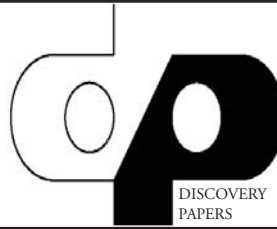


WAITING IN PEACE FOR CHRIST

SERIES: WAITING FOR CHRIST



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Colossians 1:15-23
3rd Message
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My family and I recently watched the movie *Invictus*. It tells the story of the South African rugby team winning the 1994 Rugby World Cup. It's a remarkable story, but the movie is about far more than rugby. In 1948, a system called apartheid was put into place in South Africa where the majority non-white population of the country was ruled by a small minority of white people. Segregation was established and enforced. Nothing was equal: white people enjoyed much better services than anyone of color.

The resistance to this system became increasingly violent and finally, in 1994, South Africa held open democratic elections where whites and blacks were both allowed to vote. Nelson Mandela, one of the earliest voices against apartheid who had recently been released from prison was elected president. He began his presidency talking about his dreams to create "a rainbow nation."

There's a scene in this movie where it starts off with Nelson Mandela's bodyguards, who are, of course, all black. Some white security officers (SAs) enter the room under orders to join Nelson Mandela's black security force. These are two groups of men, who just weeks prior, were sworn enemies. This scene depicts Nelson Mandela telling the importance of working together and forgiveness regardless of skin color.

This is an inspiring movie. The ideas are powerful. Nelson Mandela spent 28 years in prison. He is released and elected president. Immediately, he is ready to forgive the people who locked him away for almost 3 decades. You can see from this clip how hard that forgiveness was. If the tension within his staff is so strong, how could he possibly repair the country? How can two groups that hate each other come together as one?

These are questions that people in our world are asking and it is the question that we are asking this morning. How can we have peace in our world? Today begins the third week of Advent. This Advent we are thinking about what it means to wait for the return of Christ. As I've been saying, Advent means "coming", but Advent isn't already the coming that already came, it's about the coming that is yet to come. Our theme this week is peace, so we're

asking the question how we can wait for Christ in peace.

On Thursday afternoon of Thanksgiving, I had to run a quick errand and I drove past Best Buy over on Charleston. It was only about 3:00 PM and there were already ten or so tents of people who were waiting for the Black Friday sales to open in 15 hours. The next day I read news stories of people cutting in line, lying about how long they'd been there, and doing pretty much anything they could to get in front of others. We don't wait peacefully.

We're starting our series in Colossians as an Advent series and we'll finish it up later in the spring. The passage we're looking is Colossians 1:15-23. This passage has peace as one of its major themes. But it's not so much personal peace. It's not peace, like "Oh, I'm so stressed out from all my Christmas shopping ... I wish I could have peace during this busy season." That's an important kind of peace, but it's not what Paul spoke about in this passage. This peace is more like the peace that we eventually see develop between the white and black guards in Nelson Mandela's presidential security force. It's the peace of two groups of people who were sworn enemies, coming together as friends. That's the kind of peace we're talking about this morning.

Our passage is all about Christ. One of the things Paul said about Christ is that he brings peace. As we read it, we'll find out why he is qualified to bring peace. We'll see how he goes about bringing peace to the world. And we'll see how that brings peace to us individually. Our sermon is like that TV commercial that starts out with a view of the earth and then zooms in, farther and farther until you get down to a single person. We'll start talking about Christ on a cosmic level, zoom closer and closer in, until we see Christ in our individual lives.

Christ Is Supreme over Creation

Verses 15-20 of Colossians chapter 1 is one of the most elevated descriptions of Christ in the New Testament. It

is beautiful poetry: there are parallel phrases, repetition, metrical lines, and plays on words. I can't say enough about how important this section is to the book of Colossians. These six verses are the heart of this book. They are the chocolate chips in the chocolate chip cookie, the cookie dough in the cookie dough ice cream, the pepperoni in the pepperoni pizza. Without this section, Colossians would not be what it is.

Everything leading up to this passage is preparing us for this passage and everything after it flows out from it as implications to this truth. You could spend years studying these six verses and never get to the bottom because they are about Christ. Some scholars think that this was an early hymn that Paul adapted and modified to make his point in Colossians. Others think that Paul wrote the whole thing himself. Whatever is actually true, Paul is saying some incredibly rich things about who Christ is in this passage. We'll look at these six verses in 2 sections. Let's start by reading the first half.

