

March 29, 2020 | Sanctuary worship (livestream)

TEXT: [Colossians 1:15–17](#)

TITLE: **What Holds Us Together**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

[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.

It's that last phrase from vs. 17 that I want you to remember. "In Christ all things hold together." I've thought a lot about scripture lately—about how we communicate the gospel of Christ in our crazy, multi-tasking, sensory-overload world today. The bible is great, but sometimes it's just too big: too many words, too many verses, too much material to hold onto. Sometimes all you can handle is one phrase. In a time of crisis, what phrases come to mind? What comes to mind in dark places and hospital wards if you're alone or afraid? What do you remember when you step out on your own, when you bring a newborn child home for the first time? When we turn to the bible in those moments, often it is only short phrases that come to mind: "The Lord is my shepherd." "For God so loved the world." "I am with you always to the end of the age."

I suggest to you that these six words from Colossians should also come to mind: "In Christ all things hold together"—especially in this season of an invisible virus and looming uncertainties for the immediate future. And why do we need to remember this? Well, because it's true. In Christ all things, visible and invisible, hold together.

If you stop and think about it, a surprising number of things in life are invisible. These days we are focused on an invisible coronavirus that moves through the air and lingers on surfaces. But there are lots of other invisible things around us: gravity, oxygen, radio waves, ultraviolet light. In fact, scientists estimate that only 5% of the entire universe is observable. The rest is dark matter and invisible dark energy. In our daily lives, we prioritize that 5%—buildings, cars, bodies—until, of course, something invisible comes along to distract us. Invisible things unsettle and unnerve us because we're not used to something other than the 5% shaping our days. And even worse, this particular invisible menace has managed to literally tear us apart—isolate us and pull us back from one another.

So we find ourselves with two different stories competing for our attention: information about an invisible virus wanting to tear us apart, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God, in whom all things hold together. Both are true, but only one can be the thing upon which we stand and trust as we try to make sense of this world. So how do we move from fixating on the viral story to walking by faith and believing that short phrase from Colossians?

Well, when we think about the coronavirus, we are guided by people we trust: Johns Hopkins researchers, Dr. Fauci, the Center for Disease Control. In the same way, to know that in Christ all things hold together, we turn to trustworthy stories about Jesus that show us how his power and authority truly extend over realms both seen and unseen.

Here are two examples. On Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey in a way that was seen as fulfilling a prophecy from Zechariah about the long-awaited Messiah King. I'll talk more about this next week, but visibly Jesus did not look like a king. He wasn't wearing a crown. He wasn't riding on a war stallion or surrounded by an armored battalion of soldiers. Jesus was the opposite—humbly riding a donkey, cheered on by children and common folk waving branches. Yet in that procession, an invisible authority was present in him. The typical stories about kings were all rewritten that day—for this king's power came from on high; this king's authority was based on love and justice; this king's dominion didn't rely on a throne and soldiers, but on God's eternal plan to redeem the world. Invisible values of humility, love, justice, redemption were made visible by Jesus on Palm Sunday.

Later, on Easter Sunday, Luke tells how two disciples were downhearted and walking back to their home in Emmaus. The resurrected Christ appeared beside them, clearly visible yet unrecognized. So they trudged along together and Jesus talked, expanding the crucifixion story they carried inside them to reveal a larger story of a heavenly love made known through earthly sacrifice. And later, when they were at table together, Jesus transformed a simple dinner blessing into a moment when their eyes were opened and they recognized him as the risen Lord. The visible realm of flesh and blood and the invisible realm of Spirit and God's authority came together and was seen by them – so that they understood at last and rushed back to Jerusalem with the good news “We have seen the Lord!” Easter is the story about how the visible and invisible, earth and heaven, are one and it is Christ they holds them together.

The Palm Sunday and Easter gospel stories are important to us because they are foundational parts of our faith. Hebrews 11, in one of those other, short bits of bible wisdom, says *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Faith is an action of our heart—something welling up from the deepest part of our soul. It arises when we trust in something not seen, yet known to be true. It happens when we trust in someone other than ourselves and allow God to be God, welcoming Christ as the Christ, the reconciler of the visible and invisible worlds, the One who holds all things together. In that good news of faith, our eyes are opened too. We see beyond the 5% of this world, the limits of sight, sound, taste, touch and feel, and we discover peace in the 100% reality of our redeemer, Jesus Christ.

This is the first time I'm able to share with you a bit about my sabbatical in Barcelona. It was a wonderful experience for Beth and myself—the first time we'd ever visited Spain. Being there took some work on our part, since we were surrounded by a different culture and living in a city that predominantly spoke either Catalan or Spanish, neither of which we were fluent in. It is a heavily Catholic country with a strong veneration of the

Virgin Mary; and Barcelona is the capital of a Catalan culture that vividly remembers its time of power back in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. For eight weeks, my personal narrative as an American was not the dominant one. My comfort zone around how to communicate, what I'd find in grocery stores or watch on television were totally upended. I had to allow another story to shape my days and learn how to see something different, something invisible yet obviously present all around me.

Now that we are back home, I'm more aware of the fact that we all live, move and breathe in settings that are shaped by common stories—by and large, our American story. It is one that has both strengths and weaknesses. It values hard work, generosity, creativity, and equal rights. It also stumbles and struggles over issues like racism, ensuring justice for all, protecting the weak and vulnerable, and accepting a role as global partner on a vulnerable planet. All of that - the good and the bad—is our story here. But it is not the whole story. It is shaped too much by the 5% we see and not by the greater, invisible truths revealed to us in Christ.

Another story is offered to us this day. It involves a different language—a language of faith, not a language of self-sufficiency. It involves a different culture—a culture of humility and grace, not one of fearfulness or aggression. And it alone brings together things seen and unseen, the visible and invisible, thrones, dominions, and powers from ages past and for ages to come. It is the story of God becoming incarnate, of justice and compassion taking human flesh, and of how a love divine, all loves excelling conquers every illness, sin, virus and even death itself that we might have a lasting hope that nothing can defeat.

Maybe all this is too big a story to fully grasp and remember every detail by heart. But that's okay. What is most true can be captured in just a few words: The Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not want. I am with you always, even to the end of the age, says Christ the Lord. And, there are our six words from Colossians:

In Christ all things hold together. All things. Be not afraid, O people of faith.

AMEN