

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
November 21, 2010
Colossians 1:11-20
“Jesus Is...”

My Pap loved to tell the story of my first birthday. He'd tell of how the family gathered to celebrate – singing happy birthday, watching home movies of my first year. Until someone noticed that several inches of snow had fallen, that is. I'm told of how the family made their frantic get-away – and my parents have added to the story the tales of each carload's adventuresome journey home. I'm always reminded that my maternal grandparents got lodged in a snowdrift, my grandmother finding that it was easier to walk the three remaining miles home in her stocking feet than her dress pumps. I'm also told that I cried in my mother's arms, so sad to see the people I love leave so suddenly, and not understanding why they all just couldn't stay.

I know that even as my Pap acknowledged my adulthood; even as he honored the shift in my role from care receiver to care giver – every time he looked at me he somehow caught a glimpse of that one year old girl, with wispy blond hair, reaching for them so that they wouldn't go.

It's amazing how our minds can do that – hold together different images of a person all at once. In the same instant, someone can look our way and see us as adult and child in the same breath. Those closest to us can often even see our greatest strengths and our most frustrating weaknesses at the same time, and still, miraculously love us – all of us – with their whole heart. Truth be told, the most accurate picture of a person is almost always fashioned when one can see a person through just such a lens – one that offers a view of many, sometimes paradoxical images simultaneously, all at once

The liturgical calendar invites us now to look at Christ through just such a lens. As the end of one church year comes to a close and we prepare to begin again with the Advent season, we are invited to hold together two, almost paradoxical images of Jesus at once. Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King where we remember that Jesus the Christ is the Lord of heaven and of earth. We likewise celebrate the reign of the kingdom that he ushers into this world – even as we acknowledge that the fulfillment of this kingdom is yet to come: a kingdom of justice, of liberation from oppression, of peace and of love.

This is the second time in the liturgical calendar that leads us through such an exercise, holding before us these two images of Jesus at once. We took such a look at Jesus on Palm Sunday, where we celebrated Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem just days before we remembered his death on a cross. It was as if we needed to remember his transcendent sovereignty, his powerful divinity, before we entered into the messy depth of his humanity.

Today, once more, the reality of Jesus as divine and Jesus as human are laid side by side. Next week begins Advent, a season of expectancy. We'll remember a full-bellied Mary and a rugged road to Bethlehem. We'll remember Elizabeth and Zechariah – and their story of a miracle before the miracle. We'll remember the hope and the promise of the prophets of old as we recall a grown up John crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" We know where this path will lead: to the stable birth of a baby whose birthday we long to celebrate over and over and over again.

But before we fix ourselves on the image of this humble, precious, beautiful baby, Paul holds out another image of Jesus: the "image of the invisible God – the firstborn of all of creation through whom all things in heaven and earth were created." This Jesus who was named Emmanuel, God-with-us, whom shepherds worshipped and who stooped to wash feet, is the one in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell that all might be reconciled to God through him through the blood of the cross."

Paul gives us a picture of Jesus that is more than we can fathom. This image of Jesus transcends the tangible, accessible realm of creation and provides a gateway to God's heart and God's domain. We get a picture of Jesus that is "**more-than**" – more than creation, more than heaven, more than death, more than *us* . . . and yet entirely God. Paul reminds us that even though God in Christ put on flesh and dwelled among us, *Jesus is God*. As much as we'd like to claim Jesus as our own, as one of *us*, it is *God's* heart beating within him – he fully embodies the divine intention of the triune Godhead – to create, to reconcile, to love.

But Paul hardly puts it in simple terms. The dogma in this Christ-hymn can be distancing and perhaps distracting – for it can make Jesus seem so far away, so *unlike us*, that it's hard to figure out what this means for us. How do we follow the "image of the invisible God"? We know how to follow a Jesus who heals and feeds, who teaches and loves, who takes naps on boats on stormy waters and wakes up to calm the seas. And we sure know how to love a little baby. But the image of Christ as the instrument of creation, holding all things together, the dwelling place for the fullness of God . . . well, that's a larger matter altogether.

