

Is There Hope for a World Gone Wrong?

Colossians 1:15-20

January 16, 2022, AM

Pastor Dale Evans

Introduction

If nothing else, the last 4-5 years should have taught us that the world is “messed up.” We have seen threats, direct and indirect, from world dictators both militarily and subversively. We have experienced a roller coaster of economic changes. We have watched our own country practically convulse over political ideology. We have witnessed one tragic weather catastrophe after another. We have watched news reports of countless mass shootings in public places, some even by children. We have had the experience of new illnesses flex their virulent muscles. Many of us personally have seen the passing of loved ones for a variety of reasons. We have watched friends and loved-ones struggle with fear, doubt, and sorrow.

And even though we think that things are worse now than ever, that is probably not completely true. These same conflicts, disasters, wars, cultural upheavals, and pestilence have occurred many times over the course of history. In and of themselves this is nothing new. It might be “newish” to our particular country and time, but not truly new. One thing that we are observing to be coming apart is the complacent faith we place in the social fabric of our family, culture, country, and even the entire world to hold together our lives to make sense of the whole. And even that has never changed. Every generation since the beginning has tried to maintain a sense of wholeness and self that is based on and derived from the stability of what seems to be going on around them. In fact, nearly every religion’s history has some connection to social change and how it has been born or changed either to move forward or at least hold the course in its story. The Bible is replete with narrative after narrative of self-determined folk trying to move themselves and those around them through this life. And the final assessment of these endeavors is universally dismal. And yet, from the Scriptures themselves, we see (indeed are forced to see) that God has a plan and purpose. And, mostly despite our own designs, He is working to move the world along its intended course, reminding us that He is the ultimate reason for existence and meaning.

In fact, throughout the preaching at Clearcreek Chapel this past year from the Gospel of Matthew, we have seen how Jesus of Nazareth has entered the world as a fulfillment of the Old Testament narrative and promise. This Gospel presents Jesus clearly as “the one” who alone is able to subdue and free the world from its bondage to this plague of sin, rebellion, and pride. One thread to note in the flow of Matthew is his response to the various religions of the day. Those who are in a sense ignorant of God, indifferent to God, rebellious toward God, or trying to substitute something “better” for God are all called to Jesus himself for correction, challenge, and cure. God has come, in the person of Jesus, to reorient, recover, reclaim, and redeem this fallen world.

When Russ has finished the series through Matthew's gospel, we soon will be hearing preaching through Paul's letter to the church in the city of Colossae. They were being challenged in much the same way as our contemporary culture is. They lived in a situation where their economy was shrinking. They were experiencing their freedom and autonomy being continually threatened. The religious world was swirling around them with a dizzying mix of old and new, traditional and innovative, conservative and creative. We will be challenged to take a closer look at the story and text of this great epistle in a few months, but I have chosen this excerpt from this letter to highlight the day as we come together this morning. This Sunday has been designated in many churches and groups throughout the country as the "Sanctity of Life" Sunday. I think we will find that the Apostle Paul's thoughts here are quite pertinent for not only this "day" but for much of the struggle, grief, and "mess" that we are experiencing. It is a passage reminding and challenging this group of believers to see the situation around them, its confusion and even pain, through the lens of Jesus the Christ himself. They were reminded, just as we have been in Matthew, of the person and work of Jesus and its impact on how to think and live in this messed up world that is gone wrong. Let us see how we can be impacted in much the same way.

Christ as Creator (vs 15, 16)

In the opening exchanges of this letter, Paul includes a poetic portrayal of Jesus. Some scholars think he is quoting or using some poetry or hymn that was circulating and in use in the churches during their worship and teaching. Paul might have been the original poet as well. However, I only going to highlight some thoughts from this passage for this theme of the day. Pastor Russ will give a fuller discussion of this and its context latter in the year.

Suffice it to say for now that the passage unfolds in two or maybe three "stanzas". The first is found in verses 15 and 16. The second is in verse 17 and the beginning of verse 18. The third is from the second half of verse 18 to verse 20. The main division of parts is the phrase "he is." In verse 15 it is followed by the words, "the image." And in verse 18 it is followed by "the beginning."

In this first section we have a majestic presentation of Jesus (the "Son" is the immediate reference for this pronoun from verse 13) as the ultimate authority in the world. Let's read these two verses.

*He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.
For by him all things were created,
in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or authorities—
all things were created through him and for him.*

We read back in the book of Genesis that God created Adam and Eve to be his image in this world. The passage in verses 26-28 of chapter one goes like this:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

One aspect of this was to reflect His glory and extend His dominion in this world. But, because of their failure, that we could go on to read in chapter three, the world has become an absolute and unqualified "mess." It continued to go so wrong that God judged that world and in effect, started over with Noah with a covenant that reiterated but more clearly stated the sanctity of life that we are not going to take the time to read in Genesis 9:1-17. In a sense the rest of the Old Testament is a testimony to the continued failure of humanity to carry out this mandate to be the image of God in this world.

