

Colossians 1:13-22

Picture of Jesus

The first thing you see when you come into our church is the picture of Jesus on the wall just inside the front door. I've always wanted to nail a plaque beneath it that says "Our Founder." It is a famous painting: it and others you've seen of Jesus standing at the door and knocking, and Jesus at Gethsemane- all by the same artist- have sold billions of reproductions. And no doubt, they affect our understanding of who Jesus was- not just how we might think he looked, but what he was. We have a particular image of Jesus because of this painting and others like it: he looks like us, which is a comforting concept; but also a troubling one, in that he can become too much like us, and too much unlike persons different from us; and thus, he is *our* Lord, we are the ones, we may believe, with deepest insight into the person and character of Jesus.

The painting and the mental image we have of Jesus are possible because of this scripture, and a few similar ones in the New Testament, which tell of the eternal Son of God, Lord over all the universe, creator and heavenly superpower. This picture we have in our minds emphasizes the otherworldly, cosmic, spiritual Christ, and so, divorces Jesus from his earthly ties and de-emphasizes the man

who was the mystic prophet of Galilee. I am not saying that Jesus as the “image of God,” “first-born of all creation,” “before all things,” “sustainer of all things,” is untrue, but that it is not the place to start with Jesus. It is not where the apostles and the first followers of Jesus started.

For the past seven weeks of sermons, I have been trying to deal with origins and starting places, vantage points from which to see what faith is and where our faith begins. But this isn't one of those places. Here rather is a formula about Jesus as “All-Powerful Christ” that developed over a period of time, decades at least. It is not an original image of Jesus within the faith community, but an idea that came later as the early church confronted political and social environments that were often hostile, and tried to express their faith in God and God's Son as they faced the traditions and legends of other gods. In fact, it is likely that verses 15-20 began as a hymn to a pagan god, or to some nameless force or ultimate entity existing before and above the gods, and worshipped as creator and first cause. And then adapted by the early church as a confession of Jesus, understood now as God: Jesus the Christ, God's Son, the unknown entity and creative force

now given a name, and believed to be mighty and present, and loving and forgiving.

Thus, here is the confession of the believers at Colossae, those Gentiles and Roman Jews trying to make sense of the divine man they had never met. This is basically our confession of him, as well. With the best intentions we speak of how remarkable he must have been, how unsettling his gaze, his physical and spiritual stamina, his strength of character, his authority over earthly rulers and demonic legions and even the great angelic armies: thrones, dominions, principalities, and authorities (verse 16). But this is not where we start with Jesus; it is not where he started with himself. Let's remember, rather, what Jesus told the missionaries as he sent them out (Luke 10), to present God's Kingdom to the people as they healed and spoke the word of peace. Let us recall the message of Pentecost, and the sacrificial life of fellowship experienced by the new community in Jerusalem. Let's think back to God calling and making covenant at Mount Sinai, and the beginnings of Israel as God's people. And so, understand that in this reading is a theology that grew out of those smaller beginnings in the dusty villages of Galilee; and increased within the ranks of the scorned and persecuted outside the main-

stream of Judaism; the movement that expanded among the second tier of religions throughout the Empire for those two hundred, and more, years of its history. And here is how it could attain to the first tier, to perceive its Lord as the God over empires, the God of all the world, the Creator and God of the universe.

We believe this about him, but it is not the starting point; it is not at the heart of what Jesus taught; and truly it is not what Jesus thought of himself: read again his temptations in the wilderness. This confession of him in Colossians is a word about Jesus for that community and for that time: a word for their encouragement and their comfort, a word to inspire real conversion and commitment, to turn them from gods who were no gods at all, from fear, and into whole-hearted faith in this one who is God's beloved and Savior; himself Divine-Creator, Perfect and Almighty over all the world.

This is the gospel they needed to hear. It may be also a theology that we cherish, but is it the gospel we still need to hear? In this world of such despair and danger- here for consecutive weeks we come to church weighed down sharing the world's sorrow at violence done to the innocent. How do we make sense of it? How can we help our neighbors make sense of it? By starting at the

beginning, with the message of peace, and going forth to speak hope and to heal. By making certain everyone we meet knows that the Jesus we serve is Lord and help to the poor and lonely; who calls us to the true God of love, and brings peoples together in the unity of kindness and compassion. In such a turbulent world should we not emphasize Jesus of Nazareth, the man who shows God to us and joins us to God the Father, and who proclaims God's love and forgiveness. Let's get that picture of Jesus to the forefront of our minds and hearts and faith. In our world, that is the Lord who will create faith in all who hear of him.

Look, in this passage, with its elevated tone, and exalted theology, even here it cannot omit the core message of Jesus' gospel: God reconciling all things, and all people, through Jesus, and God making peace by the sacrificial life of Jesus. Isn't that what we want our faith to be, making friends and making peace? Then, if we will, we can have reason for hope, and we can gather here giving thanks for it, and rejoicing that he has made God known to us.

Now, this passage is good news for us- we've lived with it all our lives. But for many people out there this is just the same old, tired word of religion, when what

they want to know is what we will do with this word to make the world happier and more just. And that can never happen by trying to prove my faith is better than yours, by debate or by punishing and killing those who disagree; but rather, by following Jesus' way of living out the gospel: living for others, loving our neighbors, and making peace.

The epic message of scripture is the story of people finding and re-finding God, and seeing God's relevance for their times, and God's mercy in their hurt and fear. In this letter to the Colossians is a new version of the continuing story. And as well, in this moment may truly be a new beginning and a new story for us, in this age where people are searching for answers that the old faith may not give them. It is an opportunity to hear the gospel anew, and to gain a new vision of our Lord, to live in a brighter light, and to live out God's word of grace that is hope for all the world.

So, if the gracious God is reconciling all things to himself, making friends of those who formerly were disbelievers and even enemies, then our task is simple, to demonstrate the good news of peace and fellowship and healing. By humble acts of caring, to let people see this picture of Jesus, the Lord who is for them.

