

Christ and His Church

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, verses 15 to 24.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 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. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 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. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him and through Him to reconcile to Him all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood shed on the cross.

[1 : 26] Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you wholly in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

If you continue in your faith, establish and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you have heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Well, good morning, everyone.

And wow, this is such an upgrade from the music stand that I used to preach from right here. This is great. Brian, Samantha, thank you for your kind introduction.

[2 : 37] And you guys exude hospitality because before we knew anyone here, you showed up at our door. The first or second night we were here with a plate of sushi, which was amazing, so thank you.

And I'm looking around seeing people whose weddings I officiated and the produce from those weddings. So it's really, it's amazing to be back.

I am honored and humbled and grateful and nostalgic. And being 29 when we moved here 20 years ago, you can do the math, I've always experienced Christ's church a bit like a fourth child.

We have three daughters. And now with our two eldest daughters who are grown and out of the house, every time we're with them, there is such joy over what is.

And there's also a little bit of grief over what used to be and is no longer. And likewise, today, I am so full of joy as I look at who you are.

[3 : 39] And there's a little bit of grief for me that I don't get to share in where you are today. But with five years now to reflect on our call to WCPC, so just so you know, as Brian said, that's Walnut Creek.

So a little geography lesson for you. I had to learn this too. If you go through the Caldecott Tunnel from Berkeley or Oakland, you don't just fall off the cliff on the other side.

There are other cities, other communities out there. We reside in one of those. It's a new civilization, I suppose. It's a 12-minute ride in, sometimes a 45-minute ride out, but you get the idea.

But I offer this reflection on my own calling because I know in our midst in 2025, maybe some of you are reflecting on vocational callings. Before we get into our text, let me just say I can point to three or four times in my life where a call from God clearly transcended my emotional desire. It cut across the grain a little bit. And as I considered this call five and a half years ago now, my dominant emotions were sadness and fear.

[4 : 46] There was a lot of grief over leaving a community that I helped alongside of Jonathan bring to life. And there was some fear over taking a rapidly dying church and helping bring it back to life.

And I felt like God gave me some startup muscles, but I wasn't sure if I had turnaround muscles. Yet over five years, God has been so good and so faithful.

And it's just so amazing to see Andrew and Jonathan thriving in leadership and this church thriving. And a little bit more of a brief history to bring us to this text. In 2005, my wife, Katie, myself, our four-year-old daughter, Caroline, our one-year-old daughter, Claire, we landed at SFO.

We jumped into a yellow cab. Ask anyone over 40. We spent \$56, which seemed like an ungodly amount of money, to be transported to the East Bay. And six months later, Jonathan and Catherine would join us.

So if you could imagine me with dark hair and Jonathan with more hair and imagine Katie and Catherine exactly as they are today, that was us.

[5 : 55] And, you know, to back up the story a little bit, it was the mid-1990s where I was given a cassette tape. So moved backwards from streaming services and MP3s and CDs, moved forward from big trollas and record players and eight tracks.

There it is, the cassette tape. It was a message from Dr. John Piper entitled, Doing Mission When Dying Is Gained. Now, for my liking, Dr. Piper yells a little too much, but I have immense respect for his passion and his integrity.

And in that tape, he mentions Colossians 124, which you just heard read. He said, it's our call to fill up what is lacking with respect to the affliction of Christ.

And he said, what is lacking is certainly not the atoning merit of Christ's affliction, which is sufficient for all of us. But what is lacking is their physical presence.

So, go. And I shared this tape with Jonathan. I was probably 22. He was 19. And this planted in both of us, the seed for church planting, to bring the gospel, the good news of Christ's affliction that secures our rescue to a place where it was lacking.

[7 : 13] Not the South, not the Midwest, but Berkeley, California. And if you fast forward this story to 2006, to what has become legend and lore around naming this church, I want to just ask, who was at our very first retreat at the Manzanita Lodge in 2006?