However, Immanuel came, "God with us", to reveal the Father perfectly as the image of God that Adam so famously failed in doing. Jesus of Nazareth, whom we are reading about and being challenged with from the Gospel of Matthew every Sunday morning, perfectly displays God and extends His dominion. And according to our passage before us in Colossians, this is because he has ownership of all creation. The term "firstborn" in most Biblical contexts implies right of inheritance and authority, not merely the first in the family birth order. In fact, his "firstborn-ness" is related to the fact that Jesus the Christ was the agent of its creation.

The text in its poetic form asserts that "all things" have been made by him. Note the parallel ideas that essentially means all, wherever and whatever that has been or will be made was made by Jesus, the Son. Everything, even that which has gone wrong, has been made by him, through him and even for him.

We may fret, despair and fear what is wrong with the world. We may struggle to find purpose and order. We may think we have to somehow do something to "fix" everything. We may even think we are best to just give up. But Paul reminds the Colossians, and since we understand this letter to be part of our Holy Scriptures, us as well, that God has made all of this, even what seems to be lost.

Christ as Conciliator (18b-20)

Let's skip down to the third stanza which has many parallels to the first. Let's read beginning in the middle of verse 18.

*He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
that in everything he might be preeminent.
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
making peace by the blood of his cross.*

At first, we might think we are reading another allusion to Genesis since we see Jesus is the beginning. But we are immediately oriented with the next theme. Jesus has risen from the dead. Not in the sense of merely to "come back to life", other stories in the Bible portrays the resuscitation of individuals. No, Jesus is the, again, that term, the "firstborn" from the dead. And then we see the power of the word firstborn elaborated, that in "everything" he might be preeminent. God himself had come to earth, and in his death and resurrection He will reconcile ("fix" if you will) all this for him.

The Colossians should see that the purpose of the gospel work of Jesus was to remedy the wrongs of the fallen, dark world. God himself is the only one to fix this and Jesus must be "the dwelling of the fullness of God" for this to be true. As Jesus the Son, he came and can "reconcile" all things. Note the poetic parallel again this time as "earth and heaven." And he does so in his cross work, that enigma of plans and purposes, that this is accomplished. It may not seem like it yet, but he has decisively defeated the enemy and has made peace. In the resurrection and ascension, he is the principal figure of history, in our text referred to as "the beginning", or "the first."

Christ as Center (17-18a)

But the center of this poem (could the end of first stanza or complete stanza on its own) has a reminder for us in the confusion of life. You see, we must believe that Jesus is both creator and redeemer. To become a believer is to affirm that all competing "fixes" fail in the face of Jesus. The Colossians had been commended for their faith in God and love for each other based on the hope of their eternal inheritance. They have been praised for their forward thinking. But that doesn't always seem to answer our problems in the moment, does it? The Colossians faced opposition and temptation on how to work through the issues of life and the day. Later in the letter we will read that they were "shown," by others, ways to move forward and enhance their "Christian" beliefs to bring themselves to a better place and more advanced spirituality, one that defeats their fear and despair perhaps.

But in the center of this poem, we read that Jesus is the center himself. Let's read verses 17 and 18.

*And he is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body, the church.*

Jesus knows what they are going through since he is both temporally (related to time) and positionally (related to space) before all things. His is the authority figure they should trust in their lives together. Their relation to each other as church is a significant component to keeping Jesus central in their thinking.

But at the center of this passage, we find that in fact, in Jesus, all things "hold together." This world only makes sense in the context of Jesus and his person and work. Nothing else explains life, its ups and downs, its struggles and fears, its victories and defeats except through and in Jesus. How can you make sense of the world? It is physically and metaphysically "held together" by who Jesus is and what he accomplishes. We must interpret all of life, good and bad, the calm and the mess in, through, and for Jesus.

Reflect and Respond

God, in, through and for Christ has made this world. We currently live in the broken version of it, but it is not outside of his plan and purpose. Do we really believe this? Do we just sometimes say we believe this and yet our actions and emotions speak otherwise? We must constantly remind ourselves of God, his greatness, and his design. We must remember God's wisdom, power, and love. We too frequently think we are somehow left alone in this mess. We often think that we are in charge. No! God, in, through and for Christ has made this world.

God's plan for peace is through the gospel of Christ. The work of Jesus in his death on a cross and resurrection to new life is the key to theological and social reconciliation. It is not going to be found in a social agenda, a political theory, or an economic plan. It cannot even be worked out in good deeds with altruistic motives to help our fellow man. We cannot construct the heart change that occurs only through the power of the gospel. We will struggle and fail if we refuse to give the precedence Christ requires and demands. Are we committed to this, or will we continue to bring a gospel of our own making to the mess of the world? We must remember that God's plan for peace is through the gospel of Christ.

God intends for us to trust, rest, and rely on Jesus. When life goes wrong (in a world gone wrong), remember in Him all things hold together!