A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*All Things in Christ*

Colossians 1

November 24, 2019

DaySpring, like many churches around the world, follows a cycle of scripture readings in worship throughout the year. The readings are arranged in seasons: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and so on. The story begins in the darkness of Advent yearning for the Light and then continues through the drama of God’s interventions and incarnation in the world. The story concludes today with Christ the King Sunday. While also serving as a launching pad for Advent’s hopes beginning next week, this day gives strong affirmation to Christ’s glory as the whole story unfolds toward its consummation.

Jesus, the scripture affirms, from the first Sunday of Advent to the last Sunday of the year, is the hope of the world in its chaos, violence, grief, loneliness, despair . . .its deepest darkness. And as Walter Brueggeman tells it: Nowhere in scripture is the largeness of his rule more sweepingly and eloquently expressed than in the poetic, praise-giving affirmation in Colossians 1. In verses 15-20, the letter is especially majestic about the new king who will order the chaos of darkness, disorder, and death.

All the power is his. He is the image of the invisible God. The text of Colossians never loses sight of the historical person of Jesus, yet it escalates the imagery of Jesus well beyond his historical life to give him vital significance from the dawn of creation to its consummation. Here’s the thing we’re to get our minds wrapped around: The man of Galilee is also the beginning of a new creation, a new order that will redeem and displace the old. To believe in him is far beyond the small little provincial Jesus we may reduce him to. We may try to diminish him to a kindhearted teacher, a pied piper of goodness roaming the hillsides of Judea. We may try to box him in by the lexicon of legal, religious, and political 1st century Jewish life. We may try to constrain him as our own personal savior, warming our hearts, comforting our hurts, affirming our hopes, assuring a place for our souls in heaven. He is all of these things, but if he is *only* these things, we’ve missed his majesty and made Christ far less than he is.

In verse 17, a most wondrous claim for the king of this new creation is that ‘all things hold together in him.’ The very same one known to us as the son of Mary is the one in whom all things hold together. In this daring claim, the scope of *all things* stretches the limit of human imagination. Let it stretch. Six times in this passage, St. Paul repeats the two word phrase in Greek *ta panta* which is also a two word phrase in English: *all things!*

In him *all things* were created

*All things* created through him and for him

He is before *all things*

In him *all things* hold together

He has first place in *everything*

Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In 1961, Joseph Sittler, a visionary Lutheran minister and professor from Chicago stood before the austere and sharply divided World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi. In 1961, as in many other years including perhaps our own, the world seemed to be coming apart at its seams. Sittler pointed the representatives of the churches of the world to this very passage and with it expanded the scope of the church’s proclamation of redemption out into the scope of all creation itself: “These verses sings out their triumphant and alluring music between two huge and steady poles—Christ and all things . . . Here it is declared that the sweep of God’s restorative action in Christ is no smaller than the six times repeated *ta panta* . . .all things are permeable to his cosmic redemption because all things subsist in him. He comes to all things not as a stranger, for he is the first born of all creation, and in him all things were created . . .he is the intention, the fullness, and the integrity of all things: for all things were created through him and for him. Nor are all things a tumbled multitude of facts in an unrelated mass, for in him all things hold together.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It is an exuberant vision given first to the Colossians.

I don’t know what was going on in 1st century Colossae that they needed to hear and were in any way prepared for this word about the Word. And I don’t know if we’re prepared to hear such a word either, but I’m quite confident we need it. Sittler (45) in 1961 identified the struggle faced by us all in this era. He said, “The address of Christian thought is most weak precisely where man’s ache is most strong. We have had and have a theology for [things assigned to a spiritual life]. But we do not have, at least not in such effective force as to have engaged the thought of the common life, a daring, penetrating, life-affirming Christology of nature . . . .the imperial vision of Christ in [all things] has not broken open the powers of grace to diagnose, judge, and heal the ways of men as they blasphemously strut about this hurt and threatened world as if they owned it. Our vocabulary of praise has become personal, pastoral, too purely spiritual, static.”

There’s nothing objectively wrong with the personal, pastoral, spiritual, or even the static in a rumbling, tumbling world. We need the compassionate heart of Jesus to meet us in our wounds, our sins, and in our fears. But also we need, we desperately need, a vision of Christ sufficient to the biblical witness and the age in which we live, an age in which we are being asked as never before, to make direct and meaningful connections between personal actions and global consequences. A small minded, provincial vision simply will not do anymore. It actually never did.

When they nailed Jesus to a cross and nailed the sign above his head “this is the King of the Jews” they meant it to mock as if it said something ironically foolish for a man crucified. They should have done even more. Instead of merely scribbling on a piece of wood, they should have chiseled in stone, they should have composed an oratorio, they should have declared it from the highest mountains: “this is the king of all kings, the king of all things.”

Jesus was never what he has been reduced to—a wisdom teacher, a good man, or a personal savior whose purpose is merely to help good people be better. We need a Jesus of transfiguration—his own by his glory, and our own by his grace. We need a Jesus of resurrection—his own by divine power, and our own by his promise and mercy. We need a Jesus who is the image of the invisible God, not just one who gives direction in the spiritual things of life, but in whom we find meaning in everything—all things cosmic and all things personal.

The cosmic and the personal. Can these hold together? If they do, they must hold at the Table of our Lord where we hear: ‘this is my body,’ ‘this is my blood’ said of bread and wine—the most ordinary things of life. In a brilliant essay “The Cosmology of the Eucharist” George Theokritoff explores the significance of Jesus’ words by drawing on what we know of the cosmos. He explores the questions, “What is bread?” and “What is wine?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Bread, of course, is made of flour, yeast, and water, and wine from the juice of grapes. We start there. Both bread and wine are produced from the earth and transformed by human labor. The wheat is sown, and then germinates, grows, bears ears of wheat, and finally reaped, threshed, ground into flour. Vines are planted and grafted. They grow and bear fruit, and finally the grapes are gathered and pressed. Both bread and wine are the fusion of the earth’s bounty and of human labor.

In both wheat and vine there are three key elements in the transformations they undergo: the sun, giving heat and light for photosynthesis, water, vital in every stage of the growth, transformation, and preparation, and soil.

So, what is soil? Theokritoff asks. Most soil is two components—minerals derived from the bedrock. The breaking down of the minerals produces the acids necessary for nourishment. The other component is organic material called humus. Humus retains soil moisture, binding the soil and inhibiting erosion loss. Humus is made up mostly of plant debris decomposing over time by bacteria, fungi, and little decomposers scurrying around doing their work.

So, by this point in the exploration, for the deceptively simple bread and wine soon to be in our hands and on our tongues, consider all that is represented. We have the contributions of the sun, the atmosphere, water, the solid earth, decomposers in the humus, the wheat and vine plants, and human labor. All are of these are made of matter. We ask: what is matter?

This now becomes the theological read of the periodic table stuff you learned in high school. The two lightest elements, hydrogen and helium predominate in the universe and are by far the most numerous elements. The heavier elements (carbon, phosphorous, nitrogen, sulfur) come from the only source capable of generating the heat necessary to catalyze the chemical reactions that combine the lighter elements into heavier. Temperatures and pressures in dying stars convert lighter elements into heavier ones, which are then flung out into space when the star explodes. Some of those elements disperse. Others are gathered by gravity into clouds of gasses by which other new stars are born. Still others are clustered into bodies called planets. Like this one.

So now we’ve come right to it, about as close to an account of all things present in one thing as we can imagine. “The Earth and everything on it, including our bodies and blood, as well as the Eucharist bread and wine, are cosmic in origin. In taking flesh and blood from his Mother, the Eternal Word of God clothed himself in his own creation, the Cosmos. Thus Christ’s words, “This is my body, this is my blood: have a profound literal sense in that the matter making up the Eucharist bread and wine—and that making up his flesh and blood—share the same cosmic origin.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

All things.

So in these last few moments of the church’s year, in this the pinnacle and essence of the liturgical drama and the confession of our only and ultimate hope, let us affirm this wild, bold declaration: “In the Eucharist, we offer [to God], in this piece of bread and in this cup, the entire cosmos and every living creature, including ourselves—everything from the tiniest particles of matter to the farthest reaches of space, as well as the fruit of human labor in all places and all times.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

All things hold together in Jesus Christ.

With each step toward the table of our Lord, with each bite of the bread of life, with each drop from the cup of salvation, the church summons all peoples and all things, all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, to their source and to their purpose:

All creatures of our God and King lift up your voice and with us sing, alleluia! Alleluia! Amen!

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1. “Called to Unity,” in Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken, eds., *Evocations of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000): p 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here I follow closely Theokritoff’s essay included in John Chryssavgis and Bruce Foltz, eds, *Toward an Ecology of Transformation* (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2013): p 131-135 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Theokritoff, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Theokritoff, 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)