

“Season of Light”

Col. 1:11-20

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I am always glad when there is a Sunday after Thanksgiving and before the 1st Sunday of Advent so that we as a church community can reflect on this transition of moving from a season of light into a season of shadows and personal introspection. Today is that Sunday in church life when we've reached the end of the liturgical year; next Sunday will be our New Year's Day. But we end our year with glorious thanksgiving for the light of Christ which has led us through the year to this day. We take note of today as the end (at least temporarily) of our season of Christ's light and perhaps we ask the question, "Why must it end?" "Why must we enter the shadows before we can once more celebrate the light of Christ on Christmas Eve?"

Our universe is a place of beautiful, ordered, rhythmic, cyclical nature through which our lives move. Our daughter, Brittany, was telling me of her trip to Ecuador and learning from indigenous peoples who long ago figured out complex concepts of order in their world by simply observing the rhythm of nature all around them. We take for granted the rhythm of seasons, times, and nature. We are living beings who are born, grow old, and die. We are part of a world where everywhere this cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth surround us so much that often we don't notice it happening. Our lives have an ebb and flow; we are not always light-hearted and giddy; we couldn't maintain 100% elation all the time. Our spirits have their own natural ebb and flow. We find it helpful to think in terms of markers in time--holidays, birthdays, vacation days, first days of school or school graduations. We order our lives this way, and the culture helps us never to forget what special day is coming up by providing us opportunities for buying cards, gifts, and having parties to celebrate life's passages.

We find that the "marking" of our church life through liturgical acts of the seasons provides us with memorable moments to think about what it is we are about as church. These liturgical signs and symbols help us make connections; they help us to remember what is important. They are handles to grasp hold of as we maneuver through our spiritual journey. The seasons have symbols that sometimes help and sometimes have grown so old and irrelevant that they do not have meaning for us anymore. Next week we'll talk more about the symbols of the season of Advent; we may recall some of those symbols for the sake of meaningful worship. We might choose to even abandon some symbols which humans once found helpful but which are no longer part of our frame of reference. Today, however, it is the last day of Pentecost, and we focus on Christ who is light. The congregation who first heard the words of Colossians believed that in the darkness, unseen by human eyes were mystical powers, spirits that shaped their world, that could interject themselves into their lives in threatening ways, and whom they feared.

At the time Colossians was written there was still movement of thought between Judaism, Christianity, and even the pagan, mystery cults because the teachings of Christianity were so new. People drew on any spiritual resource that they thought could protect them from the powers of darkness. So the church at Colossae was conflicted in what should be most important and in their rites of worship, and their beliefs of what was true religion. Perhaps we might think of this letter as the final report of a church consultant brought in to help the Colossae church sort things out. What the letter of Colossians does is to help the church refocus on what is really important and primary; and that is the message of Christ. That's why this text is chosen particularly for today which liturgically is called "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ" Sunday because a king requires complete devotion.

Colossians says that in Christ is: "strength that comes from his glorious power." Christ glorious power was power in the form of faithfulness unto death and as a result of this kind of

power, his enduring presence is still a resounding “yes” to the unseen powers of darkness; his reign continues. In addition to reorienting the congregation of Colossae to get beyond their petty disagreements and come together around God in Christ, this “church consultant” offers a list of virtues, vices, and household codes to help with their interpersonal relationships. And then they are encouraged to keep on keeping on. If there are ways in which we, today, may find ourselves caught up in minutia, disagreements about how to do things, forms of worship, types of music, or church life, the words of Colossians may remind us of what is really important--Christ and his message. Being an ex-kindergarten teacher, I’ve always thought taking turns was the answer to many church disagreements because there’s often more than one right way to do things.

The church at Colossae struggled with a fundamental problem of human existence and that was how not to be afraid within their very fearful world. I think we can relate to this. What unseen powers of darkness are we afraid of today? What do we try to push out of our consciousness by occupying ourselves with busyness so that we don’t have time to be afraid? What angst of spirit and soul might be lifted if we allowed ourselves to rest in the knowing that God in Christ is guardian of our lives and our world? Sometimes we have to do what Maria in *The Sound of Music* suggests, “let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start”. We have to allow ourselves to be stripped bare of any pretense, to enter a time of introspection that takes us to that place of need, of fear, of vulnerability. We must make space in our souls for the One who actually CAN protect from the powers that we know are out there but are too afraid to confront.

Next Sunday begins our time of Advent, of waiting, of allowing our shadow selves with our vulnerabilities and perhaps misplaced priorities to be revealed, to tell the truth about the state of our souls. Our culture has almost succeeded in making Advent disappear by making the lights shine again too soon and by keeping us so busy that we cannot think about anything spiritual because we are encouraged to shop till we drop. But we can make attempts to resist being completely overtaken by the anti-Advent culture; hopefully, our worship will help us for at least an hour each week return to that place where we know our spiritual need. Perhaps the world would prefer a constant season of light. But that would be false. Just as winter (at least in many parts of the world) forces a cessation of activity and a withdrawal from the elements of nature that encourages introspection even in southern California where the sun shines so much of the time, we, too, must allow for the light to dim as we look to the shadows to illuminate our deep spiritual longings.

I want to end with a prayer written by Walter Bruggemann, titled: *Occupy our calendars*. I should explain that in the last two lines are the words *kairoi and kairos*. I consulted with my ancient Greek authorities in the family and got the following nuances of meaning: *kairoi and kairos* have to do with opportunity, crisis, opportune moment, an opportunity for transformation brought about by crisis, particularly the critical moments confronting God’s incarnation in Christ. These two words mean much more than any one word could mean which is perhaps why Bruggemann uses them in this poetic prayer. So, let us pray:

*Our times are in your hands: But we count our times for us; we count our days and fill them with us; we count our weeks and fill them with our busyness; we count our years and fill them with our fears. And then caught up short with your claim, Our times are in your hands!*

*Take our times, times of love and times of weariness, Take them all, bless them and break them, give them to us again, slow paced and eager, fixed in your readiness for neighbor.*

*Occupy our calendars, Flood us with itsy-bitsy, daily **kairoi**, in the name of your fleshed **kairos**. Amen. (Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth, Prayers of W. Bruggemann, Augsburg Fortress, ’03.)*