Don't be bashful. Yeah, so there's, you know, eight or nine of us were there. As Wes Selke tells this story, Jonathan and I collected many good names for this church from our launch team.

We proceeded to ignore all of them. We went into a secret meeting room. White smoke wafted out of the chimney. We emerged and said, by decree, the name shall be Christchurch.

Now, from my recollection, there was a whiteboard full of names like Velocity, Fire, Forge, H3O, Reality, which is ironic.

Christchurch was on the list, but it was an arcane afterthought. However, the naming happened.

Christchurch was birthed Easter Sunday, April 15, 2006. I'll never forget the day.

[8 : 23] And you soon enter into your 20th year. And again, I'm so humbled by God's faithfulness. I'm honored to share the pulpit with Jonathan and Andrew. I'm glad it's not a music stand anymore.

And I've chosen Colossians 1, 15 through 24 as an opportunity to remember what is important. To get back to first principles.

And in a first Sunday of 2025, while our aspirations of the new year are still fresh, I want to get us back to the basics of following Jesus into a year of unknowns.

Because every year is a year of unknowns. There will be joy and grief and uncertainty and pleasure and pain. It'll all be there.

And the question is, where will you take it? Or to whom will you take it? So I want to endeavor to address two questions this morning from this text. One of them is, why Christ?

[9 : 18] And the second one is, why the church? Now Paul, who wrote nearly 50% of the New Testament, he plants this church in Colossae. And around 50 AD, he's in jail in an Ephesian prison.

And he writes this letter to this church. Now this is a house church, probably 40 to 50 people. 90% of them in that day would have been illiterate. So they are long awaiting the apostles' message.

They're meeting together in a large house. A courier knocks on the door. And that day, if you couldn't read, you probably would memorize the letter as it was read to you. And they could not wait to know what it was that they were called to do.

And as the scholar N.T. Wright put it in his commentary on Colossians, he says, This early church belongs to Jesus Christ. They had put their faith in government and in other religions.

But now they look nowhere else for forgiveness from the past, for maturity in their presence, and for their future hope. Christ became the center of everything.

[10:24] So the big idea under this first question, I might say it this way, We center everything on Jesus because Jesus is the center of everything.

We center everything on Jesus because Jesus is the center of everything. And as this is unpacked by Dr. Wright, this way of centering will allow us, if we let it, stability in our present, freedom from our past, and hope in our future.

And we see this in this text. Look at verse 15 as we think about stability. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Now that word firstborn is not our focus today, but because it has launched a lot of heresies, and as heresies go, they usually involve too little divinity or too little humanity for Jesus.

Let us just say firstborn doesn't mean he's created. This is the law of primogenitor, which means the firstborn is the inheritor, the executor of God's will, that all of God's wealth is bestowed to us as Christ's people.

[11:31] But he goes on in verse 15. He's the image of the invisible God. And if you could drop down to verse 19 for a second to fully grasp this, we learn that God is pleased to have all of his fullness dwell in him.

So as image, or in Greek, icon, Jesus is this pictorial representation, almost like a statue. But as fullness, as the pleroma of God, Jesus is not just the face of God.

He is God. He's the fullness of God. God, we know, is Trinity. And there have been 2,000 years and many more than 2,000 pages to sort that out.

But suffice it to say here today, our God is Trinity, is 2-3 to be one, 2-1 to be three. And when all of the other origin stories involve the gods creating out of lust and war, out of this love of power, we have Trinity in this dance.

In Greek, this perichoresis, this where we get the word choreography, this dance of love. Not a world created out of a quest and a lust for power, but through the power of this Trinitarian love.

[12:47] And we see this in verse 16. In him, all things were created. Everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities, all things are created through him and for him.

So to say by God is not a mere cliché, but it's this mere, this deep acknowledgement that we have a creator. To say through him is to acknowledge this big bang of God speaking the cosmos into being.

