Ascension -- 1-14-2018

**CONTINUE TO LIVE YOUR LIVES IN CHRIST**

*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*

Text: Colossians 2:1‑10

I have been your pastor the past 55 weeks, and now it’s time for you – and me – to move on. By the way, we are following a time-honored tradition today. Whenever I have taught someplace, the students have hosted a party at the end of the time to celebrate my leaving. The tradition lives on in the big celebration you’ve planned for this afternoon.

In a way similar to other times I’ve preached farewell sermons, I have mixed feelings today. I’ll miss standing in front of you each week – and I’ll miss witnessing firsthand how the Lord is present and active in your midst. He brought you through the difficulties you faced a year ago and has breathed a new spirit of enthusiasm and excitement into your congregation. I am happy for you and confident that the Lord has rich blessings in store for you and your congregation under the faithful leadership of your new pastor. I’ll be watching and praying for you.

My parting request of you is that you **CONTINUE TO LIVE YOUR LIVES IN CHRIST.**

The Colossian Christians were facing a difficult time. Bible scholars refer to the problem as the "Colossian heresy." False teaching had worked its way into the congregation. It was the teaching of a manmade religion of self‑redemption. Plain, simple faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior was not good enough, the false teachers said. One needs to continue in the Old Testament rituals, laws and customs ‑‑ and even carry them a step further. The Colossian heresy also promoted a superstitious interest in the spirit world and worship of angels. It said that God could not become a man because everything material is evil. And a fourth point: the Gospel message of Jesus, Paul, and the others wasn't enough. They said each believer needed and could expect new revelations directly from God.

Paul overwhelms these salvation‑destroying false teachings with the full riches of Christ. We notice as we read Paul’s letter that he doesn’t attack the false teaching or false teachers, but rather clearly and powerfully sets forth the true teachings. There’s a lesson for us in that. Let’s not spend our time focused on telling what’s wrong with other churches -- but rather let Ascension be known as a church which clearly and powerfully proclaims the truths of God’s Word. Let Ascension be known as a place where *God’s Word is still God’s Word.*

Paul sets forth clearly and beautifully who Jesus is and what he has done for us. In

chapter one, Paul vividly portrayed Christ as the all‑sufficient Savior. He made his point loud and clear: Christians are complete in Christ*.* *[In Jesus] we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.* ***15****The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.****16****For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through 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* (1:14‑20).

The conception, development and birth of any child is a marvelous and amazing wonder. We believe that every birth is a wonder of God's creating power. But by comparison, the birth of Jesus Christ is a miracle that utterly escapes our experience and imagination. For his birth is a mystery of opposites that are all stated as being true of Jesus Christ at the same time ‑‑ opposites that boggle the mind if we try to fit them together. God cannot be born; God cannot be humbled; God cannot suffer; God cannot die. Yet Jesus was born; he humbled himself, he suffered, and he died. In Jesus the divine and the human are inseparably united. As a result the Bible tells us a man had God as his Father, a man was without sin; a man offered up a perfect sacrifice for the world. And the Bible instructs us to say: "God was born in Bethlehem, God humbles himself, God suffers; God dies." Jesus is the God‑man; God and man are inseparably and permanently bonded together in him. Yes, it is a fact that Mary is the mother of God. As we just read: *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation…*. *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* (15,19-20).

In seminary classes I illustrate the truth that Jesus is God and man with this pen – I call it a Christological pen. Click, it’s a black pen; click, it’s a red pen. But it’s just one pen. Click, it has all the qualities and abilities of any black pen. Click, it has all the qualities and abilities of any red pen. So Jesus is full God and full man at the same time. This Christological pen also illustrates Christ’s incarnation – his taking on human flesh and blood. How do you suppose this pen was first invented? I suspect that someone was looking at a black pen one day and said: “I bet you could add a red cartridge into this case – without diminishing in any way the usefulness of the black cartridge.” So Christ, true God from eternity, added humanity – took into himself a human body and spirit – without giving up any of his divine qualities or powers. And why would someone have invented a Christological pen like this one – and why would someone buy such a pen? Because it’s the perfect tool for jobs such as taking notes in black and then highlighting the important points by underlining in red. So Christ, to save us, needed to be God and man. He needed to be a man so he could be put under the law, facing all the temptations and trials we humans face, and he had to be man so that he could die. He needed to be perfect God so he could keep the law perfectly in our place and so that his death on the cross was of sufficient magnitude to cover the punishment the world’s sins deserved.

The Holy Spirit did not reveal these truths about Jesus to confuse us, but to comfort us. If all we knew was that God came into our world and was rejected by humans, we would melt in terror. How could we escape his wrath when he came back in judgment? But the Bible assures us that *"He came for us and for our salvation."* When I hear that, joy fills my heart. The eternal God, whom I have offended so often with my sins, loved me so much that he personally came down from Heaven for me. That wonder is so profound ‑‑ and yet it's so simple.

Saying it once was not enough for Paul. He repeats the wonderful truth in Colossians chapter 2: *In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.... For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form…* [He] *is head over every power and authority* (2:9‑10).

