

Third Sermon: December 8th

Slide #1: Advent #2, title, “Knowledge and Power”, text, Colossians 1:3-14

Slide #2: Advent is a time to focus on the incarnation of God’s Son. This year perhaps we could ask what it would take in our lives to be capable of being called as Mary was. Galatians 4:18-19, when we share the gospel we act as mid-wives in the rebirth of the soul by the Holy Spirit

Question 1: What do you think it would take in your life to be able to do “great things for God”?

Question 2: What might be some “great things” God would ask you or others to do? (You might want to look at slide #4)

Slide #3: God alone brings life to dead souls

- He does so by His Word
- The Spirit illumines the heart and mind (Romans 10:17)
- It is God alone and not the zeal of the evangelist: Romans 9:1-3
- It is God alone and not the zeal of the “seeking lost”

Question 3: According to God’s Word, how is a person saved?

Slide #4: What does it take to love deeply, to care passionately, to strive ceaselessly and yet know that in the end there is little you can do to bring the blessing so desperately needed?

We are not speaking of “super-heroes”
We are speaking of “love-power”

Slide #5: Colossians 1:9-14.

There are two errors to avoid:

1. Applying the right medicine for the wrong disease
2. Applying the wrong medicine for the right disease

Slide #6: Christianity is unique

- God has come to us rather than we trying to get to Him
- In the incarnation God’s Son has become one of us to make God’s love “knowable” for us
- He is the Word & addresses our minds

Slide #7: God’s word of truth challenges our false thinking regarding

- ❖ Who God is
- ❖ Who we are in relation to God

- ❖ What sin is
- ❖ How to take care of sin in our lives
Jesus is the Lamb of God!

Question 4: Christianity shares many moral truths with other religions, but in what ways is Christianity different from all others?

Slide #8: Jeremiah 9:23-24

- Because of His love for the Father, the Son also loves humanity
- He gave Himself to a sacrificial death so we could be reconciled with the Father
- He removes the guilt and defilement of sin

Slide #9: These truths are not just hard to understand, they have become words without content, hollow words to our generation

- Therefore there are some who abandon the words
- ✓ Well intentioned but mistaken
- ✓ They disastrously mislead

Question 5: We often hear that Christian truth is so simple a child can understand and believe. This is true in one sense, but seriously misleading in another. According to the Bible, what does it take to understand and believe? (see Colossians 1:11-14 as well as Romans 10:17 and John 16:4-11)

Slide #10: Power, 1 Corinthians 4:20-21, *“For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.”*
A rod?
Love in a spirit of gentleness?
Colossians 1:29, *“For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”*
Gentleness is not powerlessness

Slide #11: The strength to be gentle with those who resist and reject you and the message of God’s love is greater than the power of the rod
Colossians 1:11, *“...for all endurance and patience with joy...”*
This is the goal of our endowment with the powerful strength that comes from God

Question 6: According to Colossians 1:3-14, what is God seeking to accomplish in us by strengthening us with His power?

Question 7: What characterizes the spiritually mature believer?

Slide #12: Two qualities in the empowered believer: joy and thanks – Romans 5:1-5

Question 8: Two qualities are pre-eminent in the mature believer: joy and thanks. How do these manifest themselves in your life and the life of believers around you?

Slide #13: The true Christian does not go seeking martyrdom as if suffering is inherently good

- ❖ The source of cause of joy is the hope of the glory of God
- ❖ And the supernatural strength we gain in standing for the Lord

Slide #14: The hope of the glory of God.

Christians take great joy in knowing God is glorified as we remain faithful:

The Christians own hope for glory is in God’s glory as the sum of His perfections or attributes are made known through them.

Daniel

Slide #15: Colossians 1:12, we are empowered according to God’s glorious might for endurance and patience with joy.

The Father’s grace has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light

Question 9: What is the Christian’s hope of glory?

Slide #16: Two forms of our qualification, passive and progressive

1. Passive is forgiveness and adoption, which are ours by gift
2. Progressive is the transformation of our thoughts, our desires, affections, loyalties, dreams and aspiration: the reforming and reordering of our loves

Question 10: In what two ways are Christians qualified to “share in the inheritance of the saints in light”?