And to say that this is all for God is to suggest that God is in this for God's delight. He's not some bearded, curmudgeonly old man, but he is as giddy as a child, as he is creating all things visible. The stardust on Proxima Centauri, the duck bill on a platypus, as he is creating all things invisible. Fairies and elves.

As G.K. Chesterton put it, our loss of imagination is a sign of immaturity, not adulthood. Those things exist. Imagine how these realities might stabilize us in our present situations and circumstances.

[14:03] And there's more. Look at verse 17. He is before all things, and by him all things hold together. Now there is some skyscraping philosophy here, and there's some in the dirt practicality here.

First, the skyscraping philosophy. God is the cosmic glue. That means faith and science are not in conflict, but they are compatible.

Many of you have heard the expression, well, that's what makes the world go round. And a lot of people would say, it's money that makes the world go round. Or if you're a less cynical romantic, you might say, it's love that makes the world go round.

If you're an artist, you might say, it's vibes that make the world go round. If you're a grad student, you might say, it's coffee that makes the world go round. If you're a scientist, you might say, a cloud of gas and dust started to collapse due to its own gravity, and then it started spinning, thus flinging

our solar system into being.

The earth started spinning too, and will keep spinning, because space is a vacuum with no friction to stop the spin. And God says, let there be.

[15:13] And there was. This is not to suggest that God created without leveraging gravity, and centripetal and centrifugal forces, as well as other natural laws. God invented those natural laws too.

But he created concurrently, suggesting that our God is also a giving creator who gives us life, and breath, and truth, and grace, and love.

And at the core of God's character is this generous, giving nature that spins everything into being. It's God's creative giving that makes the world go round.

Not our degrees, not our credentials, not our 401ks, not our marketability, which brings me to the in-the-dirt practicality of this truth. You've heard it said, you've got to hold it together.

You've got to pull yourself together. You've got to keep it together. Well, the blessed gift that God gives us is no, you don't. In fact, you can't.

[16:16] I kind of have a freak out moment every December 28, 29, 30. I start looking at the next year and all the responsibilities and all the obligations and how can I possibly do all of this stuff with the excellence and the diligence that it takes and without just being a big fat disappointment to people around me.

And the answer is, I cannot. What's most unique about Christianity as compared to all the other world religions and value systems is that becoming Christian first begins with simply admitting to God that you cannot pull yourself together, that you cannot put yourself back together again, that you cannot hold it all together.

Which brings us to this freedom from our past. Why Christ? Because Christ gives us stability in our present but not before giving us freedom from our past.

Look at verse 19. God was pleased to have all fullness dwell in Him and through Him to reconcile everything to Himself whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace, shalom, through His blood shed on the cross.

When we fail, when life falls apart and it is our fault, it is Jesus who puts us back together again.

[17:49] I have a friend who's secularly Jewish and he's hilarious and he's smart and we talk about Jesus stuff sometimes. And one time he said to me, you know Bart, Christ seems beautiful and Christianity seems compelling yet it all just seems too good to be true.

And I said to him, you know, maybe it's so good because it is true. Maybe the beautiful truth is when we fail and we live under this immense pressure to make it right, to pull ourselves together again, it's Jesus as forgiver, as redeemer who enables us to make it right.

It's Christ who puts us back together again. Verse 21 and 22 says that we were once at enmity, living with hostility towards God, but now we are reconciled.

That breach has been fully repaired. So think about that relationship in your life, the one with the bitter roots and the frayed edges. Imagine that one made fully whole again and then multiply that by a gazillion.

That's what Jesus has done with you. Why Christ? Because he brings us stability in our present. He brings us freedom from our past. And thirdly and finally, he's also the center of our hope as we think about our future.

[19:14] Look at verse 18. He is also the head of the body, the church, which I'll get to in a second. He's the beginning, the first born from the dead. Now that expression, the first born from the dead, is a reference to Christ's resurrection being the first of many resurrections, which means our hope is not in sporting a halo and strumming a harp and floating around in some celestial cumulus clouds.

