

A Big Christology
July 18, 2010
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Proverbs 8:22-31
Colossians 1:15-20

Who was - and is - Jesus Christ?

For all that we seek to be and to do as people of God – individually and as Caldwell church – and however many years we have been practicing our faith, the Christian life requires that each of us has an answer to that question.

It doesn't require a perfect answer – at no point in the Christian life do we hear a cosmic voice say those words we heard so often in school: "Put down your pencils and close your test books." We are all on a journey toward an answer.

But the Christian life is incomplete – indeed it is a fraud – if we do not give serious thought to the question and have an answer in our hearts, even if that answer evolves over time as we continue to grow in faith and walk with God.

Who was - and is - Jesus Christ to you?

Over the course of our lives, we might "know" many Jesuses. Jesus the teacher. Jesus the preacher. Jesus the prophet. Jesus the king. Jesus the healer. Jesus the social worker. Jesus the radical. Jesus the friend of outcasts and the thorn in the side of the comfortable and apathetic.

Our Jewish friends say Jesus was a wise man but not the son of God. Others say he was a good person – a person whose life should stand as a model – but nothing more.

Who was – and is – Jesus Christ to you?

There is no getting around this question. We call ourselves Christians, after all.

Who was Jesus Christ? In the first century, that same question stood at the center of a debate in the new church in a town called Colossae in the Lycus valley of Western Asia Minor. The apostle Paul started a number of churches in that region, but probably not

the church at Colossae. The letter to the Colossians, which is attributed to Paul, if not actually written by him, addresses the question straight on.

Some there believed that stern self-denial and even worship of celestial powers were still necessary to gain access to God. The author of Colossians wrote to assure them that, in believing, the church members there were already living “in Christ” and knew God by knowing Jesus.

Chronologically and geographically, we are a long way from that small, first-century house church in Asia Minor. But the questions of how we relate our understanding of Jesus to our understanding of God transcends the years.

Today’s reading from the lectionary invites us into these timeless questions. First, however, we might consider how God’s people in still another time and place experienced God. The Hebrews of the 6th century BC produced what came to be known as the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The letter to the Colossians is an echo of sorts of wisdom literature. So we start there.

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In the Old Testament, we see God most clearly in God’s call and guidance of Gods agents, people like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Joseph and Jacob, Moses, Esther and Ruth, prophets, judges and kings. God is present in burning bushes, clouds of fire and dreams.

But there was more to God than just a distant, grand director of a world-changing drama. God is mysterious, hidden yet present. Wisdom literature describes this hidden-yet-present aspect of God. In the book of Proverbs, from which we heard earlier, we find this aspect of God described as Woman Wisdom, a distinctly female and inseparable part God.

Listen to these verses describing Wisdom that come just before today’s reading, except this time we hear the more modern translation of scripture found in The Message by Eugene Peterson.

“I am Lady wisdom, and I live next to sanity;
knowledge and discretion live just down the street.

The fear-of-God means hating evil,
Whose ways I hate with a passion –

Pride and arrogance and crooked talk.
Good counsel and common sense are my characteristics:
I am both Insight and the Virtue to live it out.
With my help, leaders rule,
And lawmakers legislate fairly;
With my help, governors govern,
Along with all in legitimate authority ...

My benefits are worth more than a big salary, even a very big salary;
The returns on me exceed any imaginable bonus.
You can find me on Righteous Road – and that’s where I walk –
At the intersection of Justice Avenue,
Handing out life to those who love me,
Filling their arms with life – armloads of life! ¹

Woman Wisdom gives order to life and creation. In the verses Wilma read earlier, when God established the heavens, made firm the skies, defined the seas and tamed the waters, Wisdom was there “beside God like a master worker.” (8:30)

“I was,” she says, “God’s daily delight ... rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” (8:31)

Wisdom is an extension of God, an agent at work in the world, available to all as a guide and a standard for living.

The great theologian Karl Barth summed up the meaning of Christ by writing the deceptively simple sentence: “In between God and man stands the person of Jesus Christ.”

