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November 23, 2025
Colossians 1:13-20 (CEB)
Complete

A month ago we heard a passage from the second chapter of the letter to the Colossians. In my sermon I shared that the author of the letter highlights the mystery and majesty of Christ. The writing in this letter is lofty, imaginative, stirring, and seeks to strengthen the discipleship of believers. These believers were part of a young church, which not too long after it was founded began to struggle because of false teachings. Addressed to the faithful from Colossae who had not known Christ personally in Galilee or Jerusalem, the letter gives us a glimpse of the early church and how Jesus was understood by those who had not walked alongside him. It is the beginning of our theology of Christ – our Christology. Our text this morning addresses that issue, through what is thought to be one of the earliest hymns in the church, which relates the supremacy of Christ, the Son of God. Listen with me to this word from God from Colossians 1:13- 20 using the Common English Bible (CEB) translation.

The Son is the image of the invisible God,
the one who is first over all creation,
Because all things were created by him:
both in the heavens and on the earth,
the things that are visible and the things that are invisible.
Whether they are thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities,
all things were created through him and for him.
He existed before all things,
and all things are held together in him.
He is the head of the body, the church,
who is the beginning,
the one who is firstborn from among the dead
so that he might occupy the first place in everything.
Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him,
and he reconciled all things to himself through him—
whether things on earth or in the heavens.
He brought peace through the blood of his cross.

The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.

I want you to imagine with me that you are living in Colossae in middle of the First Century CE. The Lycus River Valley has been your family home for centuries, your ancestors a mix of Phrygian and Greek and Hebrew. Yes, this was one of places Jewish families were resettled from Babylon around 200 BCE. It is an interesting place to be raised, as lots of commercial traffic passes through this Phrygian Mountain valley that connects the important Asia Minor

centers of Ephesus on the western coast to Iconium and Tarsus in the southeast. Some people might think of this as flyover country, trying to get through the earthquake-prone region as fast as they can, but we do ok. Some people actually come to see the amazing monuments and arches, grottoes and cascades encrusted with chalk from the River Lycus and its tributaries. And we have some serious industry in the Tri-Cities of the Lycus Valley.

The big town is Laodicea, which is known for its textiles. Just up the road to the north is Hierapolis, famous for its medicinal hot springs and the manufacture of an expensive and exquisite purple dye. Oh yeah, and its temple to Apollo is on most travelers' bucket list. Where I live in Colossae is the other direction from Laodicea, to the southeast. We may be the smallest of the towns, but the purple wool products we are known for command a good price. The plus side of the volcanic ground is that the soil is great for pastureland. Our sheep had the softest wool, and the chalk in the river help make our dyes even more intense. We are often overshadowed by Laodicea and Hierapolis, with people forgetting about us. I understand, that millennia from now the ruins of Laodicea and Hierapolis are still visible, but there is nothing left of Colossae.¹ And I have to say it hurt our feelings a bit when one scholar said that we were the "most unimportant town to which Paul ever wrote a letter."²

But write a letter he did. A letter that has some of most beautiful language in scripture. And why did we warrant such a letter? Our community of Christ followers – you might today call us a church – was not that old. We were birthed, along with other churches in the area, as the message of Christ spread through Asia Minor. Although Paul had never visited us, he heard reports, that we had a strong spirit of love and care for each other and a deepening faith. Yes - there was much to celebrate in our ministry. And yes – there were a few issues that had popped up that threatened to push us apart and to cause us to leave the fold of believers. You see, we had a hard time understanding who Jesus Christ was in relation to God the father. Because Jesus walked on the earth, some in our community saw him as simply a Galilean preacher and teacher who was crucified as a criminal. Now most of us agreed that Jesus was an important figure and had a unique relationship with God. Jesus could be rightly called "Lord" and importantly, Jesus had the power to bring people into a right relationship with God. But where some people struggled was in understanding the *exact nature* of how was Jesus Christ was related to God. We agreed that he was unique, but how so?

So Paul, or one of his associates, wrote this letter to help us understand that Jesus was more than a man from Galilee. When we heard the letter read at a church meeting, we all sat in stunned silence: The Son – that is Jesus - is the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation. The letter goes on to share that Jesus is the one in whom all things were created, in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through whom all things

¹ The background on the area is adapted from Raymond E. Brown. *The Letter to the Colossians. An Introduction to the New Testament*. Doubleday, 1996. pp 599-600; and William Barclay. *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, Westminster Press, 1975; pp 91-96.

² Barclay quote of J.B. Lightfoot and William Barclay. *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, Westminster Press, 1975; p92.

were reconciled to God. The words were so beautiful, so poetic that we sometimes sing them.

You see the challenge for us – maybe you will understand – was that we lived in a world where the governmental rulers and authorities claimed they should be worshipped like a God – that they are gods, that they rule over every area of our lives. And every natural force – the wind and the rain and the sun and the lightning and the thunder were ruled by a divine force. So some of our teachers were claiming that Jesus was not supreme. He wasn't the ultimate sovereign. More was needed. Paul's letter invited us to see that Jesus is the beginning and the ending. All the fullness of God was pleased to live in him. All the fullness of God was in him.

Now that word you hear as "fullness" has a special meaning for us. In the Greek of the letter it is *pleroma*. It means to make full and to fill up. To be flooded – to be rendered full. It refers to both what is filled up (the container, the period of time) and what fills it up (the contents). Think about that.....The two are inseparable. The apple pie stuffed full of apples. Without the apples, there is no pie. With out the pie shell, there is no pie. It is complete. We understood. Jesus is fully God. Jesus is complete. And in his completeness, Jesus reconciled all things to God and he brought peace through the blood of his cross. This last phrase helped us understand that Jesus was fully human too, one whose human death on the cross completed the act of salvation.³

You might be asking how this understanding of Christ affected us. Did it change anything for us? We were living in a chaotic world, a chaotic time. That Christ reigned supreme gave us hope. There were a lot of places in our lives that need filling. In fact, when we looked around it was easier to see the emptiness than the fullness sometimes. The losses of freedoms and security, of jobs, ways of life, opportunities, God's beautiful creation, people that meant so much to us. We saw the holes where hope is leaking out; we saw erosion such that our faith in God and each other has leached out of the soil, leaving us withering in the storms – in the earthquakes that plague us in the Lycus River Valley.

Paul reminded us to take the long view. Christ reigns. Christ reigns with justice and mercy. Christ reigns with love and power. Christ's reign is for all people. And Christ is the head of the body, the church. These words more than anything shook me up. Whether the church is 20 or 2000 years old, we – the community of faith – the church are the vehicle for Christ's action in the world. It is the way by which Christ is still speaking and acting today. We are the hands and feet of Christ; we are the heart and voice of Christ; we complete Christ's mission. This is what our charge is ... to offer a word of encouragement to someone hungering for a purpose and complete the body of Christ. Clothe one who has wronged you with a cloak of

³ Johannes P. Louw, and Eugene A. Nida (Eds.) *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*; Mounce Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament; edited by William D. Mounce with Rick D. Bennett, Jr. Accessed through Accordance Bible Software. Version 13.3.4; OakTree Software; October 2022.

forgiveness and live the fullness of Christ. Serve a glass overflowing with acceptance for one who feels excluded and complete Christ's mission. Embrace the stranger who hides in plain sight and invite the stranger to experience fullness. We have been given the mandate and the power to bring the fullness of Christ's reign, to complete Christ's reign. And to do it in community, as a family of believers because together we complete Christ's body as the church. And the best part was that we celebrated this deeper appreciation of Christ by gathering around the table and sharing a meal and prayers and stories together. You might try that sometime, too. Join me in prayer.