

Jesus is Lord!
"Leader of the Free World"
November 8, 2020

Overarching theme: In 2020, FUMC will be a **GO** church!

Instructions:

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. *The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.*

Core Point:

The past is the past. There is nothing that can be done about it. The past can only be used to gain wisdom for the future. What can change is the future. When we, as God's people, are willing to follow God in our daily lives, God will make a good way in the future. The way may be bumpy at times and have curves, but the process will be filled with God's love and grace.

Colossians:

Most important for understanding Colossians are the circumstances to which Paul's responding. Colossians 2:8-23 indicates that the Colossians are facing temptation to turn to distinctively Jewish practices, such as circumcision (Col 2:11), food laws (Col 2:16), and Sabbath keeping (Col 2:16). Some scholars propose that these verses suggest a form of early Jewish Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a religion that seeks special knowledge in order to escape from this corrupt world. However, the material in Colossians 2 is better explained by the potential appeal of Judaism to non-Jewish converts to Christianity.

Throughout, the letter demonstrates that Christ is better than all alternative means of salvation. It insists that Christ is enough for salvation: no additional knowledge or special Jewish practices are needed. Christ created the universe and set it free from hostile powers. His story shapes the story of the world and of all the people in it. Those who wish to know the great secret of how God will restore the world need only listen to the openly declared gospel of Christ (Col 2:2). The future hope for the whole universe (Col 1:20), and everyone in it (Col 1:27-28), is known in Christ. Freedom from enslaving powers (Col 1:16) and transformed lives that please God (Col 3:1-17) are known only in Christ. The death and resurrection of Christ decide the fate of the universe.

-adapted from the CEB study bible, pp 381-382 (NT)

Reflect on these Scriptures:

Colossians 1: 15-20 NRSV ¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in^[a] 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. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in^[b] him all things hold together. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ 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.*

Commentary:

Taking for granted the church's long tradition of worshiping Christ as God or becoming preoccupied with questions about the background of the Christ hymn can both, in their different ways, lead to overlooking the staggering claims of its content. For the writer, talk about the cosmic Christ is not about some abstract idea, not about the personified figure of Wisdom. Rather, as he has underscored through the terminology of "blood" and "cross," it is about a crucified person: Jesus. It must have taken a subsequent event of some magnitude to bring about the identification of a near contemporary, who had been ignominiously executed, with the assertions of this hymn. Early Christians held, of course, that this event was not just an inner experience of forgiveness or reconciliation on the part of Jesus' followers, which, as in 1:21-23, was seen as a consequence of what had happened to Christ, but was the raising of Christ from the dead, which led to the designation of him as "firstborn from the dead."

Today there are many, both Christians and others, who have a renewed interest in the historical Jesus of Nazareth but who are at a loss about how this is to be related to the church's confession of Christ as the second person of the Trinity. A sympathetic attempt to enter into the thought world of the Christ hymn may not only be enlightening about this early stage in the development of belief about Jesus, but it may also help in our own endeavors to understand both the humanity and the divinity of Christ. Without a belief that God raised Jesus from the dead or some experience of Christ's aliveness, there is little incentive to think of Jesus as any more than a Jewish prophet, sage, social revolutionary, or healer. But once we share that same essential starting point with early Christians, we face similar questions about the status of the resurrected Jesus.

Study of the hymn shows that early Christian thought moved from what was believed about Christ on the basis of his resurrection and of believers' experience of salvation through him to what he must have been from all time.

Some will have a more urgent and existential question about assertions of the hymnic passage. What does it mean in a world of fragmentation, suffering, and confusion to repeat its claim that all things cohere in Christ or that they have been reconciled in him? It reflects an absolutely basic conviction that, despite the vastness of the cosmos, its determinative principle is not impersonal. The God who is the ground of existence bears a human – face that of Jesus Christ. This means, too, that, despite fragmenting and chaotic forces at work, we humans can trust that the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection is more fundamental and gives the power that sustains the world its distinctive character. So, although it defies present empirical verification, we confess that what holds the world together is not the survival of the fittest or an unending cycle of violence but the reconciliation and peace of Christ.

