

Invisible Things  
Colossians 1.11-20  
November 24, 2013  
Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

It is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year. We consider today what it means to mark the reign of Jesus against the literal reign of rulers and forces and influential powers of this world. We soon step into the waiting days of Advent; we'll sing of the Prince of Peace and the babe in the manger. And we're given the opportunity amidst these weeks to consider the life to which God is calling us through Jesus Christ.

But first, this morning's Epistle Lesson reminds us that God is at work making the invisible things visible to us. The opening verses of Colossians are widely interpreted as a hymn, and it is thought that Paul added his commentary between hymn phrases as both interpretation and reminder of how Christian community is to properly understand Jesus Christ. One of the common stories of scripture is a people of faith beginning to understand something of who God is but then taking a turn and missing the mark. Paul's liner notes to the hymn are an invitation to be redirected onto the right path of faith and practice.

When we modern readers hear that Christ "is the image of the invisible God", we hear that line as poetry or a lovely phrase, but an audience in the Roman Empire would have received this note differently. In their study of Colossians, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat<sup>1</sup> note that, "The image of Caesar and other symbols of Roman power were literally everywhere—in the market, on coins, in the gymnasium, at the gladiatorial games, on jewelry, goblets, lamps and paintings.' In hundreds of ways every day, images of Caesar reminded people within the Roman empire of where power resided and who was responsible for peace." To see Nero was to see the hand-picked representative of the gods "if not incarnate deity."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* by Walsh and Keesmaat; InterVarsity Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> "Imagining the Invisible God" by Mary Hinkle Shore; <http://www.pilgrimpreaching.org/2010/11/christthekingc.html>

Paul was making the case that God was at work outside and beyond Caesar's imagination, and the King of God's Kingdom did not reflect the emperors and empires of the world. Jesus is recorded often throughout the Gospels as teaching about the kingdom of God—an upside down, last shall be first/first shall be last kingdom where banquets are thrown for all who will come not just those privileged few who can repay the host. But any mention of Jesus as king is reserved for his trial and death. He is not a king who rules from a throne with great force, he is a servant king who suffers and dies for the true peace, the shalom, the comprehensive flourishing of his people.

Paul is unpacking all of that in his letter to the Colossian church, but the early church is not alone in its forgetfulness of who God is and how God goes about revealing truth in the world. We mustn't dismiss ancient ways of thinking as fixed in that time and place. While we no longer mistake rulers of this world as true divinity, we do invite powers of our day to influence the choices we make and the way we live our lives.

We are bombarded by images every day that seek to define our reality. This week opens the marketing floodgates in our culture as we rush through these last 31 shopping days before Christmas (not waiting days, not pursuing peace days, not days of seeking God's presence as experienced in the Christ-child, but shopping days). What do you give the girl who has everything? What do you buy for that hard-to-shop-for person on your Christmas list? This gadget, this toy, this scarf, *this thing this year this time* will bring satisfaction and joy and true happiness. No matter how loudly we may protest this morning, it is true that we believe these things as a consumer culture deep down inside of us. The messages are loud and will grow louder for the next month: The one who offers true peace is here, in this store, in this object, for just a simple swipe of your credit card.

There are forces clamoring for our attention. We need the reign of Christ in our lives. To align ourselves rightly, we must learn to sense the world around us in such a way that we are drawn to the ways of God, aware of the ways of culture that must be rejected, and so shaped by the distinction between the two that we ourselves become an image of the invisible God through our very lives. You and I, we are on a quest for visible images of the invisible God

and need these next four weeks of Advent to slow us down if we are to have any hope of searching in the right places. This search requires practice and intention.

On Friday morning I carved out the morning hours to be alone. I dropped the children at school at 8 a.m., parked my car here at the church, dug my headphones out of the bottom of a bag, and started walking. I walked and walked for an hour that morning, and as I walked I had to catch my breath not because I was moving so quickly but because I noticed so much. My family and I, we're in that rare, wonderful place of being newcomers to this town. Though I've visited New Orleans dozens of times over my life, I now have the surreal privilege of living here.

This washed over me as I approached Audubon Park and paid attention to the trees as the morning mist was still halfway down their branches. I noticed statues and fountain spray displayed for everyone and no one in particular. I chose the dirt trail that encircles the park. As I followed that wide loop, I noticed the sound and sensation of my feet over live oak roots. I turned the first corner and noticed two dozen birds; perhaps a stand of white ibises. The walk had a slow pace at times because there was so much to take in. I walked along homes fronting the park and moved closer to them along a sidewalk where I then noticed a quote drawn into the concrete: "And you, child, will be called to guide our feet in the way of peace." I took a picture. I kept walking. I managed to pick up my pace and return to the dirt trail all the way to the rear of the park along Magazine. Then I simply had to stop as I reached a canopy of oaks filled with Spanish moss; the sun was now fully above and peeking through breaks in the trees. I looked up for a while then returned to the path, full speed at last, with longing glances at the trees, amazed by the wide expanses of green, and grateful for the sunlight pouring down.

