



Advent 2 – December 6, 2015
Ellis White, Pastoral Intern
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*Joy for Every Longing Heart:
What Does the Future Hold?*
Colossians 1:15b-17

This week I logged onto the BBC News website to see this: "Just another day in the United States of America. Another day of gunfire, panic and fear."

Panic and fear. Many in this nation and in this world live in fear. Fear that this world is falling apart. Fear that we are on the brink of WW3. Fear that terrorists could be hiding around every corner. It appears that we are living in a world that is falling apart at the seams. And I know for many in this congregation, you believe we are living in a nation that is falling apart at its seams. What will the world be like in one, two, three generations time? What will our grandkids grow up to experience? What does the future hold?

All through advent we are digging deep into a text of Scripture in the book of Colossians and seeking to answer questions that are the longing of every heart. Can I know God? What does the future hold? Does the church really matter? Is God with us? What hope do we have? As we dig into this short passage from Colossians we hope as a preaching team that we will find hope for every longing heart, peace for every longing heart and joy for every longing heart.

First a little bit of background that is going to help us make sense of this dense passage. The letter to the Colossians was written by Paul around 30 years after Jesus died, and it was written to a church under threat. The church in Colossae was less than 10 years old but false teachers were now bringing fear into the lives of the Colossians. Local folk law believed that you needed to call on angels to protect you from evil spirits, and this teaching had made its way into the church and was creating an atmosphere of fear.

The fear the Colossians were experiencing was probably not dissimilar to the fear created by the acts of terrorism that we see portrayed in the media. Fear that there was a power out there that was threatening them and seeking to harm them. And these false teachers were responding to this by teaching the Colossians that they needed to practice certain rites, taboos and rituals to protect them from these evil spirits and the bodily afflictions that they brought.

Paul didn't plant the church, but one of his disciples, Epaphras, did. And when Epaphras tells him what is going on he knows he needs to respond. Paul doesn't

want to deny the reality of the evil spirits and the power that they can have, but he knows the false teaching is just feeding the problem. Paul wants the Colossians to know is that Christ is supreme over all creation, including the spiritual realm, and that he has already secured redemption for them.

As we sit here today and look at the way the world around us is portrayed in the media and the fear that that can bring into our lives, I want you to know that what we are about to read is just as relevant to us as it was to them almost 2,000 years ago. And I believe that the answer to the longing of our hearts to know whether our future is secure is found right here. So let's open up our Bibles and discover what God has for those with longing hearts. Turn to Colossians 1:15, page 995 in your pew Bibles.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Last week Pastor Mark spent 30 minutes talking about half a verse. I'm not at the level of Bible ninja yet, so I'm going to grab two and a half verses this morning. And the real reason is that I think Paul is making one important point with all two and a half of these verses. So, right after Paul asserts that Christ is the image of the invisible God, the half verse in verse 15 Pastor Mark preached on, Paul goes on to say He is 'the firstborn over all creation.' The one phrase sets up the next two verses and provides a summary for them in many senses. But we need to understand what it means. Firstborn can mean the eldest child in a family, but it can also mean a person of preeminent rank. What Paul is saying is that when it comes to creation, Jesus ranks high above it all. Like the military commander Jesus is supreme over all creation.

And Paul gives us three reasons why in verse 16: all things were created in him, all things were created through him, and all things were created for him. Now I know you may have different words for in, through, and for in your Bible translation, but in the original language they are three different words, and I want us to help grasp the three different meanings Paul is trying to get at. In fact, the latest version of the NIV uses these three words in the translation because scholarship has changed since the version you find in the pews was published. So let me try and explain what Paul is getting at... Creation, just like our redemption, took place in Christ, not apart from him, and so creation is entirely dependent on him. Creation took place through Christ, as the spoken Word of God. And creation took place for Christ, as

the reason that there is something instead of nothing. Now, if trying to take all that in doesn't make your brain hurt, I don't know what will.

