

## BEGINNING WITH THE BEGINNING

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto,  
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Colossians 1:1-20

Thank God for church fights! For divisions, squabbles, disagreements, controversy! For, without church fights, the New Testament would be very brief! Much of the New Testament was written in response to church fights. Especially, the letters of Paul were mostly written to those who were divided. They were written to defend, clarify, and challenge. Paul's intent was to remind them of the gospel to which they had first responded, the message that Paul preached and taught as he went about his missionary journeys, organizing these very churches. After a period of time, in Paul's absence, they became confused. Strong-willed people came teaching something different. New fads tempted them. Other bands came along, calling the new Christians to march in their parade. And Paul, when he heard, would dash off a letter--often vehement, excited, sometimes calm and composed--to defend the gospel, to call the Christians back to the basics, back to the beginning.

It is fitting that as we begin this ministry together, the lectionary passage (the suggested Bible readings for this and the next several Sundays) includes passages from Colossians, where Paul superbly discussed the "beginning." This sermon and the next several will deal with the basics of the faith as we begin together: BEGINNING WITH THE BEGINNING.

The Christians in the Colossian Church were being tempted and influenced by a combination of movements which were very popular among the people of that day. This was a time of upheaval. Alexander the Great had destroyed the old religions and the old social orders. People were floundering; searching for security, a community to which they could belong, structure, order and answers. The society of that day was very similar to ours today, where our social order is changing.

Into this vacuum came many movements. The cult that attracted the Christians in Colossae included elements of magic, astrology, secret traditions (if you possess a secret, you are superior to those who don't know), rigid behavioral code, and a belief system which included angelic beings who mediated between God and people. The Colossian Christians (some of them) named one of the beings "Jesus", thus merging the two movements. These angelic beings were called "Principalities, powers," words which you heard read in the lesson. This cult offered the people security, an ascetic behavior code, a belief system, and a demand for loyalty and allegiance.

Not only are we living in a similar period of upheaval today, but we are also living in a time where cults are attractive. I know three young persons who are converts to the Scientology cult. They--all from fine, active Methodist Christian families--have renounced their past, believe what they are told, go where they are directed. The Church of Scientology demands complete obedience and severance of family ties. Distrust of family is encouraged. Where are we failing as a church that our youth can be attracted by such cults? Paul's letter to the Colossians is of particular relevance to us today, for the same battles are being waged.

Not only, however, are we as individual Christians tempted by the cults and movements of our day; but the church itself is constantly pulled this way and that, tempted to go down roads that lead to disappointment.

It wasn't too many years ago that the Church was attracted by secular movements which told us that if we all got feely-feely with one another, express our deep feelings, lower moral standards so that we would do whatever felt good, the kingdom of God would be here! At that time in our history, we put the Bible on the back burner, followed

the fads, lost good people to movements like Creative Initiative, followed other philosophies, and practiced Eastern religions. We practiced other religions when we have yet to practice our own religion as Jesus taught us!

Now today the church is being seduced by fundamentalism, the Moral Majority, T. V. religion, and Second Coming enthusiasts. Again, we see the attractiveness of secret tradition. For many today claim they "know" when Jesus is coming again. They "know" something the rest of us don't, and so feel superior. Fundamentalism has elements of secrecy, security, strict behavioral code, loyalty and allegiance, and a belief system with all the answers.

Really, what is the church all about? What are the basics of the Christian faith? How do we live our individual lives successfully in this age in the midst of all the voices who sound so convincing? As we begin this ministry together, what is the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto? Where are we going? What are we to believe? What and whom do we follow? Do we do whatever works, whatever is popular? Sisters and brothers, let us begin with the beginning.

Paul spelled it out for us in his letter to the Colossians, summarized in 1:18: "Jesus Christ is the beginning."

The preceding three verses, 15-17, read: "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in Christ all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities--all things were created through Christ and for Christ. Christ is before all things, and in Christ all things hold together."

Jesus Christ is not just one of the angelic beings. He is not one of many gods. Jesus is not on a level with other religions or philosophies. Jesus is at the apex, in Christ all things were created. What does this mean?

