

WGUMC October 30, 2016 "All Means All"
Colossians 1:15-20

I started studying theology when I was a junior in high school. It had been a rough year, academically, socially, and spiritually. It was also the year I was diagnosed with epilepsy. I went to see my pastor so he could help me wrestle with some of the big questions: Why am I here? Why is life so hard? And does God care? But what I asked him about was the doctrine of original sin and his understanding of salvation. And that was just the beginning. When summer came, I signed up for a religion class at Rocky Mountain College, because I thought that if I studied enough I would be able to find the answers to all my questions.

So you see, I've always been a nerd. And probably the least surprising thing I ever did was get a PhD in theology. It's the big questions that still fascinate me. Though I have long since given up on the notion that I can adequately answer them, I did learn that by keeping my mind focused on the Big Picture,

I gained a better handle on my little life. I no longer had to worry about writing my own story or figuring it out all on my own. I came to realize that I was being written into a much bigger story, and Christ is the author of it.

Our reading in Colossians this morning gives us the Clif Note version of that Big Story of God-in-Christ, a story that literally means everything and not just to nerds like me. Today I'd like to talk about it.

I should mention that most scholars agree that the letter to the Colossians was probably not written by Paul. But I am including it in this series on Paul because I do think that it represents a faithful development of Paul's thought. A couple of weeks ago, I suggested that Paul sometimes wrote down truth that he didn't fully understand. For instance, it would take almost two thousand years before we would begin to see how Paul's teaching on Christian freedom applies to slaves and women. Here again, in Colossians, we have verses that point to

the significance of Christ not just for us, but for the whole cosmos. But Christians couldn't fully appreciate them until recently, after we learned a whole lot more about the cosmos. Thanks to modern science, I am finding more truth in the Bible all the time!

It is a blessed coincidence that in the week that I had planned to tell you the story of the Cosmic Christ, Richard Rohr made that story the focus of his daily email meditations, and this sermon is heavily indebted to him. He even created a graphic to help explain it, and I put it on the cover of our worship bulletin for you to take home and ponder it.

To begin with, Rohr equates the Cosmic Christ with the Divine Presence of God that has filled the creation from the beginning. [Rohr, "God in All Things," 10/23/16] He picks this up from the Gospel of John, where it says, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...All things came into being through him and without him

not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

[John 1:1-5]

You could say that the Cosmic Christ is like the Big Bang, a burst of light that shined into the darkness at the dawn of creation and has been shining ever since. The revelation of Christ, Rohr says, was "geological, physical and nature-based before it was ever personal and fully relational." ["God In All Things"]

Now what about Jesus? He showed up 2,000 years ago, but Christ was around long before that. As our text for today says, 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...and in him all things hold together."

This is mind-blowing stuff and probably not what we are thinking about when we sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus,"

because we like our Jesus to be a little more personal, thank you. But when we only think of a personal Jesus, we forget that the Eternal Christ is so much bigger than that. When we think of Jesus as someone located in a particular place and time in history, we forget that Christ is everywhere and always. When we think of Jesus as this guy who came to save us, we often lose sight of the fact that Christ is the firstborn of all creation and it is in him that all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him that God reconciled to himself all things on earth and in heaven.

In his graph of the Cosmic Christ, Rohr is trying to show how Christ encompasses a lot more than Jesus. John's Gospel said that Christ was the Word of God. In Greek, that is *logos*, which also means "reason." It's where we get the word "logic." I like to say that Christ is the inner logic of God. And we can perfectly express that logic in one word: Love.

The story of the Cosmic Christ is simply the story of God's eternal outpouring love. It begins before the beginning, with the love between God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is loving and being loved within Godself. But because it is the nature of love to seek out others to love, God created the world through Christ so that love could keep on loving. In this story, it's important to note the Christ isn't Plan B that God came up with when the creation didn't work out as planned. No, Christ was Plan A all along.

From the beginning, Christ was the plan and the purpose for creation. Christ is the revelation of love and the destination of love. And Christ is what holds everything together until we get there. So Rohr says that we have to stop thinking of Christ as the "divine plumber" come to fix the mess we got ourselves in. [Rohr, "Love Is the Nature of Being," 10/25/16] When we make Jesus out to be a problem solver, we make him too small and our understanding of salvation becomes small, too. But

salvation is not just the solution to the problem of human sin. It is much bigger than that. Salvation is God's purpose for everything.

It looks like this: First we have God in Christ pouring out love and creating the world. Jesus is the infinite love of God poured out into the finite body of a first-century Palestinian Jew. In this way, Jesus becomes the visible symbol of the invisible Christ, the Eternal Christ. And his life, death and resurrection plot out the pattern of salvation for the whole Creation. As Rohr puts it:

Jesus comes forth from the Father into the world to say, 'This is what God is doing. Look at me. I'm what God is doing. And I'm the whole process, from beginning to end'...Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we know ahead of time that the final chapter is always resurrection. Though so much of life is filled with suffering, disappointment, disillusionment, absurdity and dying, God will turn all of our crucifixions into resurrections. Look at it in Jesus, believe it in Jesus, admire it in Jesus, love it in Jesus, and let it take shape in your own soul. [Rohr, "Abstract to Personal," 10/26/16]

I believe in this process that takes us through life and through many different kinds of death to those amazing moments of resurrection because I have seen it take shape in people's souls. I know someone who has suffered a lot of losses in her life and came to me a few years ago telling me that she wasn't sure about this Jesus business. But I encouraged her to keep her mind and heart open to him, and she did what she could to follow him, though she had many questions and doubts. Just a few days ago I ran into her again. She's losing another member of her family now, but this time God has given her the opportunity to share her faith with them. Whether she knows it or not, this friend has been shaped by this great pattern of salvation. She may still have questions about Jesus, but I have no doubt that she has encountered the Cosmic Christ.

But it is not just an internal process that we are talking about here. Transformation is going on at all levels all the time,

from the personal to the social to the geophysical. Colossians says that all things are being reconciled to God through Christ, and I truly believe that all means all. When it happens in our soul, we call it salvation. When it happens in our relationships, we call it reconciliation. When it happens in our society and its institutions, we call it justice. When it happens in the natural environment, we call it re-creation. Whenever and wherever it happens in our world, we call it God's kingdom.

And we are all a part of it. That's why I love the big questions, because we have a very big God. That's why I've been a theology nerd all of my life, because the story of Christ is the only thing big enough and comprehensive enough to include all the answers to all the questions. Christ gives everything in creation a purpose for being and for each one of us, Christ puts grace into our loving, brings joy into our serving, makes sense out of our suffering, and gives us hope to get through the dying, so that we can get on with the living.

Because I want you to get on with the living, I will pray with Paul that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. And I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of our Cosmic Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Amen. [Ephesians 4:16-19]