

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua Narcisse
Sunday, November 20, 2022

Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He 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. He 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. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

“It could all be so simple, but you’d rather make it hard.” I’ll never forget the day I heard those words. It was in the parking lot of the local grocery store and I had successfully convinced my mother to let me stay in the car by myself. Because what 9-year-old really wants to follow their mom around the grocery store knowing you won’t be able to convince her to buy any extra snacks?

It was a strategic decision, because it meant I could be left alone in the car with my mother’s vast CD collection. I opened the CD organizer she had stashed between her seat and the console and flipped through the sleeves filled with musical genius. I flipped past Whitney Houston and Kirk Franklin, past Aretha and Smokey Robinson, there was even a Dolly Parton record in there. And as I was flipping an orange-brown image of a woman with deep eyes and full cheeks arrested my attention. The title of the album made me slip it from its sleeve and it into the CD player, and before long I heard the sultry voice of Ms. Lauryn Hill wrap around those words that have been

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in the back of my mind since that day in my mother's minivan in the parking lot of the local grocery store, "It could all be so simple, but you'd rather make it hard."

Now to be sure, even at 9 years old I knew that what Ms. Lauryn Hill was singing had nothing to do with Jesus Christ. What she was singing about in between the beat dropping and soaring harmonies that gave the chorus it's hook was a painstaking outline of the trying, tortuous, tempting and testing times we each go through at the end of a relationship, especially when one person hasn't lived up to the shared expectations of the partnership. Lauryn is singing about a breakup. "It could all be so simple. But you'd rather make it hard. Loving you is like a battle, and we both end up with scars."

Lauryn wasn't singing about Jesus Christ, but on this day that we pause to celebrate the reign of Christ, her words ring out loudly in my mind because when it comes to how we respond to the fact of Christ in our daily lives, when it comes to the faith we profess to have in Jesus the Christ, when it comes to who we say Jesus is and the difference we claim Jesus makes in our lives, I hear the voice of Lauryn Hill echoing through this sanctuary, "It could all be so simple. But we'd rather make it hard."

We make it hard, we make it hard because we are human, we make it hard because we don't always fully grasp the full sovereignty and dominion of God over our lives, the Church, this world, and the cosmos. We make it hard because we are human and we are constricted by the need to make things make sense. And so we talk about Christ in the only way we can through human language that is always too finite, too fickle, and too fragile for it to ever truly grasp all the strength, all the endurance, all the patience, and all the glory that is wrapped up in Jesus Christ.

We talk about the reign of Christ as a king because monarchy is the best way we've come up with to describe the power of God in Christ. But Christ's power is so much more than that, it's so much more absolute, it's so much more just, it's so much more loving, it has so much more impact, and it lasts so much longer than any human system or power ever could.

It could all be so simple. But we're human, so we'd rather make it hard. And we fasten onto Christ all the things we want Christ to be, all the ways we want Christ to act, and all the things we want Christ to believe. All the people we'd prefer Christ to love and those we'd like Christ to hate and ignore.

It could all be so simple, but we too often and so easily give into the temptation to turn Christ into a distant ideologue, or into an otherworldly mystic, we turn Christ into a simplistic sacrifice while ignoring the impact of his life and ministry, or we turn Christ into a literary character and forsake the fact that he is the very Word of God enfleshed.

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And so Beloved, we've each got work to do, if we are to recover and remember why we believe Christ reigns, why we believe Christ rules, and what difference it makes for those of us who claim to follow after Christ each day of our lives. We've got to begin by setting an accurate picture of the Christ we claim reigns in this world.

And that is why this letter to the Church at Colossae that is attributed to Paul, is the perfect text to help reorient us to the reign of Christ in our lives. For when pen is put to paper in this letter, there is a crisis afoot. A crisis of belief, really a crisis of misordered faith. This letter is trying to help the good church going folks at Colossae remember the truth about who Christ is and not the Christ they've created after their own desires.