Colossians 1:15-17:

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

There is so much going on in this passage. It's like trying to describe a sunset. Any one of these phrases could inspire an entire sermon. Paul starts by describing Christ's relationship to God. He said Christ is the image of the invisible God. The Greek word for image, *eikon*, is familiar to us. The very word brings up a lot of associations. Plato said the universe is the image of God. Moses said man is made in the image of God. Paul said that we were being transformed into Christ's image. Here he says that Christ fully and completely represents God.

Then Paul used another powerful word, *prototokos*, translated "firstborn." Some people confuse this word to mean that Christ himself was created. But the word refers to your ranking in the family, not whether you were born. To be the firstborn in ancient culture is to inherit all the responsibility in the family. Christ is preeminent

over creation. He is supreme. He is the highest ranking one. Nothing anywhere is higher than Christ. Christ is supreme over creation.

There are not a lot of committed atheists in our culture. Most people look at creation and say they have some vague belief in some kind of God somewhere that must have something to do with all of this somehow. Paul made that point in Romans: that creation displays the attributes of God. But the emphasis here is different. We are challenged not just to recognize how creation shows us that God exists, but to look for Christ in creation. Look for the hand of Jesus, the Christ in the universe. Look for Christ in Creation.

A few weeks ago, some scientists in Switzerland made a major breakthrough in this effort. They managed to create and trap 38 atoms of antimatter long enough to study them extensively. Antimatter is kind of like your evil twin on a molecular level. It's the opposite of regular matter. Oh, and anytime matter and antimatter touch, they instantly destroy each other. That's why it hard to get your hands on antimatter.

But these scientists did, and people all over the world are very excited about this. Headlines are saying things like "Trapped Antimatter Could Help Spill Universe's Secrets." Reading stuff about antimatter is just like reading science fiction. Normal, intelligent people with letters like Ph.D. after their names start talking about time travel, alternate universes, the secret to the universe, and other stuff straight from Hollywood.¹

People are excited about this because antimatter clearly has a lot to do with how the universe works and what is going on behind the scenes, but no one really understands it yet. They hope that if they can get a grasp on antimatter, then it will unlock something that will explain everything else. This could be the piece of the puzzle that we are missing. Figuring it out will make everything else make sense. That's what Paul said about Christ here. He is the secret behind the creation of the universe.

Paul explained the secret behind the universe by using three little words to describe how Christ relates to creation. These words are important because they show up again in the next section. The NIV messes things up a bit because there are three different words, but it translates two of them using the same word. In verse 16,

the NIV says, “by him all things were created” and then at the end of the verse, “all things were created by him and for him.” A better translation would be “in Him all things were created,” and then at the end of the verse, “all things were created through him and for his sake.” So everything that has been created is created “in Christ,” “through Christ,” and “for the sake of Christ.”

But what does that mean? Everything is created “in Christ,” “through Christ,” and “for Christ?” It means that Christ really is at the center of this universe. That everything everywhere has to do with him. It means that this leaf is created in Christ. Christ is the mechanism that God used to create this leaf. And God created this leaf for the sake of Christ. Everything you see has to do with him.

One of the things this means for us is that this entire world is drenched with the person of Christ. There is no divide between religion and politics or professional life or ethics or family. There is no part of your life where Christ is not a part of things. When you go to work and sit in your office or cubicle, everything you do has to do with Jesus Christ, whether you are programming, building, administrating, seeing patients, or whatever. When you stop around noon to eat lunch and you have a salad on your plate—that lettuce was created in Christ. It was created through Christ. It was created for Christ’s sake. He is everywhere.

The next statement I want us to notice is even more amazing. Paul said in verse 17 that “in him all things hold together.” What does he mean by this? Most of us don’t think this way about creation. We think that God created the universe according to certain material rules and properties and it just kind of runs. An analogy is that of a watch-maker. God created the universe like a watch, wound it up, and it runs according to the rules that God set up to govern it. We probably also believe that God sometimes steps in. Sometimes when someone is sick, he steps in to heal them. Sometimes he orchestrates events a little more closely. God isn’t just a watch-maker; we think of Him as a tinkering watch-maker. He made the watch, let it run and every now and then he tinkers with it.

But this passage says that if that’s what we think, we’re dead wrong. This passage says that God is more like the creator of an orchestra than a watch-maker. He has assembled everything, started it going, and he has placed Christ as the conductor. The orchestra is playing—all

the parts are working together, but only because they are following Christ. If he lets his arms drop to his side, everything would fall apart. The whole thing would stop.