Slide #17: Why not give yourself as a companion in the faith to someone? We have the power; we just need to put the power to work!

Today, as I mentioned before, we are continuing in our study of Colossians I. The title for the message is “Knowledge and Power”. The passage is Colossians 1:3-14. As I mentioned in the comments regarding Advent, the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. Most of us have struggled with this. We know that it is essential to articulate the faith. Yet it is easy, words are easy, but actions are hard. So we understand the distinction. As the world around us darkens spiritually, as the moral guidelines for our society erode and we have an increasing experience of moral confusion as well as moral perversion, our ability to trust one another continues to disintegrate. Not only do we cease to have as ready a trust in one another, but as has been measured and commented on by many people, our capacity to trust the institutions of our society goes down, our ability to trust even our government goes down, and we increasingly have a society in which we are guarded against potential danger which we cannot define but nevertheless we hide from. So it is troublesome. As was mentioned before Advent is a time for us to focus on the miracle of the incarnation of the Son of God. That is a defining reality for all Christians, that the Son of God Himself took on human flesh, the condition that you and I share, was born in our midst and lived a life that you and I could have lived beside Him.

Last week I challenged us to think about this question: what would it take in my life to be capable of being called by God as Mary was? [She was] an innocent young girl living in a rather back-water, ill thought of community, asked to become the husbandless mother of a child. That could not have been anything other than a most deeply frightening prospect. The question, then in light of the topic, which is “power”, is simply this: do we have the internal strength, do we have the fortitude of spirit and the depth of conviction to be called in such a way, to be challenged to live in the face of social scorn and rejection. That undoubtedly is what Mary would have faced as she carried the child.

It might surprise us, we don't often think about it in this manner, to realize that you and I are also involved in the birthing prospects. In Galatians 4:18-19 Paul actually makes this comment: *“It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, - and this is the portion that is important [for our present topic] – for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”* That is a deeply challenging statement, I think, for Christians of our persuasion. Our persuasion is that when a person makes a profession of faith, they say “I believe in Jesus”, they are born again and that is kind of the end of the process. But it is not the end of the process. I think that when you reflect upon the letter to the Galatians it is unquestionable that Paul is writing to a group of people who had made profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Yet he says, I am troubled about you; you are falling away from the faith. You are once again beginning to commit yourself to a series of good works by which you hope to secure your standing in the favor of God. What is going on with you? The point simply being this: that people who have made profession of faith in Jesus Christ thereafter can fall into terrible ignorance. Thereafter they can lose their way, lose sight of the truth, that they can become confused, they begin to practice things that simply do not fall within the context of the gospel. So there is a sense in which Paul in writing to these Christians says my sense of the matter is that we need to give birth to Christ in you again, that Christ needs to be formed in you again. I think it would be right for us to understand that he is saying that your minds need to be changed, your thinking needs to be changed, your heart needs to again focus on God and you need to once again rebuild your life on the foundation of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Born again indeed!

Later in this first chapter of Colossians Paul says this, *“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”* Scripture says that all who are truly saved are born again and Paul here tells us that to be born again is to have Christ formed in us. We know that it is God alone Who can actually bring about this divine work. Writing to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 2:16 Paul says, *“Who is sufficient for these things?”* Who indeed but God Himself? God alone brings life to dead souls. We know that. It is fundamental of our understanding of the sovereign work of grace. Only God is the source of life. Only God can overcome the death condition of our hearts and minds. Only God can set us free. We know how God does this. He primarily does this through His Word. The Spirit, as I mentioned earlier,

brings this Word to life. There are many people who read the Bible and never know what it has to say. There are many people who sit in churches like this. They read the scriptures, they hear the sermons, but it never penetrates. Their lives remain essentially unchanged. It takes the action of God to penetrate and actually bring life to the dead. We know that. Paul goes on to say that it is the Spirit of God Who brings life to the heart through the Word. So at some point in time, and I suspect that most of us in this room will be able to reach back probably at more than one time in our lives when all of a sudden a portion of the Word of God, it is like somebody turned the light on. It leapt of the page and you thought, “Wow, my goodness; this is talking to me!” That is precisely correct. Suddenly it ceases to be an ancient book filled with thought of men, interesting thing to think about, and all of a sudden it becomes a word directed to you. Indeed, that is exactly what needs to happen. It is the Spirit of God that causes that to happen as He comes over our lives.

