

July 18, 2010  
Colossians 1:15-29  
Holding It Together  
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A couple years ago, I spent the summer in Grand Rapids and worked for the library at Calvin College. My roommate was away for the summer, so I was in the apartment alone. Since it was summer break, I didn't have any homework to do. So, once I got home from work at 5:00, I was free to work on projects I didn't have time for during the school year. And the main project I gave myself was, *Catch up on pop culture*.

A number of my friends had been talking about a popular TV show, LOST – and how brilliant and engaging it was. So a friend loaned me Season 1 on DVD.

The premise of the show is that an airplane crashes on a deserted island, and the folks who survive try to figure out a way off the island. But there are these weird, supernatural forces at work that give you a sense that there is something really eerie going on there. And there are enemies on the island that make the place all the more dangerous.

Part of the show's draw, I think, is the suspense: you don't know what's living in the forest; you don't know who's lurking around that dark corner.

And the show was scary to me! I realized that I'm not so good at differentiating between the story and real life. Because whenever I came into my apartment at night, I always had that unsettled feeling: what could be lurking around *this* dark corner of *my* house?

I started freaking myself out so badly that I had to start giving myself rules, like: *Don't watch LOST unless it's with somebody else, AND it's during daylight hours*. Because I could really freak myself out, and I was feeling so scared at night. Eventually, I became too afraid, and I had to give up watching the show altogether. (And it took me a while to recover even from that!)

Now, I knew it was silly to be afraid of the dark, and island forces, and the Others. I knew that God was good and has the whole world in his hands.

But because my fear felt so silly to me, I didn't pray and ask God to protect my apartment...and protect me. I didn't pray that God would reach in and touch my fear.

I felt like it was such a small and silly thing that I didn't really think about Jesus' power reaching there, too. (I mean, does the power of God fit into a place as small as my fear of the dark?)

Truth is, there are all sorts of things in this world that we *are* afraid of:

Small things: like the dark, and heights, and tight places.

Big things: like cancer, and earthquakes, and wars.

We fear shame, and pain, and death.

We fear the unknown, our present circumstances, the future.

We fear others: what they're capable of doing to us.

We can fear ourselves: what *we're* capable of.

Sometimes, if we're honest, we may even find ourselves feeling afraid of God.

So many things in this world feel out of our control. And, really, not only do we *feel* powerless to hold it all together...but we *are* powerless.

In the face of these things, we know Jesus is for us (“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so”), but we wonder:

Is Jesus' power able to hold us together in big things?

Is he big enough to have a say in:

international conflict,  
and economic crises,  
and oil spills?

How deep does Jesus' power really go?

Is it deep enough to reach:

the voice that shames you and says, 'You're not good enough'?  
And loneliness?  
And your past?

Is Jesus' power so deep that it reaches:

anorexia,  
and anxiety,  
and depression?

Does it go that deep? Can he hold things together there?

And just how strong is Jesus' power, *really*?

Strong enough to release us from a sin that keeps hanging on?

Strong enough to heal a relationship that's broken into a million pieces?

Strong enough to bring *real* hope to a courthouse, hospital room, cemetery?

Strong enough to actually disarm the enemy and overcome the evil that we actually encounter?

Is Jesus really powerful enough to:

heal our past?

Can he hold us together in the present, today?

Can he lead us to a future where we'll be okay?

Those are a lot of questions. And ones we don't ask aloud very often. But aren't *those* the questions that keep us lying awake at night? Aren't those the questions that, at the end of the day, really matter?

Is Jesus who we say he is?

Is he really strong?

And does his power reach into every crack and crevice of our own real lives?

And that gets at what the church in Colosse was wondering, too.

We learned last week that the Colossian church was discouraged, and that false teachers were coming in saying, “You need to do more and be more in order to be good enough.”

This week, what we're going to talk about...those false teachers made the church feel afraid...afraid of the powers of this world, afraid even of God, and that Jesus wasn't powerful enough to do anything

about it.

Next week, we'll talk about how the church was pressured into *adding* so many things, and *doing* so much in order to be okay.

But this week, what we're dealing with is: they're afraid.

(Next week, we're going to spend time in Chapter 2. And chapter 2 is the part of the letter that really gives us an idea of what was going on in the Colossian church, and what the Christians there were dealing with.)

What we need to know now is that our passage for this morning is written in direct response to the problems that the Colossian church was having. Most likely, the false teachers who had come into the church taught that they had much to be afraid of:

things in the natural world,  
supernatural, spiritual powers,  
and, without some kind of way to make themselves more acceptable, even God himself.

They taught, "God could help you. But you really need to *work* in order for God to listen to you and intervene."

