

The Preeminence of Jesus Christ
Colossians 1:15 – 20
Christ the King Sunday
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
November 20, 2016

Let me thank those who filled in for me during our recent trip to Israel: Ron Dinunzio, Dennis Leshner and Dan Obenshain. It is freeing to know that Fairview's pulpit was in capable hands during my absence.

Lois Ann, Benjamin and I had a very satisfying trip to Israel under the leadership of Jerusalem University College and our knowledgeable guide, Carl Rasmussen. Carl is a gentle spirit. Accompanying us were – from Fairview – Craig Shaffer and Mimi DeSolis; and – from our time living in Peru – Andy and Ivar Quindland (who now reside in the Atlanta area) together with Ed and Cathy Jager (who live in Mongolia. Ed is the Canadian ambassador to Mongolia.)

This was Benjamin's second trip to Israel. He celebrated his second birthday in Israel in 1987.

Today is the Christ the King Sunday. Our text, from Colossians, tells us key truths about the person of Jesus Christ. The first being that Jesus Christ is the image of God.

Jesus Christ is the image of God

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

There is an ancient story that while our Lord carried his cross to Golgotha, he stumbled, and a woman stepped from the crowd to wipe his face with her cloth. Later, she noticed that an image of the Lord's face was imprinted upon the cloth. The cloth was said to be a "true image" of the Lord Jesus' face. In Latin, the word for true is *vera*. And in Greek the word for image is *icon*. The tradition says that the image on the cloth is the "true image," the *vera icon*, from which we get the name Veronica.

Lois Ann and I own a handful of icons. We bought a new one on this most recent trip to Israel. The key to remember when you look at an icon, in contrast to any other painting, is that the icon is communicating spiritual truth, not natural reality. People sometimes say of icons, "They do not look realistic." They are not supposed to look realistic. An icon seeks to communicate the reality of the unseen spiritual world. I own an art book that celebrates the theme of "Mother and Child" in art. But the author of the book made an error when he included reprints of icons of Mary and the infant Jesus. The icon is not portraying an abstract theme of *mother and child*. The artist paints only one mother and one child: Mary and Jesus. He is not interested in motherhood in general. He is only interested in one particular mother and one particular child. If you do not see that, you do not understand the icon.

The word *icon* is the Greek word translated as *image* in v. 15. What we are told is that Jesus Christ is the image of God. In Genesis 1:26 we read, Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. We humans, we mortals, reflect God’s glory. We are made in his image. Note: we are *made* in the image of God and not that we *are* the image of God. Paul tells us that Jesus Christ *is* the image of God. Jesus Christ is a picture of the Creator. Jesus Christ makes the invisible God visible. Hebrews 1:3 says that He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. John Calvin, commenting on this verse, writes For in Christ he [God] shows us his righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, his entire self.¹ If you wish to know what God is like, look to Jesus Christ.

Paul also tells us that Jesus Christ is the firstborn of all creation. False teachers, heretics and cults have used this verse to cause a great deal of mischief through the centuries. Contrary to what these groups may teach, Paul is not suggesting that Jesus Christ is the first created being. What this verse means is that Jesus Christ existed *before* all things. He is Lord of creation because he was there when the work began. Paul is asserting the preexistence of Christ. Jesus Christ has always existed. He is the second person of the divine Trinity. Every Sunday we gather to worship “the Triune God.” Jesus Christ has always existed as part of the Trinity. He acquired humanity when he was incarnated in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Bible says he “became flesh” (John 1:14) but he had always existed as a divine person.

In this, *firstborn* also refers to privileges of rank. The firstborn in a family held a privileged place in the family. Christ, the firstborn of creation, holds a privileged place in creation.

Jesus Christ is the image of God. He is the firstborn of creation. Next, Paul tells us that creation is in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ.

Creation is *in Christ, through Christ and for Christ*

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

In Ephesians 1:3 – 4 reads, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world. Note how we are told that Christ chose those who are his before the foundation of the world, i.e. before creation. We are blessed *in Christ*. We are chosen *in Christ*. We are created *in Christ*. There is an element of mystery to this. Paul tells us that by him all things were created. Creation is both *in Christ* and *through Christ*. Certainly, Paul’s emphasis upon Christ’s work in creation is to highlight that the creation *is not* mere impersonal force. There is *personality* at the foundation of creation. There is an intimacy between Christ and his creation.

