

## Sermon: June 2, 2002

### Every Creature

**Speaker: Scott Hoezee**

**Colossians 1:15–23**

As we just yesterday turned the chronological corner into June, the thoughts of many of us make another turn: the turn toward anticipating an upcoming vacation. Like many of you when on vacation, so also my family and I enjoy the opportunity to soak up the outdoor world of God's creation in ways we can't always do in the rigors of the average work week. Many years, we climb the Sleeping Bear Dunes in northern Michigan and so marvel afresh at what a colossal pile of sand the winds have heaped up there over the centuries. We may spy a hawk soaring along the thermals emanating from the warm sand. A hike through the forest may reveal gorgeous wildflowers and, as happened last year, maybe a red fox bounding through a meadow. Bike and car rides are made the more fun by the sight of white-tailed deer with twin fawns, wild turkeys with chicks, and sometimes even the odd coyote carting off some prey.

These are the kinds of natural sights which we look for when on vacation. But how often do we ponder foxes and deer, wildflowers and hawks, when we gather for worship? In particular, this morning I'd like to wonder with you how often such thoughts pass through our minds when we enter into that central sacramental mystery of the Christian faith: the eucharist, the holy supper, the communion at the Lord's table? The answer is probably, "Not very often."

The truth is we have enough difficulty seeing in our mind's eye even the other *people* with whom we gather at Christ's table. When we eat the body of our Lord, we thicken our union with the Nigerian Christians in Jos. We become one yet again with the Navajo and Zuni Christians in New Mexico. We are one with Chinese Christians who may have to break the bread and spill the wine in a house church away from the watchful eyes of the government. When we gather at our Lord's table, we sit among a vast congregation of people from all over the world and from all along the span of history.

That's hard enough to remember. So it seems unlikely that we would associate the blessed sacrament with foxes and trout! And anyway, these days there are some who label 'New Age' any association of Christian spirituality with the non-human creation. At a combined worship service a couple of years ago, we used the classic 'Canticle of the Sun' by Saint Francis of Assisi as part of a responsive reading. Francis, as most of you well know, typically called the moon, sun, and wind his 'brothers' and 'sisters.'

But no one in the thirteenth century or since condemned Francis as a heretic. Yet when his words are used today, such sentiments are labeled New Age or pantheistic, as indeed a well-meaning, but misguided, member of my church did when she wrote me and my Worship Committee a stern letter, stating that she felt dirty when she left that service. She felt she needed to confess before God her complicity in a service that was tinged with, as she termed it, Wiccan witchcraft imagery and pagan pantheism.

Using Saint Francis leads to no such things, of course, but on the other hand given the recent rise in Mother Earth goddess worship, some hedging is needed. The Bible everywhere forbids any blurring of the line between Creator and creation. We worship God alone and though we give thanks to God *for* what he has made, we do not worship those things instead of God or along with God, nor do we worship God *through* those other creatures.

Those are the up-front matters we need to keep in mind. However, *with* all of that in mind there is a sense in which Paul's words in Colossians 1 tell us that it is proper to sit at God's table and envision the good news which the bread and wine contain for also foxes, fish, coyotes, and flowers. Doing this *is* eminently apropos.

A few years ago, however, when I preached an earlier version of this same sermon in my congregation, one of my more conservative members assured me after the service that I had really gone overboard in that sermon. He was quite certain that you simply cannot mingle ecological matters with something as spiritual as the Lord's Supper. That sermon just went too far, he said. Naturally, I went straight to my office and ear-marked this sermon as one I simply had to preach again! But not to be merely cheeky, let me explain why I think this follows from our passage for today.

Colossians 1 is a most remarkable passage. For one thing, Paul goes on a verbal tear here the likes of which you seldom see. In most Bibles you will find something like eleven sentences between verses 9 and 23. However, near as we can tell, in the original Greek Paul wrote exactly *two* sentences in those fifteen verses! The first whopper of a sentence has 218 words in it, running all the way from verse 9 until verse 20. Verses 21–23 are one more Greek sentence.

