

Because of Hope

After five weeks of readings and sermons from Paul's Letter to the Galatians, we now turn to a very different letter from Paul, this one to the Colossians. We'll spend only four weeks with this shorter letter but return to it in November for a passage often associated with the celebration of Christ the King Sunday, just before Advent. I want to acknowledge as we begin my debt to two authors in particular in my work on Colossians. Once again, the excellent Word Biblical Commentary has provided a key volume, this one written by Peter T. O'Brien of Moore Theological College in New South Wales, Australia. And I have returned to my roots by reviewing in recent weeks one of the very few books I know of to be written by my old New Testament professor, the late Harold Songer: Colossians: Christ Above All. I am grateful for the work of both of these men.

The letter to the Christians in Colossae is different from the one to the churches in Galatia in several ways. The tone is quite different – we will find very little of pugnacious Paul in this letter. Paul's relationship with this church is not the same as his relationship with the Galatians and Paul himself is in a very different place in his life. The concerns which Paul is addressing in this letter are also quite different – there is little evidence that the Colossians are being targeted by the Judaizers that were plaguing the Galatians. Instead, there is a whole new set of questionable teachings being presented to them which Paul has been asked to correct. And the Colossians themselves are in quite different circumstances from their sisters and brothers in Christ from Galatia. In some ways, I find the situation and concerns of the Colossians to be much more similar to our own than those of the Galatians. I'll be talking a little about this today and in the weeks to come. This morning, I want to spend a little time on the background of this letter, insofar as we can know it, and on what we can surmise about the false teaching that the Colossians' pastor asked Paul to refute. Ultimately, as you might have surmised from the image on the front of your bulletin and from the hymns we've sung so far, I want to focus on Paul's words about what he described in his first letter to the Corinthians as the abiding gifts of the Holy Spirit: faith, love and hope.

But first, a few words about Colossae. I've included in your bulletins this morning two small maps of Asia Minor, the area that we now know as Turkey. The bottom map shows the majority of that great peninsula, separated from Europe at its northwest corner by relatively narrow strips of water and bounded to the west by the Aegean Sea and to the south by the Mediterranean. In the southeast corner of the peninsula, you will find Paul's hometown of Tarsus and to its southeast the Syrian city of Antioch, where Paul's missionary ministry was based. You'll also see a city named Antioch on the upper map at the far right but that is Antioch of Pisidia, one of the cities Paul visited and the first in which he preached to the Gentiles but not his base. Also on the upper map, you will see three cities nestled in the valley of the Lycus River: Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae. You will also see the larger river which the Lycus feeds, the Meander, so famous for its twisting, turning path that its name has come into English as a synonym for "wander." These rivers made Colossae an important stop on the trade route between Ephesus and the great River Euphrates to the east, which served the city of Babylon and gave access to the Persian Gulf.

As you might suspect, this made Colossae a large and wealthy city for centuries. The Greek historian Herodotus called it "a great city" in the fifth century BCE. But around by the time of Christ, the city had diminished. Writing at about the time of Jesus' birth, the Greek geographer

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Strabo called it a “small town.” It had been surpassed by its neighbors: the Romans had chosen Laodicea as their equivalent of a county seat and Hierapolis had become famous for its hot springs. When a series of earthquakes hit the area not long after Paul wrote this letter, Laodicea and Hierapolis were rebuilt but Colossae was not, a good indication of how its importance had waned. Habitation continued until the eighth century but Colossae was never again a town of any note. Today, the site of Colossae lies under wheat fields – it has never been excavated.

Despite the waning fortunes of Colossae, it remained a cosmopolitan town at the time of Paul. Some trade and the merchants that carried it continued to flow through Colossae along the route from Ephesus to the Euphrates. In addition to the population of native Phrygians, the Persians, Greeks and Romans who had successively ruled the area would have left both influence and settlers. There had also been a fairly substantial Jewish community in the Lycus Valley since the second century BCE. Along with the settlers and the merchants, the Colossians would have been exposed to every philosophical and religious school from around the Mediterranean and the old Fertile Crescent as ideas and beliefs were exported with goods. The Gospel being carried by Christian missionaries would have been only one item on a whole roster of potential faiths to be adopted by the people of Colossae.