¹Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Colossians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Col 1:15). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

The reference to the thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities is to power and authorities in the heavenly realm *and* in our world. Christ is Lord of the created world, and he is Lord of space and time. He is Lord over history.

And, creation is *for Christ*. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus Christ left earth and ascended to his heavenly realm. His is the highest name in all creation. Jesus Christ entered our world and through the magnificence of his life, death, resurrection and ascension his is the greatest name in all of human history. One day, the world will acknowledge his greatness and glory. One day, all creation will bow and declare his greatness.

Next, in addition to declaring Jesus Christ creator, he tells us that he is the sustainer of all things.

Jesus Christ is the creator and sustainer of all that is

¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is *before all things*. Some groups promote theological mischief teaching that this means that Jesus Christ was the first person approved of by God the Father. Typically, these groups take the story of Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:16 – 17,

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

From this they argue that Jesus' baptism was a kind of knighting ceremony. He pleased God and, according to this false teaching, he provided the model we are now supposed to follow. The idea is that Jesus fulfilled the law and therefore provides an example that we are to imitate. Rather than lifting and celebrating what Jesus Christ has accomplished, the emphasis falls upon what we are supposed to do, how we are supposed to act.

In contrast, when Paul says that Jesus Christ is before all things, he means it quite literally. Paul is saying that Christ existed *before* creation. He is co-existent with God the Father. He is before creation itself. Christ is self-existent. One aspect of the false teaching in Colossae revolved around an inordinate interest and appeal to angels. Paul is making clear from the outset of his letter that Christ is greater than any angel. Angels are created beings. Jesus Christ is uncreated, co-equal to God the Father.

When we consider the universe, one of the questions we must ask is this, "Why is there cosmos and not chaos?" The Christian geneticist Francis Collins tells of how the outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins had admitted to him during a conversation that "*the most troubling argument for nonbelievers to counter is the fine-tuning of the universe.*"

What Dawkins meant was this: if the constants in the universe were set just a little differently, the universe would not work. These constants include things such as the behavior of matter and energy, gravity, and the speed of light. These things must be precisely right for life to exist as we know it. Collins says, *“To get our universe, with all of its potential for complexities or...any kind of life form, everything has to be precisely defined on this knife edge of improbability. That forces a conclusion. If you are an atheist,...it is just a lucky break,...the odds are so remote.”*

This is why, in recent years, there has arisen a new discipline in science known as *“Intelligent Design.”* Essentially the Intelligent Design folk are saying that the universe is ordered and structured in such a way to suggest that it has design and purpose. It cannot be explained merely by chance, accident. Atheist and unbelieving scientists react with antipathy to this argument, but the burden is upon them: the *intelligence* of the universe is undeniable.

As Christians, we say that the reason there is cosmos and not chaos is because the universe reflects the mind of Christ. Christ stands behind the universe. He gives it order and meaning. The precision of the universe is a reflection of the wisdom and providence of God.

This is an important point. The modern secular world places its faith in the concept of an impersonal universe, governed by time and chance. The accidents of the Big Bang and Evolution being the only explanation as to how the world has become what it is. The faith of the secular world is in blind chance, dumb luck. The world of secular universities and government mandated education has no explanation as to why there is cosmos and not chaos in the universe. In contrast, as Christians, we know that behind the universe stands a person, Jesus Christ. The power and purpose of God is the reason there is intelligent design in the ordering of the universe.

Paul also tells us; not only is Christ the creator of the universe, but he also sustains it. The world was made by his command and it continues to exist because of his sustaining will. This is in contrast to the false theology of Deism. The Deist God is a clockwork God. The Deist sees God as creator, but not sustainer. The idea is that God created the world, established the physical laws mentioned previously, and then walked away. For the Deist, God gets things started, but then leaves the world to run on its own. God sets the stage, but mankind writes the play. The error of Deism is its belief that God does not remain interested in the world he has made and its thinking that the world could continue to exist independently of God’s sustaining power. Contrary to what Deists believe, if God walked away from the universe, the universe would cease to exist.

Jesus Christ is the image of God, existing prior to creation. Creation is *in* Christ, *through* Christ and *for* Christ. Jesus Christ not only created all that is; he also sustains creation. Next, Paul tells us that Christ is the head of the church.

Jesus Christ is the head of the church

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church.