So let me try this. Let's replace some of the words and see if it helps us understand it. Let's replace 'all things' with 'the United States' and let's replace 'him' with 'freedom.' Now, we have something I think we might be able to grasp... The U.S. was created in freedom, the U.S. was created through freedom, and the U.S. was created for freedom. The U.S. was created in freedom, without force or coercion but in a free decision. The U.S. was created through freedom—the actions that won freedom in that war against your tyrannical enemies, the Brits. And, the U.S. was created for freedom—that is the goal of this nation. And because the U.S. was created in, through and for freedom, freedom reigns supreme over the U.S. You can understand that, right?

In the same way, Paul says, all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ, and therefore Christ is supreme over all things. And this is important because Paul wants the Colossians—who are living in fear of the evil spirits and the afflictions that they can bring—to know that Jesus is supreme over them. Jesus is supreme over them because they were created in Him, through Him and for Him. And Paul goes on to reiterate this in verse 17: 'He is before all things.' Really this is just a recap of what he already said about Jesus being the firstborn. Not only was Jesus before all of these things in terms of time, but is before all these things in terms of status: Jesus is supreme over creation.

But Paul goes even further... he doesn't just want to Colossians to know that Jesus is supreme over creation and so they need not fear the power of the evil spirits and physical afflictions, he wants them to know that Jesus is at work in creation. And so he makes one more assertion: 'in him all things hold together.' Paul says: Jesus not only rules over creation, but he is continuously sustaining it. Jesus is the glue that is holding this world together at every moment. And without Jesus, everything would fall apart.

I don't know if you've ever felt like life is falling apart. I know I have. Last year was one of those years. Rachel and I had our first daughter Evelyn the previous summer and had an enjoyable fall and Christmas, but as the new year came things started to get more difficult. Rachel found staying at home increasingly lonely and life-sucking. At the same time we were applying for an extension to our visa, which resulted in the first of many visa difficulties that year. They got confused by something in the paperwork and asked for more evidence.

The whole thing was incredibly unsettling. We began to think about the very real possibility of life back in England. For Rachel this seemed like a lifeline. The physical separation from her family there was becoming ever more significant as she just needed a mom to look after her. She longed to return there so much that I remember the day we were notified our visa had been approved, she didn't even want to celebrate.

After that we needed to apply for a new type of visa and part of that process was changing the terms of my role here and how I was reimbursed. As it became apparent that things would probably be less secure financially on the new visa, we both began to think seriously about leaving and returning to England. After much discussion and deliberation we let the elders know that we wanted to return to England. Thankfully God intervened, as I've told you in a story before and we reversed our decision to leave. Although things got better in the summer they took a turn for the worse in the fall.

That fall we got notice that Citizenship and Immigration Services intended to deny our new visa. I remember the moment sitting in Pastor Mark's office as I read the email and I felt like the world was falling in around me. Instantly all the same insecurities of being out of our country of origin came back. The very real possibility of being forced to leave, even after we had decided to stay was thrust upon us. As Rachel and I went out for dinner to celebrate my birthday that November, I remember telling her: 'I think this has been the hardest year of my life.'

Little did I know that the day beforehand a friend had been arrested and placed in custody on very serious charges. A friend I had believed in and believed that God was at work transforming his life was now facing jail time. The result was devastating on me. I was tormented by the thoughts of what this friend was accused of. I began to question whether it was worth being a Pastor when you don't even really know people. I felt like my life was falling apart once again.

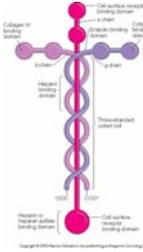
That December we took a week of vacation... a vacation which will probably go down as my least favorite ever. I sunk into a depression and a desire to run away from it all. There was not a single part of me that even wanted to think about church, and I was thankful we were a thousand miles away. Once again, I felt like my life was falling apart.

Have you ever felt like that? Maybe you feel like that right now? Like your life is falling apart? Like the future is filled with fears and insecurities? Maybe you don't feel like that personally but you know someone who does? Or maybe you look at this world and see a world falling apart through fear and acts of terrorism? And you're left asking yourself the question: What does the future hold?

