

## SCRIPTURE'S GREATEST HITS

### *Back to the Beginning*

Colossians 1:15-20

July 30, 2023

Several years ago, my extended family took a big family vacation to Ireland, the place of the ancestors (or at least some of them), a place that my grandmother had dreamt of visiting for many, many years.

In hindsight, it was an amazing vacation, but a few days into it, after our large, intergenerational group had spent a couple of nights in Dublin in a badly chosen hotel perched above a pub and meandered our way across the country on cliffside roads, where many of us mused over fish and chips, "it is unfathomable we don't hear about more of those tour buses falling off of them," we arrived at our "home base" for the duration of the vacation. We arrived jet lagged, motion sick, newly aware of our new fear of heights, and mostly having already lost our filters. And it was raining, and it was chilly. We were a rather curmudgeonly group.

So, while the menfolk stayed at home, researching biking and hiking excursions that we wouldn't take (because grandma), the womenfolk stomped around town in their rain boots, trying to get acquainted. Most of us were in baseball caps having already given up on our hair, eyes and heads cast down, looking no more than a few feet in front of us, bickering about silly things and still moaning about the clouds and the rain, wondering why we didn't go to Italy or the south of France instead.

And then with a stroke of luck—or providence perhaps—my teenage cousin, Anna, caught sight of a little cottage-like shop just a ways off the beaten trail, and we made our way down this little cobble road to what turned out to be a little art gallery. Peering in, we saw the painter and her easel, both covered in paint, mostly blues and purples and blacks. It was set up in the corner. One more step inside and we

were immersed in brightness. Bright, white walls full of vivid painting after painting after painting of water: shallow water, deep water, calm water, raging water. All the colors water could possibly reflect from sunrise to high noon to dusk to sunset and in any given season.

We were transfixed. Our gazes softer. Our tongues softer. Our feet softer. It was a place you were compelled to move about slowly, sort of suspended in time. We had spread out, each of us taking our own path around this room, our attention captured by different paintings, but our hearts captured by the totality of the space and the way that it transported us somewhere else.

When my aunt and I bumped into each other, her shaky voice betrayed her as she struggled to name the surprise and the embarrassment that she felt at being so deeply moved. "I don't know what is going on here, Sara, but I feel like I'm going to cry."

Moments later we were deep in conversation with the artist, Carol, whose warmth and ease and depth reflected her paintings. She was native to Dingle, Ireland, and had spent many years abroad painting landscapes, but the water itself kept calling her back until she submitted to its claim.

We probably lingered for an hour in that gallery and only peeled away after promising Carol that we each planned to have one of her paintings hanging above our fireplaces just as soon as we pay off the trip to Ireland itself. For now, she would need to accept payment in the form of our accolades and a few self-conscious tears.

Transported as we were in that space, the biggest blessing was found as we moved on. The paintings

that were so transcendent in fact were paintings of the waters that physically surrounded us. So, as we moved out of the gallery and back into “the real world,” we did so with a shifted perspective. The images of water pointed beyond the water and beyond the moment of beholding the image. The paintings captured a measure of the beauty that surrounded us. Beauty that our sulking, bickering group was apparently worthy of. We left with a new lens. It’s a lens that the author of Colossians offers to us as a gift, if we would receive it.

Often, we read lofty scriptural language of the type we encounter this morning with a deep breath, prepared to do some real mental gymnastics as we parse the theology and the philosophy and the ecclesiology—all of the ologies—of the text. And we exhale once we have figured out exactly what it means. (Or we just never exhale.)

The irony is that a text like this one wasn’t meant to function that way, at least not primarily. It was a hymn of the early church—or at least it was a liturgy—known in the bones of the people and sung or spoken not as a theological treatise to intellectually master and repeat, but more as a piece of art to behold and to be moved by. Old Testament Scholar Walter Brueggeman, oft quoted from this pulpit, has said that while doctrine closes and closes, biblical poetry opens and opens, which we all so desperately need. We need to “relish the images; make them our framework of life and faith.”

The text we encounter in Colossians gives us such an image by offering up the supreme one: “He is the image of the invisible God. The firstborn of all creation...” It’s known as a Christ Hymn. With the others in Philippians, Romans, Ephesians, John, Hebrews, and Revelation, it paints a picture of Christ that is expansive, even universal. Timeless, even eternal. A picture that takes us beyond the Jesus of history—the man that some could touch—and to a time before him and a time after him. Echoing the Gospel of John which begins with *the Word*—which was *with God and was God* long before it ever became incarnate in the baby born in Bethlehem—the author of Colossians

also points to the Christ who existed beyond and before, who exists beyond and before time. Today we come to the end of our journey through “Scripture’s Greatest Hits,” and we do so appropriately with a song and a text that takes us right back to the beginning.