Note how easily Paul moves from the created order, the universe, to the reality of the church. Jesus Christ is the creator of the cosmos **and** he is the head of the church. These two statements stand side by side for Paul. They are of equal weight and gravitas. Not only is Jesus Christ the creator of all that is, he is also the head of the church.

Jesus Christ has created and sustains the vast cosmos that is the universe. The question that naturally follows is this: What is creation's purpose? What is God about in the unfolding of time and history in the world he has created? The juxtaposition of Paul's comments suggests that the meaning and purposes of God in creation find embodiment in the work of the church. Of all the institutions, events and realities from human history that Paul might have named, he names the church. It is not an exaggeration to say that the church of Jesus Christ is God's instrument for the unfolding of his purposes in human history.

Many modern people mistakenly believe that the unfolding purposes of life are revealed through politics. For many, politics and a progressive agenda are their substitute for religious faith. Jill Abrahamson, the former editor of the New York Times has said: *"In my house growing up, The Times substituted for religion, if The Times said it, it was the absolute truth."* Hers was a family that placed its faith in a newspaper, and not in Christ. I believe that some of the emotional turmoil that has followed our recent presidential election is a consequence of people's misplaced faith in the power and importance of the political arena. If you place your faith in a political candidate, a political party, or a progressive agenda, then your faith is dealt a serious setback if the election does not go your way. People place their faith in all sorts of beliefs and individuals. People choose someone or something other than Christ all the time. We believe that Christ is Lord of all. And, we know that his preeminence is not uncontested.

Jesus Christ is the head of the church. Jesus Christ is at work in our world through the church. Paul also uses the image of the body. On one hand, this suggests that the church is Christ's body at work in the world. What the church does, it does in Christ's name, as his agent. We often reaffirm this truth in our celebration of communion. In the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, we pray *"As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world."*

On the other hand, the imagery of the human body also emphasizes the organic unity Christ and his people share. A body is one. It is dependent upon the various parts of the body working together to find completion. The union of Christ to his church is an important affirmation in our world today. There are those who mistakenly seek to be Christian without being part of Christ's church. That is not possible. One cannot have Jesus and not have the church. It was the church father, Cyprian, who first articulated it succinctly, saying, "There is no salvation outside the church." Jesus declares, in Matthew 16:18, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. What Jesus is doing in our world, he is doing in and through his church.

This is not to suggest that the church is perfect or infallible. It is not. The church is made up of sinners. Only sinners gather for worship each week here at Fairview Presbyterian Church. We have our weaknesses, errors and failings. At the same time, the church is Christ's chosen instrument. He works in our world through the worship and ministry of the church.

Jesus Christ is the image of God, existing prior to creation. Creation is *in* Christ, *through* Christ and *for* Christ. Jesus Christ not only created all that is; he also sustains creation. Christ is the head of the church and it is through the Church that Christ is at work in our world. Next, we are told that Jesus Christ is our hope of future resurrection.

Jesus Christ is our hope of future resurrection

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

The New Testament divides history into two ages: 1) the present evil age and 2) the age to come. Jesus Christ's resurrection actually belongs to *the age to come*. This is what Paul means when he refers to Christ as *the firstborn from the dead*. Christ's resurrection heralds the age to come. The fact of his resurrection is the down payment, the promise, that the age to come will, in fact, one day arrive. In the previous point, I emphasized the organic unity between Jesus Christ and his church. It is his body. We are in Christ. Our union with Christ provides for us the promise that just as he has been resurrected from the dead, so too we will one day see a comparable resurrection of our body. If we are in him, then we shall be raised like him.

The theologian Bruce Springsteen sings,

Well now, everything dies, baby that's a fact;
But maybe everything that dies, some day comes back.

Life is not fair. Everyone dies. Some are blessed with long lives. Some are not. Some experience great blessing and success in life. For others, life is a vale of tears and sadness. The world is not as it should be. In the face of life's challenge and sadness, the question is: Is there a hope? Is there a better world coming? Will there be a reunion with those we love in the age to come? The teaching of the New Testament is clear: those who are in Christ have the hope of his resurrection in the age to come.

Jesus Christ is the image of God, existing prior to creation. Creation is *in* Christ, *through* Christ and *for* Christ. Jesus Christ not only created all that is; he also sustains creation. Christ is the head of the church and it is through the Church that Christ is at work in our world. Jesus Christ is our hope of future resurrection. Lastly, by Christ's sacrificial work and according to his purposes, all things will one day be reconciled.