This is incredible. Paul is said that if Christ were to stop doing whatever it is he is doing, everything in the universe would explode. The universe would literally fall apart. Scientists are actually aware that there is some kind of force holding the universe together. Some think its something called the “weak force.” I tried to do a bit of research on this so I could use it as an example, but I came across statements like, “The weak interaction affects all left-handed fermions and right-handed anti-fermions. It is the only interaction capable of changing flavor.”² So I quickly gave up hope of saying something intelligent about what physicists think holds the universe together.

But Paul wasn’t talking about physics here—he wasn’t talking about how the universe is held together, he’s talking about who is doing the holding. Who is making the flavor changing weak force do its stuff? It’s Jesus Christ. The traditional conflict between religion and science is a distraction from the real issues. Theology and Physics are asking completely different questions. No wonder they’re getting different answers. Leave it to physics to tell us the how. But Christ is the who.

Remember our movie about South Africa? One of the things that the people who established apartheid claimed is that white people were created in order to rule over non-white people. In order to justify their system, they go back to creation. Going back to the beginning is important in any argument.

So Paul went back to creation in order to explain Christ’s role in the universe. He said that Christ holds everything together. We’ve thought about what this means on a molecular level, but what about a social level? Have you ever hosted a get together with groups of people from different parts of your life: work friends, family, school friends, and church friends? You feel like you’re trying to pull people together and it’s difficult.

In South Africa, they created apartheid in order to keep people apart. The goal was segregation. But Christ’s goal is integration. Nelson Mandela’s challenge was figuring out how to hold all the different people in his country together, peacefully. Christ has the same challenge on a much bigger scale: holding together everyone, everywhere in peace. Some groups of people are like matter and

anti-matter: they destroy each other immediately upon contact. How do you hold them together? How do you create peace? This is where Paul went next.

Christ Is Supreme over Redemption

He began by asserting that Christ is supreme over creation. Next, he continued talking about supremacy, but over a different sphere.

Colossians 1:18-20:

¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

The first section of this hymn claims that Christ is supreme over creation. Now Paul brought in the topic of redemption. The first section began by showing how Christ is related to God: he is the image. This section begins by saying how Christ is related to the church: he is its head. Christ and the church are one. He is the head, she is the body.

Then Paul used the same word to say that Christ is the *prototokos* or firstborn from among the dead. He is preeminent over everything that is created and he is preeminent over everyone that is redeemed. He is the big brother to all of creation and he is the big brother to all of redemption. Then Paul summarized his point: “in everything he might have the supremacy.” Christ is supreme over creation. He is supreme over redemption. He is supreme over everything. Do you understand my claim that this is one of the strongest passages about Christ in the entire New Testament? What more can you say about him?

So Paul said that Christ is at the center of redemption. If something can be fixed, it can only be fixed in Christ. If the universe can be repaired, it can only be repaired

in Him. So our challenge then is to look to Christ as the only one who can redeem. Look for Christ to redeem.

I’ve said before that one of the most difficult things about following Christ in our culture is the idea that only Christ can redeem. That he is somehow unique on the menu of world religions. But here Paul said that redemption comes through Christ. There’s a beautiful parallel between how Paul talked about creation and how he talked about redemption.

In this section, he used the same three Greek prepositions we looked at in the previous section. The NIV translates it, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself” (vs. 19-20). This time the NIV shows that these three words are different. Paul made the same point here about redemption that he made earlier about creation. It’s all about Christ. God’s fullness dwelt in him just as everything was created in him. God reconciled the world through him just as God created the world through him. And God reconciled the world to Christ just as everything was created for the sake of Christ. This last one is a bit different when it’s translated, but the underlying Greek word is the same.

Paul’s point is simple: Christ is the only one who redeems because Christ is the only one who created.

Think of it this way. Let’s say I find a watch that’s broken. I really want to fix this watch. I know that if I could just get this watch working, it would be a beautiful thing—it would do more than just tell the time—it would be a piece of art. So I look around the find watch fixers. I find a bunch of different watch fixers. They all claim to be able to fix the watch. Each of them has a very different method, but they all say that they can get the job done. How am I to choose? I’d start by trying to understand each of their methods, trying to decide which one sounds most promising. But maybe it doesn’t matter who I choose. Maybe any of them would work.