This letter is sent as a reminder that it is through Christ alone, that God decided to reconcile this world to himself. That in Christ love put on human flesh. That Christ, as Paul wrote to the church folks in Phillipi, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Why do we pause this day to celebrate the reign of Christ? We celebrate the reign of Christ first because Christ decided to be with us.

Afterall, that's where we are heading as believers, as this liturgical year comes to an end and another dawns. When you come to this sanctuary next week the scene will have shifted, the colors will have changed, and we'll be patiently making our march toward the manger. That is where we are heading, heading to get a glimpse of God wrapped in flesh, God that will heal and teach and feed. God that will lead and love and challenge. God that will be strung up high and stretch out wide on a cross and who will be crucified. But before we get there, we march toward the manger, and at that manger see a helpless, hungry, and swaddled baby, that is utterly vulnerable to all the world around him.

We've got to reorient ourselves to the reign of Christ. Because Christ comes into this world not as a fully formed adult, not as a conquering hero, not as a presiding prelate, he doesn't even come into this world as a Presbyterian, believe it or not.

But Jesus begins his ministry on earth as a helpless child and ends it as a crucified criminal so that we might see in his life the way God's divinity always meets up with the crises of our human reality; and is not overcome.

We pause this day to celebrate the reign of Christ. Because when Christ reigns he reigns with the full knowledge of our deepest conditions. When Christ reigns he reigns with the full knowledge

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of how hard it is when our bodies are touched by illness and healing feels far off, “for he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.”

When Christ reigns he reigns with the full understanding of what it means to love someone that death has snatched away, for when he was told that Lazarus was dead, Jesus wept and the crowd confessed, “See how he loved him!”

When Christ reigns, he reigns as one who knows what it’s like to endure oppression and political violence, for as he told the disciples When you hear of wars and insurrections. When nation rises against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. When you hear reports of great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues, do not be terrified.

Why do we pause this day to celebrate the reign of Christ Beloved? Because the words of that old hymn of the Church are still true, “Jesus knows all about our troubles, he will guide till the day is done, there’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus, no, not one. No, not one!”

No one could love quite like him, no one could heal quite like him, no one could save quite like him, and no one reigns quite like Jesus the Christ. It’s really rather simple, even though we try to make it hard. We celebrate the reign of Christ because Christ decided to be with us, and in being with us he reigns over us with an intimacy that assures us whatever the problem, whatever the pain, whatever the sickness, whatever the mistake, whatever the failure, Christ knows and is able and willing to make it well, to the glory of God alone.

That’s really the second reason we must reorient ourselves to the reign of Christ over our lives and the entire cosmos: it’s because through Christ we find everything we need to make it.

This letter to the church at Colossae is helpful to us at Idlewild because it outlines what you and I are graced with when Christ reigns in our lives. Hear those first few verses of our scripture reading again: “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, so that you may have all endurance and patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He 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.”

It could all be so simple, we don’t have to make it hard.

When faced with the vicissitudes of life we ought to know that we are not going at it alone. Through grace we have been made strong with all the strength that comes from Christ’s glorious power. Not from the machinations of human powers and systems. Not from the accumulation and leveraging of wealth. Not from the influence and prestige of our online personas. Not from

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the alignment and realignment of political power; we are made strong through Christ's glorious power alone.

And not only that, we are reminded that in our daily walk with Christ we have all endurance. All endurance means that through the power of Christ you and I are graced with every kind of endurance we need to make it. Physical endurance to persevere even when our bodies reach their limits, mental endurance to keep our minds when what we face threatens to shatter our mental defenses, spiritual endurance to run the race of faith before us with joy, all endurance.

Beloved, we've got to reorient ourselves to the reign of Christ in our lives because it's through Christ's reign that we are graced with all strength, all endurance, and all patience. It is because Christ reigns that we have been made inheritors of a grace that we could never earn and never deserve, grace that sustains, grace that gives life, grace that even forgives our sins. That's why we celebrate the reign of Christ because with Christ we are given everything we need to make it.

Don't ever confuse the efficacy of your own power with the fact that it is God in Christ alone at work holding your life and this world together.