– adapted from the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, IX, 607-609.

This week – Leader of the Free World

Colossians was written in a time in which the fastest growing religion in the world at that time was not Christianity, but the *cult of the emperor*. Augustus had set a precedent, being declared the *Son of God* (adopted son of his deified father, Julius). Augustus himself was later deified post mortem (a practice which continued).

But the cult was so strong, the intoxication with power so great, many regions of the empire took pains to call the current Caesar *Son of God* and *Kyrios* (Lord, God), worshipping them during their lifetime to curry favor from their emperor-god. In some areas, shrines were set up where one was expected to burn incense and say "*Caesar is Lord*" on a regular basis, and those who didn't were particularly suspect and subject to blame if there was setback for Rome, a defeat or epidemic.

Colossians, written to a people experiencing all this and other aspects of uncertainty and upheaval, begins, after the introduction, with what scholars believe is this astonishing ancient Christian hymn. Colossians 1:15-10 was likely something that Christians in Colossae would have been familiar with and would have sung in worship.

When one considers the content, it is astonishing that a crucified Jewish peasant preacher, crushed by the heel of Rome, would be considered One in whom *all things hold together*. Why would these fiercely monotheist Jews write and sing this remarkable hymn claiming that this Jewish peasant preacher, Jesus, is Lord? They knew him – they were close to him. To claim that "*He is the image of the invisible God*" is tantamount to blasphemy unless early Christians had an unprecedented experience that first Easter convincing them that he was "*firstborn from the dead.*" The persecution they would experience, the distance they would travel (Thomas to India), the sacrifices they would make, and the martyrdom they would face is inexplicable unless they were absolutely convinced that *in him all the fullness of*

God was pleased to dwell. Why would they choose torture and martyrdom at the hands of those who said Caesar is Lord, their last words being “*Jesus is Lord,*” if this were a nice myth that they made up – some great pumpkin-like story that they conjured up?

Our citizenship is vital. Elections are important. They do have a great impact in these challenging days. But the **greatest impact** on our lives is not who resides in the White House, but in who resides and reigns in the human heart. Can you imagine the impact in this country alone if the 200 million people in America who profess *Jesus is Lord*, would live out those words? Worldly powers come and go, but Christians trust that the government will be on *his* shoulders (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus may not be ‘leader of the free world’, but He is the leader that frees the world, one person at a time.

Questions to Ponder for accountability in the group:

As you think about this passage, how can you respond to this Scripture:

1. If you lived in the Roman empire in 54 A.D. or so, how would you feel if you were asked to burn incense at the altar of the imperial cult and say “Caesar is Lord?” Would you have misgivings or would you just think “when in Rome...”?
2. When a person is confirmed in the United Methodist Church, they “promise to serve (Jesus) as their Lord.” When you think of the sacrifices early Christians (and contemporary Christians in some places) made for this confession, what does it mean for you today?
3. In the midst of this confusing political season, how do you try to live out your faith as a Christian and a citizen of this country? What are the tensions (if any) that you experience between your Christian faith and citizenship?
4. In the midst of uncertainty and anxious times, the Colossian Christians were reminded of the One in whom *all things hold together*. How is this reminder helpful for you today in these uncertain and anxious times?
5. The resurrection of Christ gave the Christians in the Roman Empire a hope that transcended their temporal aspirations. How is our hope in the ultimate victory of Christ helpful for us regardless of who wins a given election?

Activity for the life of a disciple:

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMC.
2. Ponder and pray on this Scripture this week: **Colossians 1:19-20 NRSV**
¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ 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.

3. Read the book of Colossians this week and reflect on how its' message was comforting for people in 54 A.D. and comforting for us today. Write down insights and seek to apply them in everyday life.
4. Pray for our country and leaders that whatever the election outcome, God's peace and wisdom would prevail in these days.