

Kirkwall Presbyterian Church
Sermon by Keith Marcy, January 2, 2022

In preparation for this morning, my goal was twofold:

1. To prepare a sermon that would read more like a story. Most people who call Kirkwall their home will be reading this since it will not be videotaped today.
2. To remind you, and me, and anyone reading this, that in this forever changing, panic stricken time, there are some very important facts that do not change – facts we can be absolutely certain of.

Come. Let us go on a trip back in time – about 2,050 years, to central Asia, to the town of Colossae. You will not need a coat, and you can leave your mask in your seat. The town lies in a fertile valley on the shore of the Lycus River. It is known for two agricultural products – extremely high-quality wool, and a purple coloured wood. In fact, you will likely be able to purchase an idol of Zeus, the Greek god, or of an angel made from this special wood if you wish. Colossae lies on a major trade route running between Ephesus and the Euphrates River. You will have no trouble getting a hotel room, or a hostel and, if it's your thing, you will have your choice of nightly entertainment.

As far as a place of worship, well there are plenty of choices. You could go and worship the Greek god Zeus. Or, you might be interested in worshipping angels, in particular Michael, who, it was claimed, opened a crack in the ground releasing a flow of ice-cold spring water. Or, you can join one of the Gnostic groups who believed the earth was created by a lesser god and that all matter is evil and therefore the great God will have nothing to do with it, except that a few people have a little piece of this great God in them and they will have eternal life. There are other groups who worship their traditions. And of course, you could go to the synagogue and worship with the orthodox Jews and live under the Pharisaic laws. Most Colossians grab a bit of this and a bit of that and come up with their own blended beliefs called 'syncretism' – much as predominates the religious climate in Canada in the 21st century. But why don't you come with me to the home of Archipus where the Christian church has been meeting.

The founder of this church was a native of Colossae by the name of Epaphras. He met Paul in Ephesus, a town 100 miles to the west during Paul's 3 year ministry there. He had been introduced to the risen Lord Jesus Christ, heard about His earthly ministry, His purpose in coming, His substitutionary death on the cross for the sins of all who believe. And Epaphras believed! He became a disciple. And he

studied under Paul until he felt ready to be a missionary. And where did he go? To the hardest mission field he could – back to his home town – Colossae – where many knew him!

I think we can safely assume he would have followed Paul's example and started with the Jewish people – those who had the Old Testament with all the prophecies concerning the Messiah. Some believed! Philemon was one, along with his slave Onesimus. The little church grew. Epaphras kept Paul informed so that later Paul could write:

'We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints – the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit'. (Colossians 1:3-8)

But where the Gospel is proclaimed, and people are brought from death to life through faith in Jesus, Satan is angry and he attacks. Subtly! He sends false prophets to deceive people; to raise questions in their minds; to whisper lies in their ears. The Bible calls false prophets 'wolves in sheep's clothing.' They look like a follower of Jesus – a sheep. They talk like a follower; they even act like a follower—to a degree! But their goal is to destroy, maim and kill. How do they do it? By altering the truth about Jesus and by chiselling away at His glory. "Oh yes, Jesus was a fantastic teacher – but He wasn't God," they say. "His miracles – oh yes – well they are rather impressive, but you know, Satan does miracles too." And they keep chipping away, bit by bit, until the virgin birth is questioned, His death and resurrection are denied, and all the time they are adding their own visions, promoting abstinence from certain foods, holding onto traditions as gospel, and denying the Biblical account of creation.

How do they get into a church? Like a weasel getting into a chicken coop! And once in, they begin, through smiling faces to exhibit their charm, cause divisions, and suck the life out of God's true believers.

By this time Paul is in a prison in Rome. How did he hear about this problem in Colossae? We are not told. But we do know that Philemon's slave, Onesimus ran away and went to Paul in Rome. Maybe he broke the news to Paul, "You won't want to hear this Paul, but all is not well in our church. No, Epaphras taught us so well, as you taught him. But some smooth-talkers have come in and told us that we do not have forgiveness of sins simply by believing in Jesus. We have to do more. We have to deny ourselves certain foods, and we must mutilate our bodies and participate in pagan festivals. Paul, tell me, Paul. Who is right?" And so, after Paul sends Onesimus back to Colossae and back to Philemon, he takes some papyrus, a quill and ink and writes a letter to the Believers at Colossae. Tychicus, one of his faithful helpers makes the long journey to hand deliver it to Archippus. Archippus has been burdened to the point of tears as he witnessed his brothers and sisters in Christ who have been gathering in his house, losing the joy of their salvation through Christ alone as these false teachers tear away at them. He rips open the letter. Paul has carefully worded his letter to first of all, remind the believers of their position in Christ.