It's really rather simple, even if it's hard to grasp. Christ is all we could ever imagine and hope for and more.

Christ is everything.
The first and the last.
The visible and the invisible.
The beginning and the end.
In All Things,
Christ Through All Things,
Christ Before All Things,
Christ After All Things,
Christ Christ is everything.

It really is quite simple, for us, Christ is everything, even though we make it difficult by clouding out our view of Christ with all the other things that compete for our time, our love, our loyalty, our attention, our hope, even our faith.

Christ is everything. Christ is everything, and when we recognize our own Belovedness as we stand before him, when we accept the liberating truth that we wield no power ourselves, but the power that He works within our lives, we will engage in this world with the confidence that because he is and in all and through all, no matter how it looks, God will be glorified. "It could all be so simple, but we'd rather make it hard."

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You know who always tends to complicate things and make things hard? Preachers. We have a tendency to make simple things hard, because let me let you in on a little secret, we think that if we can just string the right words together in just the right way the sermon will do what God alone can do, which is bring about the transformation our souls desperately need.

And plus we think if we can fix the sermon up just right we'll lessen the risk of flunking in the pulpit every Sunday. And let me tell you, flunking in the pulpit is something every preacher is terrified of.

It was on a Saturday evening, when that terror hit me. Sunday morning looming too close for comfort for a preacher who didn't have a sermon ready, and found myself sitting at my grandmother's dining room table. I was there because I was procrastinating, I was avoiding writing the message for the next day because I didn't know what to say, I didn't know where to start. And so I decided to make my grandmother an accomplice in my procrastination project, and she was only too glad to assist. So there we sat at her dining room table where I had worked on math problems and learned about the history of my people. At that big oak dining room table where I was made to memorize the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm, there we sat at that big oak dining room table, playing Scrabble, and my grandmother was beating me, mercilessly.

See my grandmother was a retired librarian and because she was the granddaughter of a former slave education was everything to her, she worked her way from the tobacco fields of North Carolina to a degree in education from the North Carolina Central University and a Master's degree in Library Sciences. She put two children through school with the help of her husband and even saw one through the brutality of the Vietnam War.

And there at that table, my grandmother, the retired librarian, nearly 100 points ahead of me in Scrabble with no signs of letting up, was assisting me in my procrastination project, even as Sunday morning grew nearer and my sermon seemed to slip farther away. But because she was beating me so mercilessly, I wasn't too concerned about my sermon anymore, I was trying to preserve my dignity, so in an attempt to distract her, I began to engage her in conversation, and I said to her, "Grandma, you know I really don't know what to preach tomorrow, I just can't seem to make heads or tails of this text. I, just don't know where to start."

And my grandmother, while playing a triple word score to extend her lead, simply said to me, "Just preach Christ glorified and don't worry about anything else." And just like that the game had ended and my sermon had begun. "Just preach Christ glorified and don't worry about anything else." that ought to be for us the end of any confusion or doubt, the end of any wrestling with how it's going to work out and the beginning of the sermons we preach with our lives.

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We ought to preach Christ glorified in the way we love ourselves and how we love one another.

We ought to preach Christ glorified in the way we are an Idlewild family and how we witness to the city of Memphis from the heart of Midtown.

We ought to preach Christ glorified in how we hope and how we pray, how we grieve and how we respond to loss. “Just preach Christ glorified and don’t worry about anything else.”

My grandmother sounded like those great Reformers of the faith who raised the “Five Solas”, Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus, Soli Deo Gloria. To the glory of God alone!

Because at the end of the day all of our living and laboring, all our organizing and our praying, our joy, our laughter, our lament, every part of these little lives, ought to be to the glory of God alone!

Beloved, it really is that simple, please, please do not make it hard. Our lives are in need of the simple promise that Christ reigns, that Christ reigns fully aware of what we need, and fully capable of equipping us with the resources to handle what seems impossible. It really is that simple, let’s not make it hard, all power and honor, dominion, and glory be, to God alone, Amen.