It's easier for us when God enters OUR story; when God's power is conveyed in terms we can see and in language we can understand. And Paul in fact is not dismissing any of that. Yet Paul in his profession of faith is reminding us of all that is beyond our comprehension – of the awe-inspiring truth: That Jesus is one with God. That Jesus is Lord of Heaven and earth, of all that was, is and will be.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians was just trying to do what lots of folks have been trying to do since Jesus was born. He's just trying to put into words a complete, comprehensible answer to the pressing question: *Who is Jesus?* He's trying to sum up for the church this complicated reality of who Jesus is and why *he* is worthy of praise. In a religiously pluralistic society, and as an evangelist spreading the Gospel beyond the realm of Judaism, Paul invites others into discipleship by setting Christ apart from all other "gods." Even as he adds his own words to an ancient hymn he gives voice to the

uniqueness and sovereignty of Christ. Who is Jesus? Well, he is the one in whom all of God can be found, who reflects God's power, God's grace and God's love. If you want to know what God is like, if you want to grasp the mysteries of the Divine, just look to Jesus – for through him you will see all you *can* see in this life.

And our gospel writer lets us know that God's kingdom is unlike any we might imagine. It's a kingdom in which "the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:78-79)" This is a kingdom ruled by love where reconciliation overcomes estrangement; forgiveness overcomes sin; peace overcomes violence; new life overcomes death.

As 21st century Christians, we are often called upon to answer this question ourselves: ***who is Jesus?*** In a world where the things of Christ are often ignored or dismissed; consumed by the marketplaces of our world or distorted by fear and greed, we may be asked ourselves to define Jesus – for our neighbors, for those of other faiths, for those who don't believe in a God to begin with, for *ourselves*. Sometimes this question might be asked outright, but sometimes it is grounded in our internal response to our world and our community as a people of faith. We may be asked to respond in word or deed to the question of who Jesus is . . . for the poor; for the imprisoned; for those who are told they don't belong because of the color of the skin or because of who they love; for those seen as outcast for the amount of money they make, the language they speak or the name of their native land. We may be asked to figure out who Jesus is in an age of war and economic crisis, when Haitians are dying of cholera or when one we love more than our very selves lays sick and dying.

We are called upon in many ways to give voice to our faith, to express in word and in deeds how our beliefs in Jesus impact our daily lives. We do it all the time – when we say grace before a meal, when we visit someone in the hospital, when we take a stand for change. We do this through our Facebook status updates and by filling out pledge cards. We do this when we choose how to relate to another – to show acceptance, forgiveness, hope and love. We may even borrow Biblical language of light or shepherd; of teacher and friend. But even as we affirm him as a prophetic teacher, whose example is worthy of devotion and discipleship – many of us will say that the reason that we worship Christ in the face of all that brings us down and all that confounds our human existence is that ***we profess Jesus as Lord***. Sure, we might not like the word choice, **but we join with others who cling to the hope that somehow in Christ's embodiment of perfect love, all that wounds and injures will be brought to an end.** We cling to the hope of our faith that Christ's reconciling work is so transformative that not only will our personal sin be forgiven but that we will also be freed from the bondage of the sins that have been done against us. We cling to the hope that through the power of Christ's resurrection that not only have the sins of the world been forgiven but that Christ claimed an ultimate victory over death, once and for all.

We cling to the hope of our faith that Jesus was and is ***more than us*** – that *even* as he in his humanity understands our human frailty and need; that *even* as he in his living called

us to a prophetic way of life. We have confidence in a Christ who is uniquely ***one with God*** – one who alone can triumph over the powers of sin and death once and for all, where all other efforts fall short. We profess Jesus as Lord over a kingdom not made of human hands – a kingdom ushered in through the life of Christ, in which God’s love and mercy are made known; in which God’s topsy-turvy sense of justice will prevail; in which the weak will be strong, the first will be last, and none shall be afraid.

But this kingdom is not just that for which we wait. This kingdom is not relegated to the heavenly realm. Christ the King is *also* Emmanuel. As Jesus takes on human flesh he also ushers this kingdom vision into this world. He turns tables in our lives – inviting friendship with enemies; inviting outcasts to sit at table together as friends; inviting wholeness for those broken in body and in spirit. And he invites us into this kingdom way of life. He invites us as members of his body to introduce his kingdom in every act of care and mercy; every time we take a stand for those oppressed; every time we love in the face of hate; every time we hope in the face of doubt.

How do you answer the question: who is Jesus? I begin my answer by saying simply: Jesus is the embodiment of the fullness of God’s love and of its transforming power. And so in him will I put my hope.

Amen.