Paul is all—but tripping over his own words, piling on one subordinating clause after the next. Even as his *thoughts* spiral higher and higher, so does his rhetoric. He is like an excited child who cannot get the words out fast enough to describe a day at the amusement park. "And then we rode the ferris wheel and then we got some cotton candy, and, and, and then I think the next thing we did was go to the fun house, which was really spooky but I didn't get too scared because I knew it wasn't real, even though once I kind of screamed, but after that we walked right over to the roller coaster and, and, and, . . . ." and so forth!

Paul's quill cannot keep up with the places to which his heart is racing as he realizes anew the truth of Jesus. And what a truth it is! Keep in mind that Paul is talking about Jesus of Nazareth here. Keep in mind that Paul wrote this letter probably sometime between the years 55–63 AD, a scant thirty or less years after Jesus died. Any non-Christian in Paul's day who read Colossians would surely find these words absurd. This Jesus was someone who had *died* a quarter-century earlier! What's more, even before he died he was just a carpenter's son, a peasant, a nobody from the redneck backwaters of the empire. But now Paul says this Jesus is the creator of every blessed thing that exists, that he rules it all now, and that he is finally the one in whom and through whom all of reality hangs together!

That's outrageous! This is one of those places where you sense the poignance of that comment C.S. Lewis once made about Jesus: either accept him as who he said he was (the Son of God) or consign him and the New Testament generally to the realm of mental illness. Because Colossians 1 does not allow you to accept Jesus as no more than an inspirational role model whose example, though just an example of an ordinary human being, still has much to teach us. No, the New Testament insists that he is *the One*, God's One and Only, who created everything in the beginning and who more recently redeemed it all, too.

Yes, he lived at a definite time on a definable piece of Middle Eastern real estate. But he was also the one who, when the Big Bang flashed, blew out the match with which he had lit the fire. He's the One who, as the galactic soup expanded, cooled, and slowly gelled into stars and planets, was cruising overtop of that spectacle, shaping and molding it according to his and his Father's and his Holy Spirit's designs. And so although he was born one night and laid in a manger, he is also the one who, a few billion or so years before that night, had created the atoms that made up the wood of that manger. Now through his resurrection he is preserving every creature in whose creation he took delight at the dawn of history.

He's the One. He's the Only One. If he is who Paul says he is, then Jesus is the Key to reality: it all makes sense in him. If the universe has a future beyond the limits of time and space, then it is because of him. If *you* have a future beyond that moment when the doctor looks at your heart monitor and declares Asystole. That's it, then it is because of Jesus. That's who we believe Jesus is. That's what we proclaim in the bread and wine of the holy supper.

And *that's* why our thoughts at the table of the eucharist simply must range so broadly. Paul's thoughts clearly did so. Four times between verses 15 and 23 Paul uses some form of the Greek word *ktises*, which is the word for 'creation'. And though Paul is clearly including humans in what he has to say about the scope of

Jesus' work, it is equally clear that he is wrapping his mind around all other creatures too. In fact, at the end of verse 16, Paul caps off his list of creatures by throwing in the catch—all Greek words *ta panta*, which literally means 'all things' but which colloquially could be rendered 'the whole kit–n–kaboodle!'

Paul does not want to leave anyone or anything out. And just in case we still have not gotten the point by the time we reach verse 23, Paul goes so far as to say that the gospel has been proclaimed "to every creature under heaven." Clearly this is an example of hyperbole. Paul is exaggerating. Even in 55 A.D. it was not the case that even every *person* had heard the gospel. And if that was true then, it is much more the case now when the world has about *5 billion* more people in it than it did during Paul's lifetime. It is not literally true that even every *person* has heard the gospel, much less the trillions of other *creatures* on the planet.

