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November 26, 2023
John 1:1-5 and Colossians 1:11-20
All Ready and Not Yet

Our scripture passage this morning is from the letter to the Colossians attributed to the apostle Paul. The church in Colossae, in what is now present day Turkey, was one of the early churches founded by Paul during his three-year ministry in Ephesus. Not too long after it was founded, the church began to struggle because of false teachings. One of the issues seems to be difficulty understanding the nature of Jesus Christ. Who is Christ and how is he to be understood in relation to God the Father? We first hear Paul's words of encouragement to the church and then proceed into what is thought to be one of the earliest hymns in the church, which beautifully relates the attributes of Christ. Listen with me to this word from God from Colossians 1: 11- 20.

Words of encouragement: May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Words from an early hymn about Christ: He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for 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. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He 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. For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and 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. Thanks be to God.**

“This is the final bit, thinning away to nothing. This is the end, according to Aristotle, what we have all been waiting for, what everything comes down to, the destination we cannot help imagining, a streak of light in the sky, a hat on a peg, and outside the cabin, falling leaves.”¹ So ends the poem *Aristotle* from former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins. And today we mark an ending as we recognize Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the liturgical year. Next week the season of Advent begins. We celebrate this Sunday with white paraments – just like on Easter Sunday – when we recognize that death does not have the last word and Christ reigns forever and ever. Already reigning and yet the kingdom of God has still not yet been realized.

¹ Billy Collins, “Aristotle” from *Picnic, Lightning*. 1998. The poem can be found online at The Poetry Foundation <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46706/aristotle>

And the question for us today is how to approach Advent as a people who already know that Jesus is King. As pastor and author Barbara Blodgett notes, one of our challenges as a people of faith is to “celebrate the multiple meanings of Christ’s identity: the same Christ who is hailed as king also suffers a cruel death at the hands of the state, and the same Christ who rules over all creation also enters the world as a vulnerable baby.”²

The promise, and the fulfillment of the promise, go hand in hand. We are in the land of the already and not yet. Jesus Christ has already come, the good news of his life, death, and resurrection is a reality. We are all invited to the Table to feast. Our sins have been forgiven. Death is no more. But the kingdom is not yet here. We look around at the scarred earth, the broken lives, the fear, the violence and bloodshed, the desire to win simply so someone else loses. And it seems no bright star can lead us to the already here Jesus.

Like us today, the early followers of Christ often had struggles in organizing themselves and responding to Christ’s call. The early followers lived in a polytheistic society – with many different religions and understandings of god. Each of these “*little g*” gods had different rituals associated with them, different ways to worship. Just what does it mean to follow the one born of such humble origins and then who died on a cross? For the faithful from Colossae who had not known Christ personally in Galilee or Jerusalem, their first challenge was to understand just who this Christ is that they were following. The letter to the Colossians gives us a glimpse of the early church and how Jesus was understood by those had not walked alongside him. It is the beginning of our theology of Christ – our Christology.

This is the time of the year when my email seems to fill up with lists. Everyone it seems had a list of Top Ten Black Friday Deals and where to spend Christmas and usher in the New Year. I spent way too long reading *Rolling Stone’s* Top 100 Best TV Theme Songs. I may or may not have been procrastinating on sermon writing. Spoiler alert – my two favorites – came in tied for #2 – *The Brady Bunch* and *Gilligan’s Island*. You can thank me now when they are running through your brains later today.

Rolling Stone contributing editor Rob Sheffield notes that, “*The Brady Bunch* and *The Ballad of Gilligan’s Isle* are the platonic ideal of what a theme song should be: catchy tunes that introduce the characters and tell you everything you need to know before watching. A lovely lady, a man named Brady, three girls, three boys — any questions? Seven castaways on an island — we good? That’s the principle behind all of the great premise-explaining cheat-sheet TV themes, from *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Odd Couple* to *Charlie’s Angels* and *The Six Million Dollar Man*. True, (lyricist) Schwartz ducked the question of why Ginger and the Howells packed 98 episodes’ worth of couture for a three-hour tour. ... Both of these TV themes epitomize the lost art of here’s-the-story opening credits.”³ (And just in case you are

² Barbara J. Blodgett Proper 29. Reign of Christ. Colossians 1:11-20. Theological Commentary. *Feasting on the Word* – Year C. Volume 4. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Eds.) Westminster John Knox, 2013. p328.

³ <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-tv-theme-songs-of-all-time-1234630913/tie-brady-bunch-and-gilligans-island-1234631072/>

curious about the number #1 TV Theme song – it is the deeply theological *Moving on Up* from *The Jeffersons*. Stay tuned for a sermon on the “deluxe apartment in the sky.”)

