

Like many of you Jayne and I like to enjoy God’s creation. When we’re at Camp Lambec we walk to the lakeshore to hear the ebb and flow of the waves as they endlessly fall against the shore, or just to watch a sunset. A hike through Cook Forest reveals gorgeous wildflowers or a hawk high overhead through an opening in the trees. Car rides anywhere are more enjoyable when we occasionally spot a white-tailed deer with fawns or a wild turkey with chicks.

These are the kinds of natural sights that we look for when we’re away from home. But how often do we ponder hawks, deer, wildflowers or turkeys when we gather at the Lord’s table? The answer is probably, “Not too often.” Truth is, we have enough difficulty seeing the other *people* with whom we gather at the Lord’s table. When we eat the body of our Lord, we strengthen our union with Christians far and near. When we gather at this table, we sit among a vast congregation of people all over the world. But too often we keep our focus on only the people around us in our own congregation when we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

So, it comes as no surprise that we don’t see any connections between worship or the sacraments and the creation all around us. Yet there is a sense in which Paul’s words in Colossians 1 tell us that it is proper to sit at God’s table and envision the good news that the bread and cup contain not only for us, but for fish and flowers and deer and turkeys. Let me explain why that is so and why it is necessary.

Colossians chapter 1 is a most remarkable passage. For one thing, Paul goes on a verbal tear the likes of which we seldom see. In most English Bible translations we find about 9 sentences between verses 15 and 23. Near as we can tell, however, in the original Greek Paul wrote exactly **two sentences** in those 9 verses! The first whopper of a sentence has 111 Greek words in it, running from verses 15-20. Verses 21-23 are one more sentence. Paul is all-but tripping over his own words, piling on one subordinate clause after the next.

As his thoughts spiral higher and higher, so does his rhetoric. He's like a child who is so excited they can't get the words out fast enough to describe a day at the amusement park. "And then we rode the Ferris wheel and then we got some cotton candy, and, and then I think the next thing we did was go to the fun house, which was really spooky but I didn't get too scared because I knew it wasn't real, but I kind of screamed a little, and after that we walked right over to the roller coaster and, and..." and so on!

Paul's quill cannot keep up with the places to which his heart is racing as he realizes afresh the truth of Jesus. And what a truth it is! Keep in mind that Paul is talking about Jesus of Nazareth here. Keep in mind that Paul wrote this letter probably sometime between the years 55-63 AD, a scant thirty or so years since Jesus died and rose again. Any non-Christian in Paul's day who read Colossians would surely find these words *absurd*. This Jesus was someone who had *died* decades earlier! What's more, even before he died, he was just a carpenter's son, a peasant, a nobody from the redneck backwaters of the empire. **But now Paul says this Jesus is the Creator of every blessed thing that exists, that he rules it all now, and he is finally the one in whom and through whom all of reality hangs together!**

Outrageous! This is one of those places where you sense the poignance of that comment C.S. Lewis once made about Jesus: Either accept him as who he said he was (the Lord) or consign him to the realm of mental illness (a lunatic). Because Colossians 1 does not allow us to accept Jesus as nothing more than an inspirational role model who, though just an ordinary human being, still has much to teach us. No! **The New Testament insists that he is *the One*, God's One and Only, who created everything in the beginning and who more recently redeemed it all, too.**

Yes, he lived at a definite time on a piece of Middle Eastern real estate. But he was also the One who, when the Big Bang flashed, blew out the match with which he lit the fire. He's the One who, as the galactic soup expanded, cooled, and slowly gelled into stars and planets, was cruising over top of that spectacle,

shaping and molding it according to his and his Father's and his Holy Spirit's designs. And so although he was born one night and laid in a manger, he is also the one who, before that night, had created the atoms that made up the wood of that manger. **Through his Resurrection he is now preserving every creature in whose creation he took delight at the dawn of history.**

He's the One. He's the only One! **If he is who Paul says he is, then Jesus is the Key to reality: it all makes sense because of him.** If the universe has a future beyond the limits of time and space, then it's because of him. If *you* have a future beyond that moment when the doctor looks at your heart monitor and declares "That's it," then it's because of Jesus. That's who we believe Jesus is. That's what we proclaim in the bread and cup today.

That's why our thoughts at the Lord's table must be cosmic and extensive. Paul's thoughts clearly were. **Four times between verses 15 and 23 Paul uses some form of the Greek word *ktizo* which is the word for "creating."** And though Paul is clearly including humans in the scope of Jesus' work, it is equally clear that he is wrapping his mind around all the other creatures too. In fact, at the end of verse 16 Paul caps off his list of creatures by throwing in **the catch-all Greek word *panta* which literally means "all things"** but in every day conversation could be something like "the whole kit-n-kaboodle!"

Paul does not want to leave anyone or anything out. And just in case we still have not gotten the point by the time we reach verse 23, **Paul goes so far as to say that the gospel has been proclaimed "to every creature under heaven."** Clearly Paul is exaggerating. Even in 55 A.D. *every* person could not have heard the gospel. And if it was true then, it is much moreso now when the world has about *7 billion* more people than it did during Paul's lifetime. It is not literally true that *every person* has heard the gospel, much less the trillions of other *creatures* on the planet. *But it is literally true* that the gospel has something to do with every creature, and that is really Paul's point. He's willing to exaggerate a bit if that's what it takes to convey the message that Jesus has scooped up all things in his love. **And in Romans 8 Paul says the**

whole creation is *groaning* for Jesus' return, craning its neck like a child at a parade eager to see the next float coming down the street. The whole creation is waiting on tippee-toes, because the whole creation is exactly the scope of what Jesus made and what he is in the process of saving.

Paul talks to believers about their reconciled relationship to God through Christ. We are given the gift of faith, so we can persevere in faith. Paul says in v. 22 this means that Jesus Christ presents us to God "*holy in his sight, without blemish, and free from accusation.*" What a priceless personal gift that is to every one of us. **But Paul sets this gift in a much larger context!** Faith brings us into the space of Jesus' cosmic salvation project. Colossians 1:15-23 begins by talking about **the entire creation** and concludes with a reference to "*every creature under heaven.*" In the middle is every believer's salvation through faith. What that means is that far from *disconnecting* us from our fellow creatures, faith actually *connects* us in the common hope of all creation.

Which brings us back to how I opened this sermon. **When we come to the Lord's table, it is right to give thanks to God for saving us, for granting us the gift of faith, and for securing the hope we have in eternal life.** But as we prepare for today's celebration of the Sacrament, we want to give thanks to God in Christ for the awesome physical world he has made, and then give thanks that God's entire world has a bright future. Let's connect the joy of living in God's creation with what we celebrate in the body and blood of Jesus.

What is Jesus the Creator up to in our present time? As N.T. Wright says, "*Jesus was not simple in his own time, and he is not simple now. Jesus, the Jesus we might discover if we really looked, is larger, more disturbing, more urgent than we ever imagined.*" That's why in Lent you'll hear me say again and again that I'm preaching this sermon series because of **Who Jesus was, What Jesus did, and Why Jesus matters.** These three questions remain enormously important for the church, for our personal lives, and for every sphere of human endeavor. Blessed be the name of Jesus, "*the image of the invisible God and the firstborn over all creation!*" Amen.