Then I look at bit closer at the watch and I see some initials. I realize that one of these watch repairmen is not just a repairman, but the very one who created the watch. He made the watch in the first place. All of a sudden, my decision has become simple—it’s not even a decision anymore. He’s the one to fix my watch. It doesn’t matter what method he uses; I don’t care about that anymore. If he’s the one that made my watch, he’s the one that I’ll

trust to repair it.

The brilliance of what Paul did here was to bring the argument back to the beginning. Remember that the reason Paul wrote this letter was to challenge false teachers in Colosse. They said that Christ was a good start, but now it was time to move on to something more. We hear similar voices in our world: people who say that Christ is fine for you, but not for everyone. Paul began by saying that Christ had an exclusive role in creation. If that's true, then of course Christ is the only one who can redeem. If he was there at the beginning before everything was broken, then of course he's the only one that can fix it now. We think that its controversial to say that only Christ can redeem. But what's really controversial is to say that Christ took part in creation. Once you say that, it's no big deal to say that Christ is the only one that can redeem.

Paul said that God reconciled the world through Christ. He made peace through his blood. Christ made peace through his blood. We've talked before about how these Advent themes have become adopted by our culture and turned into ideas you might find on a hallmark card. Well, you wouldn't find this kind of peace on a hallmark card. This kind of peace came when a bunch of violent Roman soldiers hammered nails into the hands and feet of the one who had everything to do with creation and raised his body, dripping with blood up onto a cross, until the weight of his body forced him to suffocate an excruciating death. Put that on a "PEACE" sign at the mall. That's the peace of Advent. The war has ended between God and man because God's blood has been shed.

There's a great scene at the beginning of the movie *Invictus* where Nelson Mandela invites the captain of the national rugby team for tea. He talks about how important it is to unify the nation and how significant, a force, rugby can be for bringing people together. After the captain of the team has left, his wife asks him what the President wanted. He replies, "I think he wants us to win the world cup." Mandela wanted peace through rugby. That's a surprising choice. But can you imagine the interchange in heaven. Christ saying, "I think he wants me to die." God made peace through the blood of Christ. The one who created everything has to die. This is why we look for Christ to redeem.

Christ Is Supreme in Us

So Paul said some amazing things in this beautiful poem. He had said that Christ is supreme over creation. He had said that Christ is supreme in redemption. This is been deep theology. It's cosmic and supernatural. It all takes place on a much larger scale than we're used to dealing with. Most of us are more worried about whether we can handle Monday morning and the start of a new week than we are worried about the disruption in the created universe. So Paul followed this passage and brought it into our lives. He told the Colossians that this grand story of creation and redemption was their story. It also played out in their lives.

Colossians 1:21-23:

²¹Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²²But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—²³if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Paul said a lot here. He told the Colossians about their past, their present, and their future. He said that they used to be alienated from God. You don't get alienated from a stranger. You get alienated from your father. You get alienated from someone whom you used to have a relationship with, but that relationship has been broken. Paul said this alienation was severe: they were enemies of God.

Then he moved to the present with the words, "but now." Those are always some of the most hopeful words in all of Scripture. "But now." They almost always introduce something amazing God has done to intervene in the way things were headed. And that's the case here. The Colossians were enemies of God, but now God has done something remarkable. He has reconciled them.

The result of that reconciliation is described using

sacrificial imagery. Remember how Paul said that peace had been accomplished through the blood of Christ? He then went to the sacrificial imagery and said that this reconciliation meant that we could be given to God as “holy, without blemish, and free from accusation.” This is sacrificial language. Christ has become the sacrifice so that we can be counted as what Jesus was: holy, without blemish, free from accusation. What an incredible statement. We are free from accusation.

Then Paul gets to the future for the Colossians. He started with “once,” continued with “but now,” and now says, “if you continue.” The word he uses in Greek that is translated “if” is not a word that indicates doubt like our English word “if”—one scholar suggested that it be translated “provided that.” This is the future for the Colossians. This is how they will continue in their faith.

They will hold firm to their hope. This brings us right back to the first week where we saw that the basis of our faith is hope. And once again, this hope is proclaimed to us by the gospel. Paul pointed out to the Colossians that this was the gospel they heard in the first place. It was the gospel that Paul serves, it was the gospel they heard and it was the gospel that has gone out all across the world. The Colossians needed to be reminded of this because they were tempted to listen to false teachers that claimed to offer them something more. They were being told that the gospel was a good start, but now they needed to move on to the next thing.