These teachers said the church had to contend with things on earth and things in heaven: visible and invisible – all sorts of thrones and powers and authorities. And all they had on their side was: *Jesus?* Jesus-Meek-and-Mild Jesus? Jesus who was – within their lifetime – overcome by evil and killed on a cross? They taught, He might have been good, but he wasn't able to hold much together.

Now Paul heard about what was going on the church through their pastor, Epaphras. So he writes this letter to them. And every part of this letter directly addresses what they were being taught. So our passage this morning deals specifically with problems. With these questions.

So, how does Paul respond to these big, unsettling, lose-your-sleep kind of questions?

Well, most scholars think that verses 15-20 here is a hymn. So, then, Paul's response to all these frightening things is...a church song. One that the Colossians might have even known.

And the song says:

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Everything was created by him and for him.

He's before all things, and in him, all things hold together.

He's one with the Father. We know the Father is good because we see that Jesus is good.

He's the Cause.

He's the Reason.

He's the Goal.

Everything that exists is under his authority.

He holds the universe together, so that if he removed his hand, the whole thing would fall apart.

He is God. And he has a human face.

And this God has not removed or distanced himself from us. Instead, he joins us. He is the head, and

he makes *us* the body. And later Paul says, “The mystery that I'm proclaiming is this: that Christ is *in you*.”

And this Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

His power has overcome the most powerful enemy we know: death.  
He's opened the way for his people to rise from the dead, too.  
And he is the head of the church. His power becomes our power.  
His life gives life to the church.  
The church's work is his work.

And God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 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.

He reconciles all powers to himself.  
Not by force, but through his blood.  
Because he is the fullness of God – he is able to do it.  
Because he is flesh and blood – his power extends to *us*.

By the blood of the cross, Jesus puts everything into right relationship with himself.  
And that means that Jesus joins himself with the church. We are his body; he is in us.  
And Jesus stands over and against every single other enemy power.  
Jesus holds us together with him.  
And he holds everything together.

(pause)

The hymn ends in verse 20. But Paul applies it right where it's needed in verse 21:

Through Christ's physical body, he has reconciled you, too, Colosse. He has made you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

Then Paul says in verse 23:  
Your call, then, is to continue in the faith.  
No matter what anybody else tells you.  
No matter how things appear.  
No matter how afraid you are.  
Don't move from your trust in Jesus.  
Don't move from the hope he holds out to you.  
He holds together every atom in the universe, and through his blood, he's reconciling all things to himself.  
And he's holding you together, too.

Now I've got to stop here and make a confession: this sermon has been a difficult one to write for this reason: Jesus holds all things together...and we live in a world that's broken. We know that our days here can be frightening and painful. So, how do I tell you that Jesus' power reaches everywhere and that your call is to continue in him when you know well what it is to suffer? When it comes to explaining things and putting them neatly in place, not only can I not hold my life together (because none of us can), but I can't even neatly hold a sermon together.

The best way that I can communicate this mystery is to tell you a story:

One Sunday morning at my church in Grand Rapids, I overheard two men talking during coffee hour. And the one said to the other, "So, what are you up to today?"

And this second man, "Well, I'm going to the nursing home to sing."

And the first man said, "You sing? Well, what do you sing?"

And the second man said: "You know, the people I visit most are the people who are dying. And now here they are, and they're filled with regret, and they wonder if God loves them enough to accept them, and if God is powerful enough to somehow make a difference in this life. So, I sing to them. And I sing a lot of songs, but the one I go back to over and over is:

*Jesus loves you, this I know  
For the Bible tells us so  
Little ones to him belong  
We are weak, but he is strong.  
We are weak, but he is strong.*

People of God, when God calls us to hold firmly to the hope we have, *that's* what it looks like. It means we keep singing these church songs about who our God is, trusting that the Spirit will make that truth work deep down in us. That the Spirit will help us believe it. That it will give us courage, and fill us with hope.

So, the call then? Continue in him.  
The remedy to fear? Trust Jesus. Keep singing those church songs.

Does this mean he'll always change circumstances? No.  
Does this mean we'll always *feel* him holding all things together? No.  
But are we bound to be subject to evil as the final word? No.

(Even as he's now reconciling all things to himself...even now as he has *already* reconciled *us* to himself...there is a day coming when our Jesus will put everything to right once and for all.)

So, whether we feel it or not, does his presence matter? Yes.  
Even in hospitals, and courthouses, and battlefields, and cemeteries? Yes.  
Does Jesus' presence reach into every single crack and crevice of this world? Praise God, yes.

And if I've been running from him?  
He's also gentle enough to lead you home.

People of God, Christ holds all things together.

And that great mystery: Christ is in...*you*.

Put your hope in him.  
Keep singing those church songs.  
He is powerful, and he is good.  
He's holding everything together.

Amen?

Thanks be to God!