Romans 10:17 says, *“Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.”* None of us this Christmas can give the gift of faith to someone else. We can’t do it. If it were possible for a human being to actually give the gift of faith to someone else, I can tell you who would have done it: the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul says of his brethren the Jews, “I would be willing to be accursed and go to hell if I could just give faith to my brethren, for they have a zeal for God but it is a zeal of ignorance. They do not know anything about the righteousness of God and they are trying to earn their own. Oh, if only I could somehow break through! But I can’t! It is only God.” That is one reason why it is so essential that the Word of God remains central in our thinking and in our witnessing, because it is the testimony of the Word of God itself that says it is when the Spirit of God illuminates the Word of God that faith is born in the heart and a person is saved. In the light of Galatians what Paul says about those rather confused [Galatian] Christians is that it is the power of God which is able to undertake the ongoing work of rebuilding that life so that it has the character of Christ instead of wandering in confusion.

These truths then present a profound question to us. Here is the challenge: let me phrase it this way. Let us say that I have become friends with Ian Carlisle and he is not saved. I am a good friend of Ian. As David says of Jonathan, my soul is knit together with this man, but he is not saved. There are two things that I know based on the Word of God. I know that I must continuously present the gospel and the love of God to my brother. I have got to do that. But I also know that I am incapable of saving him. Now I am going to state that in a broader statement: What does it take to love deeply, to care passionately, to strive ceaselessly and yet know in the end there is little you can do to bring about the blessings in the lives of those you love that they desperately need. I know enough about this congregation to know that there is more than one person in this room who loves deeply and cares passionately for someone who is not saved and has not been for a long time. I appreciated the comment earlier that in an age in which social order collapses, shared values disintegrate, you receive no reinforcement in the things you hold most true, there is a completely understandable tendency to withdraw, to disengage, to say, “I am not going to stick myself out someplace where I am not wanted.” That is one level of dysfunction that we wrestle with. Here is another, here is one wherein in the most intimate relationships that we have sometimes, where we are bound up closely with people we hold in high regard and sweet affection, yet there is within those relationships a chasm, and you say, “For all that I do to reach over this chasm, my hand cannot reach over to the other side. I can’t do it!” There is only one hand that can, that is the hand of God. The question is, how do I find the strength to persevere? How do I find the strength?

I think sometimes people speak as if what we need to become are spiritual giants, super-heroes of the faith. But you and I know that we cannot live with the maximum of intensity every hour of every day. It is not possible. In fact in John 4 there is a beautiful illustration of the distinction and misunderstanding of the nature of power and invincibility and the reality of vulnerability in being truly human and witnessing for Christ. This is when Jesus, you might recall, was traveling with His disciples. He was on His way back up to Galilee and they came to the town of Sychar in Samaria. What we are told is that Jesus, the Son of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit grows weary. In His weariness and His thirst He sits down beside a well. His men go into the town of Sychar to buy food and Jesus is

tired and He sits. Because He is sitting by the well He is there when the woman comes from Sychar to get water. Christ was weary in body, but He was not weary in Spirit or soul. That is what you and I should look for. It is not possible for physically finite creatures to be continuously, forever on top of their game. You might consider that if you always want to be on top of your game, you may blow by people who are in need.

When you consider the challenge of being faithful to God, we are not talking about looking for super-hero type powers. These are irrelevant when it comes to matters of the soul. A proper understanding of the nature of [this kind of] power is essential if we are going to be mature Christians. Consider this: a mother rises at 2:17 am after already few hours of sleep to tend her sick child. Why does she do that? Because she loves her child. Perhaps a father sets aside the weight of disappointed dreams and the reality of aching bones and weariness of body as he heads off to his second job. Why does he do that? Because he loves his family and he would not see them in want. That is like the divine power of God. He loves us.

What we need is to find the power of love. Where do we get this “love-power” to keep on extending the gospel of God’s forgiving, life-giving grace to those who seem bent not only on refusing the offer, but also the one who offers it. I am not speaking now of God; I am speaking of us when we offer and the offer is refused and so are we. How does one do that? I believe that is the dimension of reality, the level of power that Paul is talking about when he speaks about knowledge and power to the Colossians.

Please turn to Colossians I. We will be looking at just verses 9-14. This is what Paul says. Again, he is writing to a group of Christians. They are believers. He is encouraged by them. In fact he begins this passage, you might recall from last week, by saying, *“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints. . .”* So [Paul] is rejoicing in that. But dropping down to the ninth verse he says,

(1:9) And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, (1:10) so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (1:11) May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, (1:12) giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (1:13) He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, (1:14) in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

There are two errors you always want to avoid. You don’t want to have the right medicine for the wrong disease, and you don’t want to apply the wrong medicine for the right disease. You just don’t want to get confused on those things. What is the nature of Christianity, what is the nature of its message, what does it say to us, what is its most fundamental statement to us? We are familiar, I think, I would hope, with the often stated truth that separates Christianity from virtually every other religion. That is that God in our understanding and according to the revealed word given to us, that God comes to us rather than us going to God. That is the fundamental reality. Already I mentioned the fact that we are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are therefore incapable of going anywhere. So the great message of the Christian faith is that God has taken the initiative to himself come to where we are, to find us and then to set us free. That is the heart of the incarnation: God has become one of us in order to bring God’s love to us, to make God’s love knowable to us. The love of God, we need to understand, this word is among other things the Word of truth. I have mentioned this already. God addresses His love to us, to our understanding. God addresses our minds. His Word of Truth challenges the false thinking that dominates the human mind regarding Who God is, regarding who we are in relationship to God, and regarding what sin is. All of these are fundamental to God’s message of love to us. Lastly, at the core is the message as to how sin is to be taken care of. How do we take care of this problem?

We are told that God’s love for us is such that He sent the Son of God to become a man and to take upon Himself as our representative the full cost of the offense of our sins against the justice, sovereignty and holiness of God the Creator. This is why Jesus is called the Lamb of God. He is called the Lamb of God because He is literally a sacrificial lamb who dies for the sins of others. We know this. But what sometimes I think is overlooked is the nature of the affirmation that lies in what Jesus has done. Jesus was without sin, that is why is considered to be a lamb, He is without sin, He is utterly pure. He did not need to die, so He died for love’s sake. He died for love – and here is where it is essential – we usually say He died because He loves us so much. Well, He does. But He does not love us as much as He loves His Father. Jesus dies for love of the Father, and the Father’s perfect justice, holiness and sovereignty. When Jesus is on the cross giving His life, what He is saying to the Father is, “I agree: sin is death-worthy! No God could be just and simply overlook the reality of sin and its degradation of the creation of My Father. I love My Father and all His works enough to die to satisfy His justice, affirm His holiness, confirm His righteousness.” That is part of the blood that pours.

This morning we are going to be celebrating communion or the Lord’s Supper. As we do so I hope that we will reflect that when we take the elements, the bread and the wine, that we are saying, “Yes” to the justice and the holiness and the righteousness of our God, and not simply saying, “Yes, He saved me!” For this is essential for our understanding of the whole purpose of God in our redemption. In Jeremiah 29:23-24 the prophet says this, *“Thus says the Lord, ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches. But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.’”* “I delight.” So I think we can begin to understand that it is because of His love for the Father that the Son loves us, for the Father made us. Jesus gave Himself to a sacrificial death so that we could be reconciled to the Father. He wants the Father to be blessed by the reunion with His children.

So not only sin’s guilt forgiven but the defilement of sin is removed. The defilement of sin is removed. Sin defiles. This is one reason why as Christians as we come to a deepened understanding of the gospel and the nature of God’s righteousness and truth we have a deepening abhorrence of sin. You do not want to dirty your hands, to dirty your feet, you do not want to dirty yourself with sin after you have been cleansed. Oh, yes, *“God is faithful to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all righteousness,”* and how precious is that cleansing! No wonder you want to confess your sins: you want to be clean. Jesus died for the removal of guilt, a judicial problem, and He died that we would be clean, not defiled, which is why ongoing confession is part of the Christian life for those who understand.

