

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 49: 1-6
SECOND LESSON: Colossians 1:15-28
July 17, 2022

“God’s Deeper Plan”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Last week we visited ancient Colossae for the first time, a city totally unaware of the fact that they were on the edge of destruction. An earthquake will destroy everything within five years of this letter. But they did not know that.

The Christian community in Colossae was small, but it was surrounded by a society burgeoning with mysticism. A strange combination of Judaism and Greek Gnosticism was developing. These ideas would get much stronger in the centuries that followed in the Roman Empire. Salvation could come only through superior beings, the archons and angels who could provide secret passwords to enter into the fullness of spiritual enlightenment. (And in case we think, how could anyone believe stuff like this, consider Scientology.) Among the prevalent ideas of the time was that Jesus was not really a man at all. He was an angel. Paul responded by quoting a hymn. Scholars are pretty unified in thinking that this next part is not original to Paul and that it is, in fact, a song. We might call it, “Twelve Ways Jesus Is Better than Angels.” I’m daring Frank to figure out how to set it to music. Jesus is:

1. The image of the invisible God (v. 15a).
2. The firstborn of all creation (v. 15b).
3. The one by whom all things were created (v. 16).
4. The one who is before all things (v. 17a).
5. The one who held (and holds) all things together (v. 17b).
6. The head of the body, the church (v. 18a)
7. The beginning (v. 18b).
8. The firstborn from the dead (v. 18c).
9. The one who has preeminence (v. 18d).
10. The one in whom all the fullness was pleased to dwell (v. 19).
11. The one through whom God has chosen to reconcile all things (v. 20a).
12. The one who has made peace through the blood of his cross (v. 20b).

As a song of praise goes, there is A LOT here! The theology is rich. This isn’t some trite quick 7-11 song, you know, the same 7 words repeated 11 times. And the claims made about Jesus are outrageous. We have to remember that they are talking about a man whose life on earth was only about 25 years earlier. Jesus lived, died and rose from the grave within living memory. We forget how new Christianity once was, and how it would have come across to many as just another totally insane cult.

Taking these statements one at a time we begin with, **Jesus is the image of the invisible God**. When Moses asked if he could see God, he was told that no one could see God and live. We cannot survive direct contact with that kind of power. But the power of God came to us by taking on human flesh. If we want to see what God is like, we only need to look at Jesus, not his physical appearance, but his **nature**. Jesus said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In Jesus we meet God. But it goes even deeper than this, because if we as humans were made in the image of God, Jesus comes to us to restore us from a broken image to a whole one.

Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. We need to be careful not to take this literally but rather symbolically. Some have interpreted this to mean that Jesus is a created being, created by God. But the role of the firstborn within Israel goes way beyond this. The identity of firstborn is one of priority and privilege. The Psalmist even claimed that God had appointed David firstborn, the highest of the kings on the earth, even though David was the youngest in his family, saying, “I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth. I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. (Psalm 89:27-29). To be the firstborn means to be the highest in status.

Jesus is the one by whom all things were created. In Greek the word can mean “in” or “by.” We might add, “through,” because in John’s gospel we are told, “All things were made through him,” referring to Jesus as the Logos. Translating Logos as “Word” is really a bit lame in my opinion, because the Logos is a philosophical concept that means reason, logic and the guiding framework of everything that exists. The Logos is the DNA of the universe. Jesus is the Logos through whom all things were created—even angels. He is superior in every way to the created order. Even worldly thrones and worldly power are inferior to Jesus. There is no civil authority or power that is greater.

Jesus is the one who is before all things. Before means two things. In simple chronological terms Jesus existed before creation. But Jesus is also “before” in terms of superiority.

Jesus is the one who held (and holds) all things together. Not only is Jesus the Logos through whom everything was created, without Jesus everything would fall apart. He is the glue who holds everything together. Without God the Son molecules would disintegrate and drift away. Our world would cease to exist.

Jesus is the head of the body, the church. Church, or ekklesia in Greek, from which we get ecclesiastical, was originally a secular word meaning “called out.” It meant a public assembly and came to refer to the public gathering of Christians. The body is a more organic metaphor, however, in which each of us has an important role to play. Jesus is the head of that body. We take our instructions from him.

Jesus is the beginning. *This is beginning to sound redundant here!* But Jesus is the beginning of an entirely new thing: God’s deeper plan of salvation.

Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. He is the first to be raised to new life in a new resurrection body. We will follow him. Death is not the end.

Jesus is the one who has preeminence. Jesus humbled himself taking on the form of a servant, emptying himself for our sake and dying on the cross. Therefore, God has exalted him. Ultimately, every knee will bow before Jesus.

Jesus is the one in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. Here is a concept we miss because we don't really know what the scripture is talking about. For us "fullness" just means full or abundant. But fullness in Greek is *pleroma*, and the mystics talked a lot about the *pleroma*! The *pleroma* had been turned into a region of space we could visit through angelic intervention, strict ascetic practices and the gaining of hidden knowledge. Reaching the *pleroma* was the ultimate high. But the hymn dismisses all that, staying that the *pleroma* of God dwells in Jesus. We're not going to get there any other way.

Jesus is the one through whom God has chosen to reconcile all things. When we are reconciled a bad relationship is transformed into a good one. In ordinary circumstances this requires two willing parties to work together equally. In this instance God has done the heavy lifting. Jesus came into a hostile world to rescue it. But reconciliation itself is a process involving many steps along the way, and God provides the grace we need to understand that we need grace.

And finally, **Jesus is the one who has made peace through the blood of his cross.** Having made peace is one word. Jesus is the peacemaker. And the peace Jesus brings can be both internal and external. Jesus brings us peace with God. We have wholeness and restoration. And Jesus can bring us peace with one another if we live as God intends us to live.

Paul then leaves the hymn and goes on in his own words, pointing out that once these people had been alienated from God, but now in Christ they have been restored. Probably most of the congregation were non-Jews, so they did not even have a relationship with God as Jews. They were separate from God and God's people. Now, however, they stood blameless before God, or more literally, "not accused" because they are in Christ.

Finally, Paul pulls everything together saying, "The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations . . . is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." And Paul may have been thinking of our text from the Old Testament today, often interpreted messianically to mean words that extend beyond Isaiah to the future Messiah--"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

There's no way around it. These are staggering claims. There is much to think about. The assertions that the first believers made about Jesus go way beyond him being a political deliverer of the nation of Israel. They go beyond Messiah. They are about divinity. And they are about God's deeper plan to save all of humanity.

We can try to define it, but we will fail. We can do what many have done, and shrink Jesus down to manageable size and make the whole thing about a misunderstood prophet who lost and was executed. We can even ignore it. Or

we can sit before God in humility, seeking to understand the fact that God knew we would make a mess of things, and planned to save us from the very beginning of time. Amen.

Isaiah 49: 1-6

49 Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the Lord called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.
2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.
3 He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
4 But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand,
and my reward is with my God."
5 And now the Lord says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord
and my God has been my strength—
6 he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Colossians 1:15-28

15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. **16** For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. **17** He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. **18** And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. **19** For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,**20** and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. **22** But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— **23** if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. **25** I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— **26** the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. **27** To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.