Now I have never thought of the apostle Paul’s writing as pithy, cut to the chase theme song, here’s-the-story type of writing. In fact, most of his writing is pretty dense. Scholars actually think this morning’s passage from Colossians was taken from one of the earliest hymns of the church. And like *The Brady Bunch* and *Gilligan’s Island* theme songs, this hymn is a teaching tool, a “Top 7 List” of who Jesus is – seven ways we understand Christ:

- 1) Christ is the image of the invisible God
- 2) the firstborn of all creation
- 3) all things have been created through him and for him
- 4) in Christ all things hold together
- 5) Christ is the head of the body, the church
- 6) in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell
- 7) through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to Godself to all things by making peace through the blood of Christ’s cross.

I don’t think it is a coincidence that those who selected the texts for Revised Common Lectionary placed this text just before Advent begins. What do we spend Advent doing? We anticipate the incarnation – the Word made flesh – the birth of the **human** baby Jesus. Or as we hear in the text from Colossians, “in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” The Greek word that Paul uses for fullness usually has a passive sense to it. To be rendered full. This concept of fullness has a sense of completeness- to be complete in every aspect – to make perfect. All the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. All the fullness of God. The divinity of God, whose Spirit hovered over the chaos, declaring creation good **and** God’s humanity in whose image we are created. All the fullness of God – God the sovereign in whose kingdom shalom – peace and justice rule and whose heart is broken when we humans fail to live into the promise of the kingdom. All the fullness of God – as we heard Sarah read from the Gospel of John: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.”

This is the tension of the transition from Christ the King Sunday to Advent. We want the sweet baby Jesus (if any of you have seen *Tallegdega Nights The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* - you know what I mean). We want the promise of goodness and light. But we don’t necessarily want to be living in the reality of what, as Rick Bobby says, “the grownup Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus”⁴ asks of us. To love our neighbor and pray for our enemy. To serve rather than be served. To beat our swords into plowshares. To side with the vulnerable and oppressed rather than those in power. To hold onto hope and faith and love when the world says that sarcasm and ego and self-preservation define us. To know that the kingdom of God is already here, and yet we have so much work to do make it happen.

⁴ <https://genius.com/Sony-pictures-tallegdega-nights-the-ballad-of-ricky-bobby-dear-baby-jesus-annotated>

Author Kathleen Norris in her book “*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*” writes about coming to a deeper understanding of her faith as an adult after being away from the church for many years. She says about her struggle, “I began to realize that one of the most difficult things about believing in Christ is to resist the temptation to dis-incarnate him, to not accept him as both fully human and fully divine.”⁵

Norris relates her struggle of understanding the paradoxes of the Christian faith – divine and human; flesh and spirit; faith and reason; last and first; servant and king; crucifixion and resurrection. She relates that it is in worship that she is able to feel Jesus’ hand in things. She says, “Just look around at the motley crew assembled in his name, myself among them, let’s me know how unlikely it all is. The whole lot of us, warts and all, just seems so improbable, so absurd. I figure that *only* Christ would be so foolish, or so powerful as to have brought us together.” As part of her journey, Norris visits a woman’s monastery where the sisters invited her to join them in their *in statio*, the community procession into church. As they process in, the sisters bow first to the Christ who is at the altar and then they bow to the partner who they walked in with – bowing to the Christ they see in each other.

This is the church. This is the “already and not yet” kingdom of God we inhabit. The church of the least and the not so least. The church of the feeders and the fed. The church of the thirsty and the ones who provide drink. The church of the ones who clothe and the ones who are clothed. The church of the stranger and the neighbor. This is the church of the **human** Jesus Christ – who was born in humility, surrounded by love; and who died as too many humans die – alone and in pain. This is the church of the **divine** Jesus Christ – the messiah, who healed not just body, but restored the sick and outcast to community; who conquered his human death, being resurrected to reign in power and glory with his Father. We crown him the Lord of Love. We crown him the Lord of Peace as we sang in our opening hymn.

This is the end. And this is the beginning. We can celebrate the promise of God made flesh – of God who chose to engage with us in the messiness of life because we know the end of the story. Jesus is King. His power has no end. He has already conquered sin and death. He has already made room at the table for all. He has already freed us, healed us and restored us. He has already invited us to be his body – the church - so that we might fully usher in his kingdom. The world is hushed, waiting for our answer. Are we ready?

I began my message by sharing the ending of Billy Collins’s poem *Aristotle*. I want to end my message by sharing the beginning of the poem as we head into Advent next week:

This is the beginning. Almost anything can happen. This is where you find the creation of light, a fish wriggling onto land, the first word of *Paradise Lost* on an empty page. Think of an egg, the letter A, a woman ironing on a bare stage as the heavy curtain rises.

Are we ready? Almost anything can happen. It already has, as we await the fulfillment of the promised kingdom. Amen.

⁵ Kathleen Norris. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. C.K. Hall, 1998; p 162-163.