How many days pass without noticing anything of beauty? How many hours of routine hide our eyes from the goodness that abounds? As we enter this notoriously busy time of year with a mere dash of gratitude thrown in on Thursday, lost on many of us in the next five weeks is a sense of magic or mystery, a sense of Divinity or Presence. We will hurry from work to meeting to holiday party to grocery to shopping mall all (potentially) without noticing much of anything let alone the signs that point to what remains unseen.

The choice to pay attention to our lives is the choice to search for God with intention. In her book *Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness*, Holly Sprink calls this practice of seeing and naming life moments “the art of noticing.” Sprink writes, “Noticing aspects of our world and lives takes practice. It takes a deeper level of awareness than we normally use. Instead of plowing through our schedules, scattering shrapnel of voice mails and sticky notes everywhere, what if we took extra care to be mindful, matching up the way we *say* we want to live with the way we are actually living?”<sup>3</sup>

If we desire to see God in our daily experiences and to live into the ways of Christ, then we do that mindfully. Glenn Hinson, beloved professor of Christian Spirituality, speaks not of mindfulness but of a contemplative life. Hinson defines contemplation as “prayer in the sense of attentiveness to God—listening and seeing the Beyond in the midst of our lives.”<sup>4</sup>

In an essay for the Center for Christian Ethics, Hinson encourages us to pay attention as “scriptures remind us that God has built messages into the order of things or, to put it another way, is always beaming messages to us...God communicates through nature, through history, and through our own lives. What we have to learn is to *see* and to *listen*.”<sup>5</sup>

As Christian community, we are to cultivate practices that enable us to better see and listen for the ways God is made real to us every day. We do this in a combination and variety of ways: a daily walk, the practice of sitting in silence, the challenges of holy friendships lived out in community, and in working to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. These practices slowly change who we are, and the world around us takes note. When we get it right, we as Christ-followers and as the body of Christ begin to reflect the image of God to the world.

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3 *Faith Postures: Cultivating Christian Mindfulness* by Holly Sprink; Smyth & Helwys, 2012, p. 17.

4 “Improving our Seeing and Listening” by E. Glenn Hinson; *The Center For Christian Ethics*, 2005, p. 77.

5 Henson, p. 78

If that sounds simplistic or unrealistic, if you think the world is disinterested in seeing some kind of visible representation of what God must be like, take a moment to consider the most well-known Christian in the world who has captivated popular attention this year: Pope Francis. His is not an evangelical campaign with a catchy slogan, there is no marketing strategy or demographic study backing up his efforts. His faith practices have shaped a way of life that is being noticed and admired far beyond the walls of the Catholic Church. Protestants, atheists, people of faith and no faith, are all drawn to Pope Francis and consistently comment that Francis reflects the Jesus of the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, Protestants (and Evangelicals, in particular) have earned a reputation for being either irrelevant or hypocritical. Zach Hunt noted recently in a widely read Huffington Post article that people of faith should take note as Pope Francis enjoys such broad admiration and praise.

Hunt commented on mainline and evangelical congregations' anxious efforts to grow numerically as opposed to Francis' slow life of faithfulness. "As a Church," Hunt writes, "we lose so much sleep over millennials leaving and our inability to reach those outside our community of faith, particularly those who are antagonistic towards religion. So, we create elaborate programs. And spend fortunes on buildings and worship bands and stage lighting and multimedia experiences...But it's not working.

And yet here is this humble man from Argentina who doesn't seem to care at all about outreach programs or marketing campaigns or cutting edge worship. He's shunned the glamorous house that came with his celebrity status, stopped battling over theological issues that aren't worth fighting over, and instead of trying to scare people into heaven with words about God's wrath, he's chosen to embody God's love to the least of these with his actions.

And the world is loving it. Young and old, he's being embraced everywhere he goes. Even those who have no love whatsoever for religion, love this man and what he is doing."

In the words of our Epistle Lesson today, the world is noticing and naming a visible image of

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zack-hunt/why-protestant-pastors-ne\\_b\\_4324400.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zack-hunt/why-protestant-pastors-ne_b_4324400.html)

the invisible God. That's not to say that Pope Francis or any one of us attains the life of Jesus, but when we seek that life earnestly, it shows. People of no faith at all are looking at Francis and saying, "Well if you're going to profess to live like Jesus, then that is what faith lived out should look like."

"Which means in his simple humility and compassionate servitude, Pope Francis is succeeding where our best programming and marketing efforts have failed - he's reaching those who don't want to be reached....As Pope Francis seems to be reminding us each and every day, if Christianity is going to have any credibility it has to be lived out, not just talked about."

Scripture reminds us that God is present to us both in the person of Jesus Christ and in the moments of daily life. If we want to grow into a way of life that reflects God's ways, we must cultivate practices that allow us to most fully discern God's presence. In doing so, we begin to cultivate a way of life that resists the urgency and false peace of our culture and embraces the love of God and the desire for the flourishing of all people and all things. Our lives can become means by which all can see and know who God is. We can be a people who welcome and love with the grace of Christ. We can be a window to things unseen. May we live into our calling as the Body of Christ. May we hold to the practices that slow us down and grow us up. May we live God's kingdom into being right here on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.