

**The Mystery of the Ages**  
**Colossians 1: 24-2:5**  
**Jennifer Clark**

Today is the third Sunday of our deep dive into Paul's letter to the Colossians. The first week began with Colossians 1:1-14. Jon invited us to imagine the excitement of these Gentile Christian converts when they receive Paul's letter, laying out for them critical truths about the gospel. In the letter he speaks specifically to their reality that as followers of Christ, they are surrounded by a culture hostile to God's way.

He reminds them of their liberation from the coercive powers and authorities of the world through Jesus. Through him they are freed from to live as citizens of God's kingdom. They are caught up in the tsunami of God's grace and rescue of a broken world that is making all things new through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Last week we encountered the stirring Christ hymn found in Colossians 1:15-23. Don invited us to imagine Paul singing these words of power, wonder and promise, that lift up the supremacy of Christ above all other authorities and powers of the cosmos. This breathtaking hymn triumphantly proclaims the invisible God made visible in Jesus Christ, the first born of creation in whom all things hold together.

Which brings us to today's portion of the letter in 1:24-2:5. I invite you to imagine Paul, writing this while a prisoner of Rome. Paul, the proud Pharisee who zealously persecuted Jesus' followers, is now Christ's champion, announcing the in breaking of God's kingdom across the Roman Empire.

Not only is he caught up in spreading Christ's gospel across empire, but he is suffering for it as well. After enduring chains and imprisonment it's hard to imagine anyone being as upbeat as Paul is. His suffering does not break his indomitable spirit. Rather in his suffering he recognizes that he is part of God's transformation of the world that is making all things new through Christ.

And so he writes: *"<sup>24</sup>I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. <sup>25</sup>I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup>the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints."*

So what exactly is this mystery of the ages that Paul's talking about? What is this word of God? It is this: **God loves you so much that he is willing to suffer for you, to die on a cross for you.**

This is astonishing truth! This is amazing good news! God isn't only for certain, favored people. Turn's out God's sacrificial love is for all people, including Gentiles like them.

“God’s mystery accomplishes a union. It is a unifying force that brings together groups previously at odds with one another: Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, slaves and masters, women and men. This mystery, Paul reveals is ‘*Christ in you, the hope of glory (v.27)*’.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul rejoices in his suffering, believing it is somehow; part of the way by which the gospel spreads. He recognizes the hostility of worldly authorities that are threatened by God’s kingdom values of grace, peace and reconciliation. Paul finds meaning in his suffering by seeing it in light of Jesus’ suffering. Paul knows the risen Jesus continues to work through him and through his suffering for the gospel.

Paul longs for the recipients of his letter to remain faithful to the One who is in them, to Jesus Christ. As a parent longing for his beloved children, so Paul longs for the Colossians to be spiritually formed and brought to maturity in Christ. He urges them to remain faithful to Christ and Christ alone in the face of forces that could pull them away from Christ, which might include suffering.

Through his letter Paul makes clear that he is suffering on behalf of the Christian community in Colossae and Laodicea who he’s never met. He encourages them to hold fast to the treasure of Christ within them.

They live among competing religions and cults that might challenge their faith. Paul encourages them to unite their hearts in love, to be assured they have all the knowledge and wisdom they need in Christ. He plainly states: *“I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.”*

When we come to worship, we often are in need of the hope the gospel has to offer us. So Paul’s talking about rejoicing in suffering this morning may be making you feel a bit uneasy. After all we live in a culture where we are quick to complain when the thermostat is set too hot or cold, or when the wait for the bathroom is long, or when we get assigned the middle seat on the airplane. Most of us do everything we can to avoid discomfort or suffering. But not Paul!

Paul speaks of the surpassing authority of Christ in his life. Christ has transformed his entire being, including his suffering. Paul testifies to the supremacy of Christ over all authorities in our lives. He encourages us to guard against things that hold power over us, often without us noticing them. How might suffering or the avoidance of suffering exert power over us?

Suffering takes a toll on us, sometimes leaving us ashamed, or hopeless or fearful. It can lead us away from Christ, causing us to trust our pain, hopelessness or fear more than our Savior.

Suffering sometimes limit our imagination as to how God might bend it to become a blessing. Fear can blind us to God’s power that is able to bring good from evil. Fear of suffering sometimes leads us as individuals and as a faith community to behave in worldly ways rather than in the way of Jesus that risks self for others. It happens when

we turn a blind eye to the suffering of neighbors near and far, when we close our hearts and our ears to their cries for justice, when we turn inward upon ourselves.