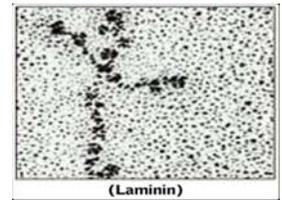
Last weekend as I drove home from church I was waiting at a stop sign behind a car with this bumper sticker: Got Laminin? As I sat there for a moment, asking myself, 'What on earth is laminin?' something slightly more significant struck me... 'Hang on. I'm preaching on Colossians 1:16-17 next weekend.' As soon as I got home, I pulled out my phone and typed laminin into Google. It was particularly unhelpful. It told me laminin was 'a fibrous protein present in the basal lamina of the epithelia.' I was like: 'Great!'

So I changed my search to 'Got Laminin?' and up popped a sermon from a pastor named Louie Giglio. All of a sudden it came back to me. I'd heard this sermon years ago, but I had completely forgotten about it. Louie met a man who was a molecular biologist. And this man told him that laminin was the most amazing thing in the world. You see laminin is a protein cell adhesion molecule. And for those of you who aren't molecular biologists let me break it down for you: Laminin is a glue. It's a microscopic glue that holds together the protein cells in your body. Literally, laminin is the glue that holds us all together. Great, right? I could probably use that as a sermon illustration next weekend, I thought...

But then I saw a picture of it. Here is a scientific drawing of what laminin looks like.



Do you see this? It's a cross. A cross! Right at the heart of your body, are microscopic crosses, acting like glue, holding you together. But it gets even better. That's just a drawing. That isn't what it looks like in real life. Do you want to see a picture of a real one? In Jesus all things hold together. Of course it does. Look! Everything holds together in Jesus Christ.



So how can you know Jesus will hold you together? How can you know Jesus will hold this world together? There is a cross at the center of human history. The cross where the creator of this world, the one in whom the world was made, the one through whom the world was made, the one for whom the world was made, stretched out his arms and redeemed the world he had created. And that cross is proof that God will hold you together, because although God does not always change the circumstances, and he didn't for Jesus on the cross. The cross is proof that God is at work in those circumstances. It is proof that God's plans and God's purposes will not fail, but will succeed.

For Rachel and me, last year was a difficult year. It was a year that forced us to cling to God, to throw ourselves upon his mercy and to place our hope and trust in Him and Him alone. As we came out of that year and into this, God gave us the gift of a son. We named him Ezra. We've told lots of people we just liked the name and we wanted both our kids' names to begin with the letter 'E'. But really, at the heart of it, the meaning of that name came from the previous year. Ezra means 'God is my help.' That was the cry of our hearts in that time, and the hope that we clung to in order to get us through the year we had just come out of. That was our constant prayer in that time: God, help us. And God did. We came through that season being even more sure of our calling here than ever. Being certain that this is where God wants us, and that we are walking directly in his purposes for our lives.

After the shooting this week, the NY Daily News published this headline: 'God Isn't Fixing This.' It was in response to the politicians who said they were praying for those in San Bernardino. When we look at the world, and how it seems to be falling apart or when we look at our own lives and how they seem to be falling apart, it

can be easy to believe this. And it can be easily to believe that prayer is pointless because it isn't fixing things. But I want to disagree... strongly.

Prayer doesn't always change our circumstances. When Jesus prayed in the garden it didn't change His circumstances on the cross. That's not what prayer promises. But when we pray, we declare something much more powerful. We declare that although we don't know if circumstances will change, we trust in the one who is supreme above them all—Jesus. Although we don't know what the future holds, we know the one who holds it—Jesus. And although we see fear and chaos all around us, we trust that God is at work, God's plans will succeed, and God holds all things together in Jesus Christ. So when the world is falling apart... when your world is falling apart, pray to the one who holds all things together. He is supreme over all things, and will hold all things together.