Perhaps the relative unimportance of Colossae by the time of Paul’s missionary journeys is why he himself never traveled there. In fact, the nineteenth century English theologian J.B. Lightfoot commented, “Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul is addressed.” Instead, it seems while preaching in Ephesus Paul commissioned one of his students, Epaphras, to take the Good News to the Lycus Valley. Epaphras obviously did a fine job, for Paul commends the Colossians in general in the opening of his letter and Epaphras in particular – a far cry from his tart rebuke of the Galatians in the opening of that epistle. Paul also makes sure to praise Epaphras again in the letter’s conclusion: “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.”

Something, however, has caused Epaphras to leave the churches he has served so well and to travel to meet with his mentor and it seems to be a problem with interlopers teaching members of his flock a philosophy or philosophies that do not adhere to his own teaching from Paul. At this point, Paul is in prison as we know from the personal greeting he added at the end of the letter — “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains.” Scholars are divided as to where exactly Paul is imprisoned but the preponderance of evidence seems to indicate that this was the imprisonment in Rome at the end of his life. Just as Galatians is likely the first of Paul’s letters, Colossians is likely among the last. It is a mellower Paul whose writing we find here. He is far gentler with the Colossians for being led astray by teachers who opposed Epaphras and does not approach the kind of scathing attack on their new teachers that he laid against the Judaizers of Galatia. Whatever unsound belief the Colossians were being tempted to follow, the older Paul takes a far different approach to correcting it than the younger Paul took to unnecessary circumcision and dietary rules.

While Paul does not mount a point-by-point refutation of the false teaching in Colossae, we can begin to come to some understanding of it from his description of his prayer for the Colossians in

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verses nine to fourteen of our passage. If Paul is praying for specific things for them, chances are pretty good it's because that is where they are vulnerable. It's not unlike our own time of sharing joys and concerns. We bring the things that are most joyful or most painful in our lives to share with our church family so that we can all pray for the things in our lives that are most important. In the case of the Colossians, Paul begins by praying "that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding..." One strand of religious philosophy which was gaining strength at the end of Paul's career and attaching itself to both Judaism and Christianity promoted the idea that God reserved special secret knowledge for the elite of the faith. Known as Gnosticism, from the Greek word for knowledge, this pernicious philosophy has continued to crop up over the centuries even until our time. It's most flagrant flowering today is in the cobbled-together religion of science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, known first as Dianetics and then as Scientology, but anytime a religious teacher promises to teach you "the secret" or to reveal a powerful "secret prayer" if only you will buy their book or take their seminar, they are following in the spirit of the Gnostics. Indeed, even our society's unquenchable thirst for facts in this "information age" has its roots in the concept that knowledge of all things saves. But Paul knew that what is essential for salvation, the faith in and of Christ Jesus, is available to all.

Paul also prays, "That you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." One of the dangers of the idea that it is secret knowledge or knowledge in general that saves is that it keeps our faith lives completely in our heads. But true faith is active faith, seeking the lost, serving the "least of these," spreading the Good News of God's love. Nor can the faithful Christian ever say that he or she has fully "arrived" for it is always possible for us to grow closer to God in both knowledge and action.

Another current of religious thought to which the Colossians would have been exposed was dualism, the idea that God, or the force of good in the universe, is completely counterbalanced by the evil in the universe. This, too, is an idea that continues to find adherence in today's philosophies. But Paul's prayer, "May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power," is a reminder for the Colossians and for us that nothing stands equal to God. Our God is the Creator of All, whose power is restricted only by God's own grace. In the act of incarnation, Jesus emptied himself of divine power, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, but the power was his to begin with. Christians need not worship or pray to any other entity, for the God to whom all power belongs is on our side, reconciled with us through Christ, loving us as a gentle Father and making us the heirs to the Kingdom. We have "the inheritance of the saints in the light... redemption, forgiveness of sins" which means that we do not need to earn God's favor (indeed, we cannot), nor does any Christian stand in second-class status in the Beloved Community.

We will touch on many of these themes again in the weeks to come but for now the idea of those last two verses in Paul's prayer leads me back to the subject he first mentions in verse five: hope. Paul writes: "we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you." In using this triumvirate of virtues in his correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul had emphasized love, perhaps because that was the

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element most missing in the Corinthian church. But for the Colossians, he emphasizes hope, citing it as the underlying gift which allows them both to have faith in Christ and to love their fellow believers, the “ones set apart,” or “saints.” Perhaps it is because, just as the Corinthians were in need of love, the Colossians were in need of hope. It would certainly be understandable. As Dr. Songer wrote, “When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Colossae, the city was struggling for survival.” Life can be difficult for a people living in a declining city or neighborhood. When one’s way of life is at stake, the nature of existence can seem very dark.