We have to recognize this process at work in our lives. We have to know that the Christ who created the universe and reconciled the world to God is present in us. He is at work in our lives. He has taken us from being alienated to being reconciled and continues to sustain us toward the future. Our challenge is to keep looking for Christ. Not to turn to something else because we’re bored, but keep looking for Christ in us.

Earlier this week, Google released a new version of its Android operating system for smartphones. That version was 2.3 and it’s code named “Gingerbread.” But this same week, Google hosted an event where they announced the next next version of Android, code named “Honeycomb.” And if you think that Gingerbread was something to get excited about, wait until you hear about Honeycomb. I just think it’s fun to hear investors in starched suits getting excited over things like gingerbread and honeycomb. This is the kind of world we live in. There’s always something new on the horizon.

It’s so easy for us to take this kind of attitude into our relationship with God. Our tendency can be to want to grow up into bigger and better things. If you’ve been a Christian for any length of time, you feel the desire to go onto the next level. To power up. Graduate to the next grade. Get a graduate degree. We want the gospel 2.0. That’s what the Colossians wanted. That’s what the false teachers were offering.

This is one of the hard things about preaching. You want something new and I want to give it to you. I want to innovate, to tell you something you’ve never heard before. But preaching isn’t about innovation. You don’t need the gospel 2.0. You need Christ. I need Christ. We need to go deeper with the same gospel about the same savior that has been preached in the same way for the past 2000 years.

So when we are tempted to think that this isn’t working for us, or we need something more exciting, we need to remember to look for Christ here. Find ways to go deeper in Him. You might consider memorizing this passage: verses 15-20. This is what you need to know. It will be new and fresh to you each time you say it to yourself. We need to know Christ.

Conclusion

Invictus is a powerful movie. It’s inspiring to hear about what Nelson Mandela accomplished in South Africa. At the end of the movie, you see these same black and white guards, celebrating together. They’ve been reconciled, but that is only a shadow of what God is doing in the world. As Mandela tells his captain, forgiveness liberates the soul. But we’ve seen that forgiveness does so much more. It liberates the universe.

What Mandela did is inspiring and beautiful, but it is nothing compared to what Christ has accomplished in this universe. He was there at the beginning of creation. He took part in it. He was at its center. If there was a big bang, it was Jesus who lit the fuse. Because he was involved in creation, he is the only one who can take part in redemption. He is the one who redeems by shedding his blood on the cross. That redemption plays out on a universal cosmic scale, but it has also played out in our lives. We have been changed by this God-man. We have been reconciled to God. The war between us and God is over. We are no longer enemies. What brought

us together is not the victory of a rugby match, but the bloody defeat of a Roman crucifixion. That blood brought us peace.

Christ is the center of it all: the center of creation, the center of redemption, and the center of our lives. He is the only way we have peace with God and peace with each other. May we wait peacefully for him to return.

now, his love has erased your hate. The bloody death of his Son made it possible for your rebellion to be wiped clean. You can walk into God's presence without shame. There's no rebellion, no hatred, no guilt. Only freedom. As you continue to keep Christ alive in your life, you will keep looking forward. Nothing will allow you to forget about what God has planned for the world. You learned of it when you first heard God's story. That same story is spreading out to all kinds of people and places. It's that same story that I've given my life to serve.

Interpretive Translation by Paul Taylor

Colossians 1:15-23:

(15-20)

This Son makes the un-seeable God seen. He is the older brother to everything God made. God created everything to be a part of Christ: everything spiritual and everything material; everything we see and everything we can't see; and every authority in the universe from presidents and dictators to angels and demons. Christ helped God create everything. God created everything for the sake of Christ. Christ was around before anything else existed. Every molecule in the universe depends on his effort to stay in place.

This Son guides and sustains the church as the head does for its body. He was there at the first creation, and he is the older brother to the resurrected new creation. Christ really is supreme over absolutely everything. All the essence of being God was in Christ when he took human form. Christ made it possible for everything in the universe to be ransomed back to God. That way, the Son could bring peace between God and his entire creation, both earthly and spiritual. But this amazing peace came at a high price: the Son had to spill his own blood on a cross.

(21-23)

Long ago, you and God had a falling out. In fact you hated God because you knew that you had rebelled against everything he wanted for you. But

NOTES

¹Thair Shaikh, *Scientists Capture Antimatter Atoms in Particle Breakthrough*. (<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/11/18/switzerland.cern.antimatter/index.html?hpt=C1>)

²Weak Interaction (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weak_interaction)