But before Christ, some of God’s people discerned God in the world as Woman Wisdom. And, as we heard in Proverbs 8, she was the first to stand between God and creation.²

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Centuries later, after God came into the world in Christ Jesus, God’s people put pen to paper to update their understanding of God as known in this hidden-yet-present aspect

¹ Proverbs 8:12-16; 18-21 (p.840)

² Walter Bruggeman, The Theology of the Old Testament, p. 343

of God Christ. Theologians have a fancy word for this - Christology, the study of the nature, character, and actions of Jesus.

Most scholars believe the Christ hymn in the first chapter of Colossians existed before the rest of the letter. It is as poetic as any passage in scripture, a style of writing that even exceeds the hand of Paul himself. We can only assume the author of Colossians figured he could not improve on it. This Christ hymn – there are others in scripture - describes Christ as being with God and in God before creation, just as Wisdom was described in Proverbs. Before humanity knew Christ in flesh and blood, according to these verses, Christ was a part of God, inseparable and essential. Christ, Colossians says,

... is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.
(Colossians 1:15-18)

Bold claims about Jesus' meaning and identity. Did you hear how the author wrote Jesus is the first born, not just of the living, mind you, but of the dead? What's the author getting at? If one is the firstborn both of creation and of the dead, can it be that resurrection was always part of God's design, fulfilled in Christ and made available to all in Christ?

That is the claim we make when we call ourselves Christians, isn't it? What other traditions might call funerals, we in the Reformed tradition have what we call celebrations of witness to the resurrection. At the time of death, even though we mourn, we celebrate the gift of life, lived out in the one who has died, as we did with Martha Cooper last week. We believe Christ gave us all access to the same resurrection as his. We are witnesses to that resurrection, even before we have seen it, because we know it to be true, in and through Christ.

A second claim is slid in the same verses.

Christ is "the head of the body, the church" the Christ hymn sings. And now things become even more concrete for you and me and anyone who calls themselves Christian. In Romans and Corinthians, Paul offers the language of the church as the body of Christ. But we do not hear of Christ as the head of that body until we get to Colossians and Ephesians. Centuries later, we Presbyterians would build our church on

that idea. The first paragraph of the first page of our church constitution states: “God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body.”³

Christ calls the church into being. Christ gives the church its faith and life. Christ is the church’s authority over and above every other authority. This, friends, is the form of the government we claim as the church, unlike any earthly government.⁴

Without Christ as savior and redeemer, the church is headless, another non-profit organization. Without the church, Christ has no arms and legs. If Christ is the head of the church, worship is its heart. Worship pumps life out to the body through arteries of prayer, study, formation and spiritual discipline, giving strength to the arms and legs of Christ to serve others, to deliver mercy and to seek justice.

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Who was - and is - Jesus Christ?

On Friday, just before she went into surgery to have a stint put into her brain, I visited seven year old Madison Dyson in the hospital. I took her a small doll of Jesus to remind her that Christ was with her at that moment and every day of her difficult journey.

When I handed her the figure of Christ, I asked, “Who is that?”

“God,” she said.

For a child, that is as good an answer as we can hear. But our answer grows with our faith. Jesus was a teacher and a preacher. Jesus was prophet and a priest and a king. Jesus was a healer and a social worker. Jesus was a radical. Jesus was the friend of outcasts and the thorn in the side of the comfortable and apathetic.

But above all of these, Jesus was the Christ, the firstborn of the living and the dead, and in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. As for the church, the Body of Christ, it does not exist to be a safe place, a refuge or a bomb shelter against the violence of the world. It does not exist to hold on to what it has. It does not exist as a social hall or a place we come to feel good about ourselves. It does not exist simply to “do good” like any non-profit agency.

³ G-1.0100, Book of Order

⁴ P.1, Form of Government

The church, the Body of Christ, exists to proclaim who Jesus was and is – in what we say and what we do.

Amen.