The Taizé community is an example of the in breaking of God's kingdom the midst of pain and suffering. In 1940 Brother Roger founded this Christian community in southern France to be a sanctuary to assist refugees, Jews and non-Jews during WWII.

Over the years Taizé grew into an ecumenical monastic community for both Protestant and Catholic brothers. Visitors to Taizé encounter through them the precious bonds of Christian community.

The Taizé community is a sign of the in breaking of God's kingdom offering peace and reconciliation through Christ to the world. Each year thousands of young women and men from around the world travel to Taizé to join in a week of prayer, song, reflection and fellowship.

In 2005, a mentally ill woman visitor to Taizé stabbed to death 90-year-old brother Roger during the prayer service, as he sat in his wheel chair. Evil struck at the heart of the Taizé community that day. Yet in the face of that horror, the brothers did not allow fear, suffering and grief to break their spirits.

Instead of circling the wagons to protect themselves from the world, they continued to welcome visitor from around the world into their community. They made a conscious decision as a community to embody the way of Christ despite the pain inflicted on them.

"Together in community they found courage, the capacity to do what is right and good in the face of fear. Taizé exists not for self-preservation, but to give the world a taste of God's kingdom. So for the brothers of Taizé, courage takes the form of continuing to live their life of hospitality and reconciliation even when they feel threatened."<sup>2</sup> . . . *Would we do the same?*

"The life of the Taizé community stretches our imaginations. By simply returning to their open, hospitable life of trust, they make possible a response to evil that many of us would think is impossible. Like Jesus they know their mission is more important than their safety."<sup>3</sup> . . . *Can the same be said of us?*

One of the sacred privileges of being a pastor is to be invited into people's lives and family during times of suffering, illness or loss. I recently had the privilege of standing on holy ground when I was invited to officiate Ginny Craig's memorial service, which some of you also attended a few weeks ago.

Ginny sang with Westminster's choir until moving to VA in 2014 to live with her daughter. Recently Ginny suffered two strokes. After her first stroke, Ginny wondered aloud in the presence of her daughter, if her life had been in vain. She expressed concerned for her relatives who did not have a relationship with Christ.

I spoke at Ginny's memorial service of the longing of her heart. As her body turned against her, Ginny told her daughter that she longed to leave a legacy to her family of the hope she had in Jesus Christ. It was Christ in her that enabled her to face suffering and death with hope.

Ginny's choir robe was displayed in the choir loft at the spot where she had stood among the sopranos through the years singing God's praises. One final time Ginny's voice bore witness to her hope in Christ we played a recording of "May the Mind of Christ" from the final choir concert in which she sang.

Like Paul she bore witness to her hope in Christ in the midst of her suffering and even in her death as a way to comfort and build up the faith of those she leaves behind.

Few of us will ever be imprisoned for our faith or martyred as followers of Jesus. Yet, we will all at some point suffer disappointment, disease or grief. Paul offers good news to all who are suffering or who will suffer in the future. He reminds us that even our sufferings cannot separate us from Christ who is in us, who loves us so much that he willing goes to the cross for us. His suffering transforms ours. From his death we receive life. Because of his resurrection we no longer suffer as those without hope.

Sometimes we choose suffering because we choose the sacrificial way of Jesus in the face of cultural threats and authorities that are hostile to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And sometimes we have no choice, because suffering comes to us through circumstances of our life: injustice, loss, illness or grief. Our hope is that with Christ in us, God can transform our suffering that through it God can bring something good to bless the world and contribute to the revealing of God's kingdom among us.

My prayer for Westminster is that we are inspired and encouraged by Paul's suffering on our behalf, to bring us to maturity in Christ. I pray that we experience God's power and love working through us as we live sacrificially in the way of Jesus. In the weeks, months and years ahead may we serve God's kingdom as faithful stewards of God's mystery revealed: *Christ in us, the hope of glory!*

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

<sup>1</sup> Andy Holt, *Sometimes Preacher*, <http://thesometimespreacher.com/2016/07/fullness-colossians-124-29/>

<sup>2</sup> p 66 "Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear", Scott Bader-Saye

<sup>3</sup> p 67 "Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear", Scott Bader-Saye