Perhaps this is a feeling with which some of us can sympathize. There is no doubt that life is changing for many of us. We are all growing older, after all. For some, this means the approach or realization of an empty nest; for others, the end of a working career or the waning of health previously taken for granted. And although the Seattle metropolitan area shows no sign of decline, other aspects of our communal lives are changing or have changed. Some feel that our country is being passed up in key aspects of productivity or education or quality of life. Some people are bemoaning the waning numbers of Euro-Americans in a country that now holds the third largest number of Spanish speakers in the world. Some of our co-religionists fear the declining percentages of Christians in the United States and Europe. Our own congregation is far from the high water mark of membership it posted in the late 60s. It may be that we need a message of hope every bit as much as the Colossians.

And what, exactly, is hope? Several of you, I’m sure, could cite Emily Dickinson’s definition: “Hope is the thing with feathers /That perches in the soul, /And sings the tune--without the words, /And never stops at all...” It’s a pretty good definition but I’d like to offer you some others. First, there is what Paul says about hope in this passage. It is laid up for us in heaven, he says, and we have heard it before in the Good News. As I mentioned a few minutes ago, what Paul says at the end of this passage connects with hope for me. The Father “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.” For us, as for our sisters and brothers of the church in Colossae, hope is embodied in the person of Christ Jesus. As that most familiar of Gospel verses says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” The hope laid up for us in heaven is also the certain hope of heaven, of the resurrection, of life in the kingdom of the beloved Son.

Another short definition of hope is one that I heard over fifteen years ago. Foy Valentine, who had been one of the giants of the Southern Baptist Convention during my youth, came to preach in January of 1995 at Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston, where Connie and Kit and I were members at the time. I wrote what he said in pencil in the back of my Bible, where you can still make out the faded words. “Hope,” he said, “is the cultivation of an eschatological itch.” It is a yearning, in other words, for the things we think of as marking the end of time – the return of Christ in glory, the realization of the Kingdom of God, the resurrection of the saints.

These hopes for our ultimate future are powerful and I share in them as I hope you do also. But now let me add one more definition of hope to the mix; one that I only read this week and in which I find much truth. Wesley White, a Methodist pastor in Wisconsin, writes, “prayer without ceasing / calls for action / beyond results / known otherwise / as hope.” From Dickinson’s “thing with feathers” that lodges within us we turn our gaze first to God, the source of our hope, and the coming of God’s Kingdom, the culmination of our hope, to action beyond results, the

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working out of our hope. I find this concept particularly helpful as I consider how it is, like the Colossians, that we can “lead lives worthy of the Lord... bear(ing) fruit in every good work and... grow(ing) in the knowledge of God.” You see, I can never think of the eschaton, the end time that Foy Valentine cited as the source of the itch that is hope, without also remembering that Jesus continually said, “the time is coming and now is...” and that “the Kingdom of God is among you.” The Kingdom has arrived, at least in part, with Jesus. We do not yet have the fulfillment of the Kingdom but we have its inauguration and its continual growth. Key to the way I understand the faith we hold in common is the notion that in Jesus, the Kingdom of God or the Beloved Community has already broken into the present age of darkness and that the spiritual light by which we live is gradually but inexorably growing stronger and stronger, so that it will come to light the whole world. Like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I believe that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Like Paul, I believe that the Good News of Christ Jesus “is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, (and) so it has been bearing fruit among (us) from the day (we) heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.”

This is the hope that Paul said was the reason the Christians in Colossae could have faith and act in love, despite their circumstances. Their hope of the inbreaking Kingdom of God allowed them to embrace each other as brothers and sisters, a family in God. Their hope was echoed in Paul’s prayer for them that they might “endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father.” Their hope, like ours, was built on nothing less than Jesus’ love and righteousness. And so, my sisters and my brothers, may we, like the Colossians, find that new hopes within us grow, enabling us to follow God with rejoicing, even though our joy may be born of tears, trusting God’s promise and working always to bring closer to reality the Beloved Community where justice dwells with mercy and love is law’s demand. Amen.