Christ, the firstborn of all creation. Christ, the one *in whom* all things in heaven and on earth were created. Christ, the one who is before all things and the one in whom all things hold together. Christ, the firstborn from the dead. Christ, the head. Christ, the one in whom the fullness of God is pleased to dwell. Christ, the one in whom God reconciles to God’s self all things. Christ, the beginning, and Christ, the end. The Word of God by which we were created, redeemed, and are now sustained in the hope that we might become co-creators in creating and redeeming and sustaining. If this language sounds even a little bit funny to you, it’s because the Western Church has a long history of neglecting The Cosmic Christ that is witnessed to over and over in scripture but not bound by it. Writing in 1988, Theologian and educator Matthew Fox said that “theologians responded to the enlightenment by putting aside the concept of the Cosmic Christ, and with it most other attempts to see the world and faith in non-anthropocentric ways.” Indeed, theology “went in search of the historic Jesus,” not a meaningless quest in and of itself, but it was undertaken at the expense of the Cosmic Christ. Father Richard Rohr put it a little more starkly when he told an interviewer, “We kind of overdid the Jesus thing.” “We” being the Church. We might know a little more about the world that Jesus of Nazareth lived in. We might know a little more about such-and-such parable and how it has been misused and misunderstood, not at all based on the context in which it was told. We might claim Jesus as “my Lord and my Savior.” But we can scarcely conceive of the Christ that permeates all things—visible and invisible, inside the church and outside the church, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

“I believe,” Fox said, “the issue today for the third millennium of Christianity—if the earth is to survive into the next century—is the quest not for the historical Jesus but for the Cosmic Christ.”

Can we recover, I hear him asking, a Christian faith that moves us beyond the intellectual ascription? Beyond the ethical imperative? Beyond the therapeutic? Beyond the possession of Jesus? Can we recover a Christian faith that seeks, finds, and celebrates Christ in all things? Not so we can arrogantly claim a monopoly on the truth but for the sake of *joy* planted and *beauty* beheld and *love* known? A Christian faith that is cosmic in scope?

Where do we begin? I think it has to do with the way that we see. *He is the image of the invisible God.* While the author of Colossians uses the metaphor of an image, Jesus himself used a similar one, claiming the title "Light." *I am the Light of the world.*

But while we tend to imagine the candle shining in the darkness, as if the light itself is the thing to behold, Richard Rohr says, "Remember, light is not so much what you directly see as that by which you see everything else."

So, maybe we begin by training our eyes to see both God and the world around us through Christ. Christ, the image of God, *and* a snapshot of ourselves in any given moment; the good, the bad, the ugly, the redeemable. Christ, the light by which we see everything.

For all of its seemingly esoteric language, the letter to the Colossians is actually quite practical. The Cosmic Christ is always and at the same time drawing us out of ourselves by illuminating the particularities of our days. All those thrones and dominions and powers. We're drawn out in order to go back in as more faithful versions of ourselves. If Christ is our image of God, our light, our lens through which all is seen, how then do we live?

I've been carrying around an image with me for about ten years now. It's of two men whose names I do not know but whose faces are forever etched on the backs of my eyelids. When I lived in New York City for a year following seminary, I loved to go to the diners—the ones that are like the one on Seinfeld. I actually went to that one on Broadway and 110th many a time. While they are of course open to anyone

who happens to be passing through, they tend to be a microcosm of the neighborhood in which they reside. Fewer tourists, more 22-year-old actresses just trying to make it, and families sitting down for a quick bite to eat as they juggle their careers and soccer practice and ballet, and a lot of 80-year-old men that sit for hours, drinking coffee and eating cake, thanking God for rent-controlled apartments and flipping through *The New York Times*.

On this particular day, I was sitting at the counter, probably inhaling a turkey sandwich on my way to the gym, my mind already on the next thing, when an interaction a couple of seats down from me caught my attention. I hadn't noticed him until then, but there was a man—clearly homeless—who had just been handed a standard breakfast plate from behind the counter: eggs, sausage, toast, hash browns, the works. He didn't say anything, but his eyes bespoke gratitude.

And then in a moment imperceptible to me, the waiter behind the counter picked up on something, some inkling of disappointment in his recipient, and he asked, "Is there a different way that you prefer your eggs?" The receiver of the meal just waved him off, but the waiter persisted. "It's really an easy thing for us to redo them. It'll only take a moment. Over-easy? Sunny side up? Poached?" The man didn't understand these terms, and he didn't talk much, so this interaction went on for a bit as the waiter described what each label meant. "Kinda runny. Really runny. Not runny at all." Together, they came to the conclusion, and the waiter took the scrambled egg plate away. And minutes later, he emerged with a new one with eggs that were sunny side up. Runny. And a smile spread across the receiver's face in recognition.

This was a diner that was known for its hospitality. It frequently let houseless folks inside to use the restrooms. It let them linger as they sipped on their house coffee. The man a couple seats down from me may have been sitting there for an hour already, just resting his feet in the air conditioning.

But this exchange was new to me. I couldn't recall ever seeing one like it before—at this diner or at any restaurant, or anywhere. It really was an easy thing to do, as the waiter insisted. It wasn't like a ribeye steak was being sent back. And it may have been an easy fix, but the moment was more about what it communicated: I see you. You matter. As an individual. As someone who has preferences. As someone who probably has childhood memories around food. As someone whose mouth waters when certain foods are presented and whose stomach heaves when others are, no matter how hungry you are. And we want to get this right for you.

The man who liked his eggs sunny side up probably received a thousand paper cuts a day from people who only saw dirt. And laziness. And ingratitude. People who thought they knew everything they would ever need to know about him—except that they would never know how he liked his eggs. The waiter must have been using a different lens.

When Christ is Cosmic, and not just “my” Christ, or the Christ of comfort, or the Christ of culture, but when Christ is most truly the image of the invisible God—the light by which we see, the lens through which we filter it all—I believe our God rejoices. Whether the lens adjusts our eyes and our hearts to the beauty of the world and its creator—like the paintings in a gallery— or enables us to see “the least of these” as the fully human beings that they are, or moves us to work for a world that better reflects the God who made it, I believe our God sings. And we are invited to join that song. Amen.