santa Clause.

And besides, the word Santa isn't an English word anyway, but of Latin origin, and it means "Saint." (Btw, what do you call Christians who are afraid of Santa Claus? Claustrophobic)

This is silly, but it does remind me that sometimes I, too, can fret over small stuff; silly stuff. And I can sometimes fuss over what others are doing or saying when I could be lifting my eyes up and out and around me to see the eternal, creator, resurrected Christ in the bigger picture of things, and in the delightful small things.

I was in the Edmonds beach area, going for a walk, and there was a three-ish year old child on the sidewalk, lying on his stomach, fixated on something. I noticed he was staring at a caterpillar. He turned to me and said, “Isn’t it amazing?” Yes! And, for me, watching the child be amazed, was amazing. We all need to return to a sense of wonder, if possible at least once on a daily basis. To see the Christ in all things, and people.

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. Pandemics don’t have the last word, or politics. Only Jesus Christ, who holds it all together.

We’re going to affirm what Paul says about Christ being “the first born among the dead” by singing (or listening to) an Easter hymn, a resurrection hymn: Christ is Risen! Shout Hosanna! It’s familiar tune (Ode to Joy), new words.