Our future hope is a past reality that Christ is risen from the dead. Our future hope is a historical event that Christ is risen from the dead.

And we learn from Paul, he is the beginning. Well, in John's gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, when he talks about the crucifixion and there's this moment where after Jesus has died, he's plunged in the side with a spear, in that account, do you know what comes out?

Water and blood. And John knew that the only other place where those two substances flow is labor and delivery, which is John's way of saying this is a brand new world being birthed right in the midst of the old one.

This maturing even by the power of the Holy Spirit right now within you. It's why Leslie Newbigin, the great missiologist to India, would say when it comes to a broken world, I'm not an optimist. [20 : 46] I'm not a pessimist. Christ is risen from the dead. It's not the end of the story. It's the beginning of a new one. So secondly then, why the church?

If I had another sermon, I'd preach it here, but this second question will really just be a conclusion. We learn in verse 18 that Jesus is the head of the body, the church.

And we'll learn in the letter to the Ephesians that as Paul writes, Christ loved the church so much that he gave himself up for her.

But if Jesus is sufficient as the one who brings stability and freedom and hope and all the stuff we've been talking about, then why the church? Why do we need the church?

Well again, to first principles, back to the basics, to our origin story. Remember, when Adam was created, God said, being alone with God is not enough.

[21 : 50] In fact, in that creation account, there are ten benedictions. It is good, it is good, it is good, it is good. There is one malediction. It is not good that you and me should be alone.

So to borrow some adjectives from Alexander of Purple Crayon fame, we live in a no good, terrible, horrible, very bad, not just day, but world.

It's still broken and the shards of brokenness cut in brutal loneliness. So while your aspirations for 2025 are fresh, be sure at least one resolution is designed to actively fight against this loneliness and isolation.

I'm entering into my 25th year of pastoral ministry in 2025. Jonathan's not too far behind me.

Andrew's catching up with us. If we were to index the most tragic circumstances, deepest losses, and gravest dangers that we've walked through with others in ministry over a collective 50 plus years, loneliness and isolation almost always either contribute to those situations or exacerbate the pain around them.

So engagement in the church, the body of Christ, this is God's solution. Take God up on his offer if you haven't already. Before your aspirations of 2025 lose their luster, be sure at least one resolution will ground you further and deeper into the body of the church.

[23 : 34] Yes, I know there's distrust and suspicion around the church and in some cases rightly so. Yes, I know that the church is full of people who are judgmental and intolerant and hypocritical and yet, and yet, there's always room for at least one more.

So join us. No. I know there are people with chips on their shoulders and sharp elbows, people like you, people like me who need one another.

That's God's solution. This is how we are refined and bettered as we follow Jesus. Jesus as head of the body is providing direction and purpose and nourishment and love and we as Christ's body are providing mutual care and encouragement to one another and to our friends and our neighbors and our coworkers and our classmates.

We might love to have Jesus apart from the contradictions and distractions of others, but we're designed by God to rely upon others. Christ could supply all of your needs directly, but he usually doesn't.

And we're also called to let other people rely on us. So an indexing question for you might be, if I stopped engaging in this local church right here, would there be ministry around me that might collapse?

[24 : 56] Well, Peter talks of us as living stones, which means there's this interlocking interdependence that we need from one another. So I imagine what it could be like in 2025.

Imagine being a people who center everything on Jesus because Jesus is the center of everything. Imagine what it would look like to wake up each and every day or at least most of the days in 2025 without the weight of the world on your shoulders, with the pressure off.

You don't have to make something great of yourself. God already did. You don't have to hold it all together. God always does.

And imagine doing this with other people whom you can depend upon and who can also depend upon you. This summons embodies Paul's concluding prayer at the end of verse 24.

All of this for the sake of the body which is Christ's church. In the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen.