

In the name of the most high Trinity, and holy Unity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One month ago today, a fire burned down Balsora Baptist Church in Bridgeport, TX. While firefighters were fighting the fires, the roof of the church collapsed on them. But, in the midst of all the charred rubble of destruction, a single cross still stood. Weathered, but triumphant. The Volunteer Fire Department later posted on Facebook, “A devastating loss to our community, but a sight to behold. The fire took the [church] structure, but not the cross. A symbol that the building was just that, a building.”¹

That scorched cross standing in the midst of real destruction is a powerful image. Because, as Christians, the cross is at the core of our faith. The cross is at the center of the Christian message. We put the cross front and center of our worship spaces. The cross leads us in processions, and we all follow behind. We wear crosses as jewelry and use it as decoration. I know Allie and I have several crosses, if not dozens, on the walls at home. And, the lace on my surplice is made up of a cross pattern repeated over and over and over. The cross is ubiquitous for good reason, because it’s the most identifiably Christian symbol available. The cross is everywhere, because it’s the very symbol of Jesus’s life-giving death for us.

Now, it has been about three months since Lent and Holy Week. During that penitential time, it seemed we would focus on the cross, the whole cross, and nothing but the cross. But now we’re in this long green season, the Season after Pentecost. And in this season, we tend to focus on other aspects of Jesus’s life and ministry, like his teachings and miracles.

But, Paul in our Epistle reading from Colossians today reminds us what is at the very center of our identity as Christians. He pulls us back to the central reality of our faith, the Good News of Jesus Christ: The Good News that God became human, and Jesus suffered death and crucifixion for our salvation, and then he rose from the dead. So, this morning, I want to spend some time with this reading from Colossians.

Our reading begins with a hymn of the Early Church. This hymn ponders the age-old question “who is Jesus Christ?”. Who is he? Many in our 21st Century American culture might like to think of Jesus as nothing more than a good moral teacher. A nice teacher that was able to bring people together across divisions. And, Jesus was definitely a great teacher, teaching many ideas that ran counter to the common sense of the world. Even Roman and Jewish opponents of Christianity would stipulate that Jesus was a faith healer and teacher. But, if that’s all Jesus was, if he was ONLY a nice, moral teacher, then our gathering here today in 2022 makes zero sense. Because, there’s got to be at least a bit more going on. So, what does Paul and this ancient hymn say?

The hymn begins, “Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God.” That’s an odd statement: Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In our culture we are constantly surrounded by different images.

¹ https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=5412088655583627&id=274526856006525&p=30

I have always liked to go to all of the art museums I can to look at various paintings and other artistic images. One of the most impressive paintings I've seen was *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze. This painting depicts the surprise attack of the American forces in the Revolutionary War on December 26, 1776. Seeing it in person eight years ago, I was surprised by its sheer size, roughly 12 feet by 21 feet. The image centers on George Washington leading the continental army while standing stoically in a boat with an American flag right behind. And it's so huge, Washington and his men are basically life-size. It's an iconic American painting.

And because it's an image, the painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* takes this now invisible reality, a historical moment in the Revolutionary War, and makes this moment visible and relatable in a new way, a way that we can still sense today.

Paul is reminding us that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Christ shows us who God is, as an imprint of the divine in the world. God is outside our material reality. But Jesus depicts who God is, God's own nature, to us. Jesus makes known God's loving nature in our world and all of creation.

The hymn that Paul is quoting continues that Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together". This is huge. This is cosmic. This goes beyond even this world. Because, Christ is the ultimate foundation of the entire universe.

In the Christian proclamation and message, God, through whom all things have existence, who is beyond the created order, entered creation in the person of Jesus. He who is outside time and space, lived and died in first-century Roman-occupied Palestine.

In fact, the crucifixion and death of Christ reorients the entire universe. It refocuses all of creation, the whole cosmos. As Paul says, "Through [Jesus,] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross".

This last assertion by Paul, "making peace through the blood of his cross", is shocking. Or, at least, we should be shocked. At the time Paul wrote this letter, the Roman Empire was at peace. This period of peace would come to be known as the Pax Romana. This Roman peace was brought by the Caesars and was enforced by the sword and crucifying rebels. This peace was simply a lack of war and aggression against the empire, not a true, or even, lasting peace. It was a peace brought by a police state. The Roman *modus operandi* was to maintain a human peace throughout the empire by spilling someone else's blood.

By contrast Paul says that Jesus "[made] peace through the blood of his cross". Jesus brings true and everlasting peace by his own blood spilled on a Roman cross. Jesus's action is completely backwards from how the Roman empire operated. And Jesus's action is completely backwards from how our 21st century world operates. How God operates in the world disrupts and reorients what we might think as the "normal" human order of things. God brings full peace and

reconciliation. God makes whole our fractured relationship with him, by giving Jesus Christ to die for us. The divine *modus operandi* in Jesus is to bring the true and everlasting peace by spilling Jesus's own blood on Golgotha.

It should give us pause to think that God acts differently than we do as humans. But, I think it is also cause to rejoice. We should celebrate God's way of bringing real peace and reconciliation. And then God calls us to proclaim this message in our words and deeds.

Paul says, "I became a servant of this good news". This Gospel. The Greek word for Good News and Gospel is *euangelion*, which is where we get the words evangelism and evangelist. In the days of the Roman Empire, the Caesars and other rulers would send out heralds to tell their *euangelion*, the Good News of their accomplishments, like maintaining an earthly peace by bloodshed.

By using that word, *euangelion*, the Good News, Paul is saying this is God's real message of true peace to be shared with everyone. And, Paul acts as a servant and herald of this Good News. This Gospel message is of deeper significance than any worldly *euangelion*. In fact, Paul says, the Good News of God "has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven." Caesar's messages of a temporary peace brought by the sword might circulate throughout the empire. But, God's Good News of peace is heralded to all of creation. This Gospel matters to the entire universe, to all things seen and unseen. It is cosmic.

Paul then calls us to live "without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard." We should put our hope in this message of God's redeeming and peacemaking power. For Paul this Good News of peace is something we can and should hang our hat on.

A month ago, a fire burned down a church building. The weathered, charred cross stood its ground, victorious. From my limited experience on this planet, I know that at times fires can seem to be all around. The roof seems to collapse in. Destruction seems to be the only way we might get out of a situation. That's sadly the way life can be. But, the Good News of Jesus Christ is the cross stands victorious for us to cling to. In the midst of seemingly total destruction, the cross remains triumphant for us to run to for shelter. Jesus's blood spilled on the cross brings total peace and redemption for all of creation. His death brings us complete reconciliation with God and a reorientation to God's way, not the world's way.

"Savior of the world, by your cross and precious blood you have redeemed us; save us and help us, we humbly beseech you, O Lord."²

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² BCP p. 455