The things that I have just said I fear many no longer preach. They have given up preaching it. They have because such things are not just hard to understand, but in fact they have become words without content, they are hollow words, words without meaning. If you do not ground your thinking in the Word of God revealed, then the things I have talked about are too abstract, they are too far removed from our sensibilities. So consequently I fear that there are more than a few who simply leave these words aside. They do not say they are untrue; they do not say they don’t believe them. They just simply set them aside in preference for other words, things which more directly and in ways more readily discerned address the thoughts and concerns of people around us. I think that such pastors are well-intentioned, but I think they are profoundly mistaken. More than that, I fear that they disastrously mislead those who listen to them. We can see why this is true if we look down to Colossians 1:11-14. Notice what Paul says: he says he is praying for them, *“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”* When those who seek to instruct and guide God’s people cease to speak of such things as righteousness and holiness and sanctification and forgiveness of sins; when they cease to do that they are applying the wrong medicine for the sinner. Sinners need to hear these things and to know them in order to understand the grace of God.

The first thing that we encounter in that little passage, in verse 11 is the very thing we are looking for. I brought [this] up earlier. There Paul says the kingdom of God is not – excuse me, this is from I Corinthians 4:20-21, *“For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?”* Colossians 1:11 says, *“May you be strengthened with all power.”* We are focusing on [the] power that is at issue here. If you attend closely to what Paul says in I Corinthians 4:20-21 I think you will hear that Paul is making an equivalency, an equal-ness, a balance between two things that we would probably not normally balance. He says, do you want me to come in the power of God (I am adding [God] in) with the power of the rod, or do you want me to come with gentleness? Both of these are a manifestation or demonstration of God’s divine power. What Paul refers to as the energy of God which God powerfully works within him: Colossians 1:29 says, *“For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”*

Gentleness is not to be confused with powerlessness. On the contrary, if you take in the full scope of biblical teaching I think you will find the strength to be gentle with those who resist and reject both you and the message of God’s love is a greater power than the power of the rod. The strength to be gentle, to persevere in the kindness, the loving-kindness, the longsuffering kindness of God with those who reject and refuse: that is power indeed. Really, beloved, what do we understand to be the glorious might of God? Is it the fiery destruction of all things at the end of the age of grace? That is what Peter talks about; in the end what is going to happen to everything? [It will go up in flames!] If you are an advocate or devotee of most modern adventure films and video games, blow-em-up! But is that power? Regardless of our perspective of the matter, Paul goes to say in v. 11 that we have received God’s power that we might have endurance with patience. God does not intend to make us supermen, creatures which transcend the creaturely limits which God Himself set in place when creating us. His intention, his plan is to make us into spiritual people, creatures who live as those who are more than conquerors over every evil and adversity as we rely on God. Beloved, Paul describes us as more than conquerors in his letter to the Romans. But you might recall that he calls us more than conquerors immediately after having said, *“For Your sake we are being killed all day long and regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”* Have we forgotten how evil men can be? Have we forgotten the miraculous power to endure which God gives to those who love Him? We need to remember both.

There are two qualities that stand out in Paul description of the empowered believer in Colossians 1:11-12. Those two qualities are [these]: joy and thanks. He says, *“May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks. . .”* In Romans 5:1-5 we again hear the same note of joy. Listen to this.

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

Wow! Did you hear what I just read? Wow!

I am prevailing on the time we need to take together as believers in Christ. You are going to miss my brilliant comments regarding Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but it is better to spend time with the Lord.

Let us pray: our heavenly Father may You Spirit grant to us understanding hearts and minds transformed as we understand by Your grace according to the truth given to us so that we our Father will indeed have Your power to endure, indeed to respond obediently to any thing and all things that You would ask of us, for we know You would only ask because You love us. We ask, our Father, in Jesus’ name. Amen.