Paul now applies this truth to the Colossians and to you and me. *"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness" (*6-7) because *“in Christ you have been brought to fullness”* (10). Go forward in Christ, trusting Christ's word, cherishing his forgiveness, obeying his commandments, and guarding against everything that might disrupt your blessed relationship with him.

With four brief phrases the apostle Paul expands on what he means by *"continue to live your lives in him*." As he does, he suggests for us key qualities of a life in Christ. When the Holy Spirit led us to faith in Jesus, we were **rooted** in Christ. We were implanted in Jesus as our all‑sufficient Savior. Now we ought to continue to draw strength and nourishment from him, sending our roots of faith down ever deeper into Jesus and his Word, as a tree sends its roots deeper into the soil to draw nourishment from the earth. The more we use God's Word and the sacraments, the deeper our roots of faith sink into Christ. And the more firmly we are rooted in Christ, the less likely we are to be blown over by the storms of false teaching and the fierce winds of worldly troubles.

Paul urges that we be ***built up in Christ*.** He wants us to grow in our faith and mature in our Christian living, like a building which rises higher and higher as it progresses toward completion. Through the Word and sacraments, as we use them faithfully, God will build us into right‑side‑up people in an upside‑down world, people who are temples of God to glorify him, people who are temples because God lives in them.

The result is that we will be ***strengthened in the faith.*** Asour faith is strengthened, we become ever more convinced that no new doctrines or no new spiritual truths are necessary because we have fullness and all we need in Christ. In things divine, addition is always subtraction. When human beings try to add to the completeness found in Christ, they lose. Only to those who abide in the all‑sufficient Christ and rely on him alone will his full blessings flow. The false teachers said: "You need Jesus ‑‑ plus." Paul says: "You need Jesus ‑‑ period."

As we contemplate what God has done for us in Christ, we are moved to the fourth part of LIVING YOUR LIVES IN CHRIST, namely to ***overflow with* *thankfulness.*** Our entire life becomes our thankoffering to God. Since I couldn't go up to you, thank you, Jesus, for coming down to me. Thank you for reconciling me to God through your holy, precious blood and your innocent sufferings and death. Thank you for giving me an inheritance in Heaven and for keeping it ready until the day I need it. Thank you for giving me a rich life in Christ here in this world. Thank you for all your gifts each day. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the many precious people who care for us and help us and love us in this often harsh, cruel world. Thank you for my Christian family at Ascension who helps keep me close to you, Jesus. Thank you for the opportunities you give each day to serve you by reflecting your love to others.

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In his letter Paul speaks of his pastoral concern for the Colossians: *I want you to know how much I am struggling for you* (1), Paul writes, *with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me*. Paul struggled for the Colossians. Like an athlete straining his entire being in a contest, Paul exerted himself to his physical limit so that *“they may be encouraged in heart and united in love”* (2) and so that in Christ they might enjoy *“all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”* (3). And when opposition mounted, he endured whatever affliction or persecution they threw at him. How could one man do so much? Paul tells us simply that the strength and energy came from Christ. The Lord who called Paul into the ministry gave him the strength and ability to carry out his ministry.

I can’t say I’ve struggled and sacrificed for you like Paul, but I thank God that he has made it possible for me to serve as your pastor this past year. I can say that I have been like Paul in one aspect. Like Paul my goal has been *that you may have the full riches* of knowing Christ.

It wasn't only Paul and God against the world, however. Paul had partners – fellow- believers in Jesus Christ who were praying for him and supporting him in various ways. In his letter to Colosse Paul speaks of the partnership he had with that congregation. Even though he had never personally visited their city or met them, he speaks of the encouragement he received by the reports of their faithfulness and love for Jesus. *"We also thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,"* Paul writes*, "when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints”* (1:3‑4). Paul speaks of Epaphras, the congregation’s pastor, who was in Rome assisting Paul at that time. Along with his letter to the congregation at Colosse, Paul sent a personal letter to one of the congregation’s members, Philemon, whom Paul calls *our dear friend and fellow worker*. Paul speaks of what a great joy and help Philemon’s slave Onesimus had been to Paul while in prison. Paul instructs Philemon to get a guest room ready because Paul hopes to visit him soon. Paul was assisted in his work and encouraged in his troubles by his fellow‑believers throughout the world – fellow-believers whom Paul knew had been praying and continued to pray for him.

Over the past year I’ve had partners, as so many of you have served this congregation faithfully and helped bring it to this day of rebirth. Thank you. Now keep it up as fellow workers with Pastor Duquaine.

As I now leave you into the care of your new pastor, I can have nothing better for you than Paul’s prayer ‑‑ **Continue to Live your lives in Christ.** I am amazed at how the Lord accomplishes his purposes in spite of the sinfulness and weakness in us his servants. ThereforeI am confident that God will continue to bless you as you strive to carry out the Great Commission, *Go, make disciples of all nations.* I am confident because we have a Savior who is full and true God – one who rose in victory and now rules all things from the right hand of his Father in Heaven. I am confident because we have a message which is *the power of God for the salvation of all who believe.*I am confident that each of you has a friend, neighbor, relative or co-workers that you would invite to come and hear the comforting and powerful Good News. It may be that God wants to add that person to this congregation as a partner and fellow-worker with you in calling others in Escondido to Christ’s forgiveness and joy.