

Series: Lessons from the Lectionary

Today: Image of the Invisible

Text: Colossians 1:11-19

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, November 21, 2010 (Christ the King Sunday)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

At our 9:00 a.m. service we are seeking to incorporate a broader expression of the arts, and this morning we used animation as our art form. I had seen what we were going to use earlier in the week, but there was something about being with other believers in the context of worship which made this viewing more powerful for me.

The animation was a simple white line on a black screen with a jazz version of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” playing in the background. As the line progressed, the animated figure of a man, a woman and a donkey appeared, and off in the distance was the outline of a city. As the line went on, it led to a stable, a crèche, shepherds and angels. Then the line continued to a hill far away where there were three crosses. It was a two minute summary of the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It is the culmination of the ecclesiastical year when we gather to proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. After 51 Sundays listening to the story of his life, beginning with his birth and ending with the ministry of the church after he has ascended into heaven, today we proclaim that He is the only sovereign of the universe worthy of our complete allegiance. Today we finish the story, and next Sunday we will start it all over again and for another 52 weeks we will remind ourselves of the promise of God’s faithful love fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Why do we do this year in and year out? Why do we need to remind ourselves of this story over and over again? Perhaps it is because we human beings are so busy that we have a tendency to forget the things that are most important in the world. We become easily distracted by the artificial and the superficial, and we forget that the story of God’s gracious love and God’s faithfulness to the covenant is

the only story worthy of our allegiance. Our lives are busy. They are filled with activity upon activity which distracts us from the things which are of ultimate importance. So we tell ourselves the story over and over again in hopes that the telling will remind us of who we are and to whom we ultimately belong.

It always surprises me when people are candid about why they come to church. Some come out of habit; it is what they have done all their lives and today is no different. It is what one does on a Sunday morning. Some come under duress; they are here to please a family member or because they feel it is good for the children to have a Christian Education. Some come as a halting first step in search of a deeper meaning in their lives. Some come for the stained glass windows, the music, the flowers, and the fellowship.

Whatever the reasons are that drew you here this morning; it is my firm belief that there is a common denominator which all of us share. Given the opportunity to make a change in your personal life, or in the life of the world in which we live, I would be willing to wager that each of us would be willing to grab on to that opportunity. If we could wave a magic wand and not have to work for it, I would bet every single one of us has one thing in our personal lives or one thing in the life or in the society in which we live that we wish were different.

If you listened carefully to the text that was read from Paul to the Colossians, there was good news for you. God cares about the changes you want to make in your lives. Paul believes that if we take the Gospel seriously, it changes: 1) The Way we View the World; 2) Our Responsibility for It; and 3) Our Relationship with God.

The Way We View the World

I received an email several weeks ago from a man who is not a member of our church. In fact, he is not a member of any church. I met him through Alcoholics Anonymous, and I had experienced him as

a rather negative person. His email confirmed my suspicions. He said, *“I have learned the hard way that most people are not worthy of my trust, and that the whole business of trying to be honest and faithful as a friend isn’t really worth the effort. I guess you could call me a confirmed cynic. I find little in the world that I want to commit myself to, and more and more on the side of those religious zealots who preach the end of the world. I am ready to be through with the world as I have experienced it. I am looking for something better on the other side.”*

His letter left an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. He is obviously depressed and needs some help, and I am trying to offer him that help. However, like you, I find it hard to be around people who have given up on themselves and the world.

Paul faced a similar challenge in the Colossian church. He was arguing against a small but vocal minority of Colossian Christians who were espousing a heresy which had gained some traction in the early church. It was a heresy which said that divided the world as we know it into two parts: good and evil. For those who espoused this belief, only the spiritual order of things was good, and since God was a spirit, God could not have created the world because it was evil, and God therefore had no interest in the concerns of the world.

‘*Not so,*’ says Paul. Not only did God create the world, but God cared enough about it to take up residence on it in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we have the image of the invisible God. Frederick Buechner puts it this way, *“Christians believe that all ground is holy because God not only made it, but walked on it, ate, slept, worked and died on it. If we are saved anywhere, we are saved here. And what is saved is not some diaphanous distillation of our bodies and our earth, but our bodies and our earth themselves. One of the blunders which religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be more spiritual than God.”* [Source: *Wishful Thinking*, p. 43).

There are religious expressions of a more ascetic nature which would disassociate themselves from the world as it is. There are religious beliefs which place an emphasis on the world in which we live as evil and looking forward to the world that is to come. Some of these have found a home within the Christian church. However, biblical faith tells us that God is the creator of all things; right here and right now. And God is personally interested in what God created; interested enough to stake a claim on it in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our Responsibility for the World

Paul takes this concept one step further. He says that just as Jesus changes the way we look at the world, he also changes our feelings of responsibility for its outcome. If God loved the world enough to live on it and die for it, then by the power of the resurrection he has entrusted it into our hands. Christ's resurrection was the beginning of a new humanity in which we are the participants. What we say and do will be the vehicle through which God continues to make his claim on creation.