But it *is* literally true that the gospel has something to do with every creature, and that is Paul's point. Paul is willing to exaggerate a bit if that's what it takes to convey the message that Jesus has scooped up all things and every thing. Paul makes a similar move in Romans 8 when he says that even the non-human creation bears within it somehow the seed of gospel hope. So strong is this hope in the breast of chickadees and sunflowers that Paul imaginatively declares in Romans 8 that the whole creation is groaning for Jesus' return, craning its neck like a child at a parade eager to see the next spectacle coming down the street. The whole creation is waiting on tippee-toes, Paul says, because the whole creation is exactly the scope of what Jesus made and is even now in the process of salvaging.

One of the oldest heresies that beset the Christian church is Gnosticism. There is evidence that Gnosticism was present as early as the first century. Alas, there is evidence that the gnostic view still rears its head today, too. A key characteristic of this heresy is the notion that salvation is mostly a matter of what you *know* – indeed, the word 'Gnosticism' comes from the Greek word for 'knowledge'. Salvation is about receiving knowledge from God. Once that knowledge is in your heart, your interest in the natural world begins to fade away as a prelude to life in heaven when God whisks you out of this gross physical world of flesh and blood, dirt and feathers, into a vapory heaven of only cloud and light.

Recently Harold Bloom wrote that in his opinion Gnosticism is the quintessential modern religion, particularly among those of us south of the border in the United States. American Christians tend to focus much on having a 'personal relationship with Jesus' even as they eagerly await Jesus' rapture of them *out* of this world. So there has been suspicion in recent years toward those who celebrate the environment.

Some dismiss concerns over the physical cosmos by hanging the tag of pantheism onto such matters even as others ignore issues related to the earth in that there seems to be no future in such things. We're going to heaven – and this earth ain't our home! Someone once asked preacher Jerry Falwell if he believed a nuclear holocaust might be the way the world ends. Falwell agreed that he thought this likely but that it didn't bother him. When asked why not, Falwell replied, "You know why I'm not worried? Cause I ain't going to be here." The rapture out of the earthly and into the heavenly will take care of us. This is the great Gnostic escahtology.

The apostle who wrote Colossians 1 thinks otherwise! True, in verses 21–22 Paul talks to believers about their reconciled relationship to God through Christ. We've been given the gift of faith and we need to persevere in that faith, Paul says. In other words, the basic idea behind the notion of having 'personal relationship with Jesus' *is* here. But Paul sets that into a huge context! Faith brings our hearts out into the wide open spaces of Jesus' galactic project of salvation. Colossians 1:15–23 begins by talking about the entire creation and concludes with a reference to 'every creature.' Nestled into the middle of that is each believer's salvation by faith. But what that means is that faith, far from *disconnecting* us from our fellow creatures, actually serves to *connect* us in the common hope we all have.

All of which brings us back to how I opened this sermon today. When we come to our Lord's table, we are right to give thanks to God for saving us, for granting us the gift of faith, and for securing for us a firm hope for an eternal future. But we would also do well to give thanks to God in Christ for the gorgeous physical world he has made even as we gratefully note that it, too, has a bright future. We do well to connect the joys of

our upcoming summertime vacations in God's creation with what we celebrate in that central element of Christian worship when we encounter our crucified and risen Lord in the bread and the wine.

This world's birds, fish, and fauna are craning their necks in anticipation of seeing what we will become when Christ Jesus is revealed. Those other critters with whom we share the universe are eager for that because then they will know that their long, sad history of hurt, decay, and travail will also be finished. We have plenty hurts and woes in our lives, too, of course. That's why, like most of you, when I savor the bread and wine of communion, I look forward to an eternal life of rest, joy, and peace. But as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we should also remember that at least part of what will make that eternal kingdom a joy for both God and us is the fact that we'll share it with all creatures of our God and King. And *that* is reason enough to shout a cosmic, "Hallelujah!" Amen.