By Christ's sacrificial work, and according to his purposes, all things will be reconciled

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

There are several things unfolding in these verses. First, Jesus Christ is preeminent because in him the fullness of God the Father dwells. Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity. All that God is, is found in Christ. Nothing of deity is lacking in Christ. If you wish to know what God is like, look to Jesus Christ. If you wish to know God, know Jesus Christ. The pathway to God is through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Why does Paul tell us this truth? Popular belief in the ancient world taught that between the world proper and the pure essence of God, there was a vast array of spiritual beings who were intermediaries. Read the church father Irenaeus' book *Against the Heresies* and you will find yourself lost in a bewildering maze of gods, demigods, spirits and forces. Declaring that in Jesus Christ dwells all the fullness of God enables Paul to succinctly make clear that all the Gnostic nonsense so common in the ancient world was of no spiritual value or help. What matters is Christ, Christ alone. Christ's presence in our world, as the fullness of God, means that these spirits are not intermediaries between God and man. The pathway to God is through Christ.

The gnostic temptation to crazy spiritual beliefs continues unabated in our modern world. New Age spirituality, Tarot cards, crystals, astrology, pursuit of human potential, seeking higher consciousness, astral projection, pyramids, and so on are simply the modern world's Gnosticism. In addition, any time that a religious teacher says of Jesus Christ that he is "one among many" – one prophet, among many (Islam); one god, among many (Hinduism); a great teacher, among many (Popular Religion) – they are guilty of false teaching, of false belief. Jesus Christ is not merely one among many. In him is the fullness of deity. To teach anything else is to teach error.

The other emphasis at work in these verses is Paul's emphasis upon Christ dwelling in our midst in order to reconcile us to God. God the Father was pleased that his God-ness would dwell in Christ *and* he was pleased that in Christ the world would be reconciled to himself. God takes interest in the world. He delights in the world he has created and sustains. All things were created by Christ. All things are sustained by Christ. And, all things need to be reconciled by Christ. Creation is not as it should be. You and I are not the people whom we should be. In this, there is an *already* and *not-yet* element to Christ's work of reconciliation. On one hand, Christ, through his birth, life, death and resurrection, has made reconciliation. This is a spiritual truth available and real today. Men and women can turn to Christ. In him they will find forgiveness and new life. Those who turn to Christ receive the hope of heaven. At the same time, as Paul puts it in Romans, *we wait eagerly* for the full redemption of creation. We hope for the day when there will be an end to the reality of decay and death, when accidents, natural disasters, and disruptions will be no more. For now, the universe is in conflict with the creator.

Creation is good. Christ came, not to judge the world, not to condemn the world, but to reconcile it. To reconcile means to change things. Christ changes things. The world is different today because of the advent of Christ. Enmity becomes friendship. The disorder characterizing creation will be done away with. There will be a renewed, redefined universe

Close

Abraham Lincoln, at an official reception during the Civil War, spoke kindly of the Confederacy, the Southerners, as erring human beings and not as foes to be exterminated. An elderly lady rebuked the president for speaking kindly of the enemy, insisting that they should be destroyed. Lincoln replied, "*Why, madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?*"

Paul tells us that Christ came *making peace*. Jesus Christ came to heal the breach between God and man. He came not to destroy God's enemies, but to make them his own. In John 3:16, Jesus declares, ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. There was enmity and division between God and man. Yet God loved the world. He loves those who are his. He was not content to leave the enmity and separation as the last word. God determined to make peace. In the coming of Christ, peace was made.

Where are you this day my friend? Do you see the greatness of Christ? Have you acknowledged the reality of your sinfulness? Do you comprehend the gap that stretches between yourself and God? Do you realize that there is nothing you can do to bridge that gap? Attempting to do so is like trying to pole vault the Grand Canyon. It cannot be done in your own power.

But there is hope. There is a path to God. That path is the person and work of Jesus Christ. I am inviting you to Jesus Christ today. Trust in him, and not in yourself, or your own goodness. Embrace Christ. He will forgive you your sin and he will give to you his righteousness. Embrace Christ in faith and believe on him.

Say "Amen" Somebody!

Colossians 1:15 – 20

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. **16** For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. **17** And 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, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. **19** For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, **20** and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.