It means primarily that Christians identify, understand, and relate to God as revealed in Jesus. As E. Stanley Jones has written, "Jesus is the best picture God ever took." To say that Christ is the image of the invisible God and that all things were created in and through Jesus Christ, means that God chose to reveal to all of us what life is all about through the person, the life, teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is not just a blob, a mystery, an abstraction, to Christians. To be a Christian means to believe that God is known through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we approach God through Jesus. We pray in Jesus' name, and approach God in the mercy and grace of Christ. We do not open ourselves to any other entity, or power, or force that is out there. We approach directly through Jesus Christ, in and through whom God revealed himself.

To turn that around: To believe that Jesus is the first-born of creation is to believe that God, the creator, was always like Jesus. God was not at one time austere, harsh, severe, full of judgment and wrath; and then suddenly become gentle, gracious and loving like Jesus. No, God was always like Jesus. Before time began, God was like Jesus. Even before Abraham, before the revelation to the Hebrew people, before the coming of Jesus, God was at the task of redemption. People ask, "What happens to people who lived before Jesus?" God is and was always loving, caring, redeeming. Wherever people live, whenever people lived, God creates, redeems, saves, loves.

Christ is not only the first-born of creation, Christ is also the goal of creation. "All things were created for Christ." This means that the purpose of God's creation and the end to which it is moving is revealed in Jesus Christ. Do you wonder sometimes where it is all going to lead? The pessimists wring their hands over the economic



situation, unemployment, rising inflation, threat of nuclear destruction, and ask, "Where will it all end?" We know! God is creating, redeeming, working for the kind of life Jesus lived; the love Jesus had for all people; the kind of justice Jesus perceived for the world where everyone, regardless of color, race, religion, sex, or nationality is treated equally; a world where the hungry are fed; a world where war is no more. That is the purpose of God in all that he does. His purpose is revealed in Jesus Christ.

What does this all mean? To us as individuals, and us as a church, what does it mean to believe that Jesus Christ is the beginning?

First, Jesus Christ is the unifying principle of our lives and our church. The force, the source of unity, the love which binds, is in Jesus Christ. We are not talking about an intellectual exercise alone. We are talking about power. The same power of creation that brought all things into being; the power that redeems; that power that raised Jesus from the dead; that power is still experienced in Christ through the Holy Spirit. We can experience it. We can be united. We can be redeemed. God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, is present to move in our lives and church. "In Christ all things hold together," Paul wrote. Isn't that beautiful? That is the source of unity.

Secondly, to believe that Jesus Christ is the beginning and the ending, is to find in Christ the criterion by which all movements, fads, and philosophies are evaluated. We are not immune from what is happening around us. There is a lot of good in the movements of our day. We are not to barricade ourselves from life. It is changing. New things are being discovered. We are in the midst of a revolution. As John Mac Donald has so aptly written about the current computer revolution, "machines design machines, projects so esoteric our pedestrian minds cannot comprehend them. It (the computer revolution) will be the biggest revolution of all, bigger than the wheel, bigger than Franklin's kite, bigger than paper towels." What exciting times! These are great days in which to be alive! What makes order out of the chaos is that we have a guide in Jesus Christ by which to evaluate, test, decide, choose and use what is good in all that is happening. Possibilities are opened by using the standards revealed in Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, Christ is our hope. We sang the hymn this morning, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness...On Christ the solid rock I stand." Oh, how we need ground for hope today. The ground is slippery, mostly mud and quicksand. The future looks dark to a lot of people. But we have hope. We are on solid ground because Christ is the end as well as the beginning. Look around and you can see many signs for hope. God is at work in our world. In the midst of cruelty, we see many signs of tenderness and concern. Slavery is abolished. Women are no longer second-class citizens. Color barriers are breaking down. People across the world are concerned about nuclear destruction. God is at work! God is working out his purpose in your life, in our church, and in the world.

Therefore, as Paul wrote so agonizingly to the Colossians in 1:9, "We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of Christ's will." Let us be about the business of knowing the will of God; the will of God for your life; the will of God for our church. Let us learn the will of God and do it!

This sermon will be continued as this is "heavy stuff!" We will continue to explore Colossians the next several Sundays.

Let us begin our ministry together at the beginning, in Jesus Christ, who is the first-born of creation, the goal of creation, our ground and our hope.

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FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
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