There is an old legend which recounts the return of Jesus to the pearly gates after his time on earth. Even on the other side he bore the marks of his earthly pilgrimage with its cruel cross and shameful death. The angel, Gabriel, approached Jesus and said, "*Master, you must have suffered terribly.*" Jesus nods, and Gabriel continues, "*And do they know now why you came? Do they understand how much you loved them, and what you did for them? Do they know that you want them to live in peace with one another?*"

Jesus replied, "*Oh, no. Not yet. Right now only a handful of people in Palestine know.*"

Gabriel appears perplexed. "*Well, what plans have you made to be sure that people will know what you have done for them and how should they live with one another?*"

“I have asked Peter, James and John and a few more friends to tell others the story. Those who are told will tell others, and soon my story will spread to the ends of the earth. Ultimately, all of humankind will have heard about my life and know what it can mean for them.”

Gabriel frowned and looked rather skeptical. He knew well the stuff of which human beings are made. He said, *“Yes, but what if Peter, and James, and John grow weary. What if the people who come after them forget? What if way down the road in the 21st Century people just don’t tell others about your story. Haven’t you made any other plans?”*

And Jesus answered, *“No, Gabriel. I don’t have any other plans. I am counting on them.*

We are responsible for the world entrusted to our care and for sharing the story of God’s redeeming love in Jesus Christ.

Our Relationship with God

Finally, Paul claims that what God has done in Jesus Christ has changed our relationship with the Creator of the universe. No longer is God the distant judge, remote and removed. God has taken the initiative. God’s intention is clear. Paul says that we are joint heirs of the Kingdom because of what Christ has done for us. We are children of the King, and we are brothers and sisters of the Prince of Peace. God desires to be the one to whom we give the honor and glory in our lives, and God is willing to pay whatever price is necessary to insure that we have allowed Him to take the reins; even if he has to pay the ultimate price in the sacrifice of his Son. God will not even allow death to have the last word.

Those of you who are Garrison Keillor fans have probably read his book *Leaving Home*. In it he tells a fictional story about a family from Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. Grace Tollefson married Alex Campbell back in the 1930s, a man who turned out to be a ne'er-do-well. They had three kids—Earl, Marlys, and Walter.

One day Alex left Grace. Penniless, she was forced to move back home to live off the kindness of folks there, enduring the relentless "I-told-you-so's" of her mother. It was humiliating. But one day they got a letter from a man in Philadelphia doing research on Scottish nobility, who asked who their ancestors were so he could look it up. Grace wrote the man back, and a few days later another letter came in the mail.

Though the envelope was addressed to Mrs. Grace Campbell, the letter was addressed to "Your Royal Highness." In the letter the man wrote: "Today is the happiest day of my life as I greet my one true Sovereign Queen." He went on to say that their branch of the Campbell family was first in the line of succession of the House of Steward, the Royal Family of Scotland. Keillor writes: [The line on the chart led] right straight to them: Earl, Marlys, and Walter. The Royal Family of Scotland living in Lake Wobegon in a green mobile home, furniture donated by the Lutheran church.

They were astounded beyond words. Disbelieving at first, afraid to put their weight on something so beautiful, afraid it was too good to be true, and then it took hold—this was grace, pure grace that God offered them. Not their will but His. Grace. Here they were in their same dismal place but everything had changed. They were different people. Their surroundings were the same, but they were different.

Years later, the youngest son, Walter, finds out the whole business was a fraud. But he never tells his mother or siblings, because thinking you are royalty, whether anyone else knows it or not, changes a person. At the end of the story, Grace is much older, and she says to her son:

Oh, Walter, what would I do without you? You're so strong. You're so good to me. You're a prince, you know. They can put a crown on a dog and call it a prince, but you are a prince through and through. They may not know it now, but they'll know it soon. Next year we'll be in Edinburgh with the bands playing and the flags flying and the crowds cheering.

On Sunday mornings, as we gather for worship, we are among unrecognized royalty. And it is no pipe dream! Your neighbors would never suspect it, of course—nor the folks in the other cubicles at work. But we can trace our lineage back to a great King, and we have it on the best authority that one day we will reign alongside him.

Peter says believers are a "royal priesthood," and in the midst of his great revelation, John saw that believers are "a kingdom and priests." Once we know this, like the story said, "Our surroundings are the same, but we are different." [Source: *Garrison Keillor, Leaving Home (Viking, 1987), pp. 140-141, 145*]

Conclusion

Today we celebrate that Jesus Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Because God chose to take up residence with us, it changes us. It changes the way view the world. It changes the responsibility that we feel for the world. Most important, it changes our relationship with God so that we know today and forever that we belong to him. Thanks be to God for the story of our salvation. Come, Lord Jesus, reign in us forever.