"For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the Son He loves in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:13-14)

Can You picture Archippus reading these lines and the wrinkles of worry and stress leaving his face as he smacks his right fist into his left palm exclaiming, "Yes, that's it Paul. That is what we have in Christ – complete forgiveness!!"

Then Paul reminds the believers of the facts about Jesus which he taught to Epaphras and which Epaphras taught to all who would listen at Colossae.

He covers 4 basic, unchanging, precious truths.

Now before we read, look at verse 15 and see the word 'firstborn'.

This does not mean that sometime before creation Jesus was born. No. It refers to His position as heir – like the first son born to a King is the heir to the throne. So I am going to read the word 'firstborn' as 'heir,' for that is the meaning.

Read Colossians 1:15-20

Let me summarize what Paul has said, just as Archippus or Epaphras may have done for the believers at Colossae:

1. To know what God is like, look at Jesus.
To know what God says, listen to Jesus.
To know God's power and wisdom and thoughts, watch Jesus.
'...for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Him.'

2. For by Jesus, all things were created for Him. The 'big bang theory' and evolution have no place in Christianity.
3. Jesus existed with God the Father and God the Spirit before all things, and Christ holds His creation together. He sustains all things!
That is why we know that the sun will set in the west and rise tomorrow morning in the east. The earth tilts slowly, but precisely on its axis so that we know spring will come, then summer, then fall.
Christ holds all things together in spite of man's attempts to make a mess of it all.
4. Jesus, the risen Lord, is the Head of His church by His Spirit.

The believers at Colossae need to be reminded of these unchanging truths. God said, "I change not." (Malachi 3:6) Christ, being God, does not change either, except that for 33 years He took on a body of flesh like ours.

Why?

Paul answers that question for the Colossae believers in the next verses:
Read Colossians 1:21-22.

Have you ever been punished for something you did not do? It's not nice is it? The Scriptures declare that Jesus did no wrong. But on the cross the sins of the world were laid on Him. In the eyes of God the Father, God the Son became a murderer, an adulterer, a robber, a gossip, a liar, an abuser, a cheat, a fornicator, and on and on we could go. And He took the whipping, the spitting, and the taunting and bore the pain of death for things He did not do, but we did. And He died paying the just penalty of sin. Once the debt was paid God raised Him from the dead.

So, what does this mean for the believers at Colossae?

In verse 21 and 22 Paul wrote:

'Once you were alienated from God and were His enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now He has reconciled you, [forgiven you] by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation.'

In other words their forgiveness is complete.
They had Faith in Christ alone.
Nothing else required.

That is why Charles Wesley could write:

*'No condemnation now I dread:
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,'....*

Oh – and what of the false teachers? Well, we hope they had a change of heart. But in reality Archippus likely had to take them by the right ear and throw them out. Those who deny the Biblical reality of Jesus are often too proud to admit they are wrong.

Well, folks, we leave Colossae and come home. And what will we find?

Will we find a body of believers with Christ as their head?

Or have the false leaders chipped away at His Biblical characteristics and left us with a Jesus who is unrelated to God the Father and who cannot save anyone?

We must believe in the Biblical Jesus, Creator and Sustainer of the universe in whom dwells the fullness of God.

If we deny His virgin birth, we have an unbiblical Christ.

If we do not believe He died and rose again, we have a Jesus who cannot save you.

But if, like the true believers at Colossae, believe He was God in bodily form, who willingly took the sins of the world, including yours, upon Himself, and paid the just penalty by dying for them, then your demerits have been forgiven, and His merits are yours forever.

In response to this, your goal in life will be to live in obedience to Him alone.

In studying to prepare this sermon, I was greatly aided by the writings of Rosemary Bardsley from Queensland, Australia. She draws many truths from the grammar of the Greek Text and explains them in simple English. You can access her essays on the internet. Google: 1 Colossians 1 Rosemary Bardsley.

Mrs. Bardsley has published several books that are available online. They include 'Encounters with Jesus' and 'How to Deal With False Prophets.'