

Pentecost 29C, Christ Reigns
Peace, Seattle
November 20, 2016
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Col 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

THE BIG PICTURE

Today the circle of Peace is growing larger once more as 14 sisters and brothers become fellow voyagers with us on the journey of faith—and ain't that grand?!

It's our conviction that the Holy Spirit has led you here—and that each of you bring unique gifts and stories to the life we share. Because of who you are and what you bring, our community is becoming richer and more resilient, our mission is growing stronger. And because of who you are and what you bring, this congregation will never be the same.

Now some of you, former members of Calvary, are somewhat acquainted with us and we with you, after sharing Lent and Holy Week services and women's retreats for many years. You know what you're getting into, right?

Those of you who arrive at Peace from other places, whether Lutheran or non-Lutheran, have found something here that has echoed inside you—and we couldn't be happier to have you become part of our community and our mission.

In recent years Peace has made a career of sorts of receiving and incorporating folks who, for a variety of reasons, have found themselves looking for a new place to call home. Friends from First Lutheran, St. James, and now Calvary—and many others (150 people in the past decade!)—have found their way to Peace, and as a result our congregation is stronger, more inclusive, and more energized than ever!

Whether we've come as individuals or couples, or as part of a family or group, we've all placed our gifts into the common pot of Peace, and in the process this Stone Soup has enriched us all—and is poised to do so once again.

Folks, by growing instead of shrinking, we're bucking the trend of mainline urban churches, folks. That's not FAKE NEWS, that's GOOD NEWS—and what else can we say than THANKS BE TO GOD!

Now, let's look at the texts before us this Reign of Christ Sunday.

At first glance it's kind of an odd assortment, really, for this final Sunday of the church year. But as we look closer, an assortment well suited for times when there's a good deal of wondering about where we're headed as a country and a world.

First out of the gate there's the warning shot Jeremiah directs toward leaders who've failed as public servants. With the nation in a crisis, Jeremiah takes them to task for a fundamental flaw:

- Called to be benevolent shepherds, they've proven themselves to be greedy and self-serving.
- Instead of gathering and protecting the sheep in their charge they've neglected and scattered them.

And God will stand-by no longer:

I myself will gather the remnant of my flock, says the LORD, and will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, not scatter them. I will raise up a righteous Branch and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In the reading from Luke, we meet that wise and just shepherd—but he’s not at all where we expect him to be. His sheep, you see, have scattered, and the Shepherd? He’s up there, hanging on a cross.

Hemmed in by criminals on his left and his right he seeks God’s forgiveness for the very ones who’ve caused his agony; and makes promises that, under the circumstances, sound more like pipe dreams. How could it all have ended up so wrong?

Alongside these two texts, comes Paul’s letter to the Colossians and with it, the BIG PICTURE. It’s that big picture that I want to focus on today.

At times, the New Testament letters address very specific situations in very specific contexts. That’s what happens, for example, in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and in Thessalonians, Philippians, and James.

On those occasions Paul and other writers address specific congregations—and sometimes even specific individuals—with words meant to encourage, exhort, warn, or call them back to faithful living.

But at other times, the authors portray with the broadest strokes imaginable, the great sweep of God’s salvation trajectory. That’s what’s going on in the opening chapter of Colossians.

In their book on leadership, Martin Linsky and Ronald Heifetz talk about the importance of gaining a “balcony view.” Of getting off the dance floor to gain a perspective from above, from the balcony, where you can see patterns and relationships that simply aren’t apparent to you when you’re on the floor engaged in the flow of the dance.¹ That balcony is where Colossians takes us today.

God has a plan that’s as big as the universe, writes Paul.

“For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

The one who hangs on the cross, Colossians says, is the very Christ who is the image of the invisible God. Whatever we say about this Christ, writes Richard Rohr, pertains to the whole universe. For Christ is the name for the very shape and meaning of the universe. Christ holds everything together.²

That’s the ultimate balcony view; the ultimate big picture.

If you’re like me you’ve become quite obsessed with the headlines recently; with news of presidential appointees and other indicators of what direction we’re heading.

But whether you find discouragement in what you read or encouragement, today’s passage from Colossians reminds us that what’s going on in our little corner of the cosmos isn’t just about us; and it isn’t just about the human experience.

God’s intention is much bigger than that—a plan to gather up ALL THINGS—THINGS VISIBLE AND THINGS INVISIBLE—into this cosmic embrace. This, the writer of Colossians says, this is where we’re headed.

But God’s timeline isn’t our timeline. And that’s what can make it so hard in times like these.

¹ *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*. [Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.]

² You can find Rohr’s Daily Meditation post here: <http://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/90D7D12E8BFB61DC/281C5472D20A0A9DC67FD2F38AC4859C>

Enter Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, Jesuit theologian, philosopher, geologist and paleontologist, who combined his knowledge of the earth's origins, and his studies of early humans with his faith in a divine Creator, and along the way produced some of the most imaginative theology of the 20th century.

De Chardin once wrote:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new.
And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability—
and that it may take a very long time...³

If you scale down the history of the universe to the span of a single year, beginning with the Big Bang on January 1st, any guesses about when our species, *Homo sapiens*, appears?

Our species doesn't make its appearance until 11:59 PM on December 31st.

On this scale, the entire 4,000 year old Judeo-Christian saga is contained within the last nanosecond of the last minute of the last hour of the last day.

Cynthia Bourgeault suggests a balcony view of history in light of recent events.

From Teilhard De Chardin, she writes, we [learn that] events which, viewed at the wrong scale (i.e., too close up), look like devastating upheavals may actually prove to be relatively minor systemic adjustments. Beneath the surface ripples and rapids, the river itself is still flowing smoothly in its channel.⁴

On this final Sunday of the church year, St. Paul, De Chardin, Rohr, Bourgeault, and all invite us up on the balcony; invite us to climb out of the turbulent waters of the moment, and to gain a perspective that brings hope.

It's from that balcony that we can see the greater arc toward which God is moving: an arc that leads toward unity, toward justice; a movement toward the reconciliation of all things.

Sisters and brothers, none of us knows precisely how our coming together today will manifest God's presence in the world, but we can be confident that it will. The words of hope Jesus from the cross, it turned out, were not pipe dreams at all. What happened on Easter allows us to see that.

The future—yours and mine—is open.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be, writes De Chardin, [So let's] give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading [us], and accept the anxiety of feeling [ourselves] in suspense and incomplete.⁵

³ From Chardin's *Hearts on Fire*.

⁴ You can find her essay and video on the [Center for Action and Contemplation](https://cac.org/wisdoms-hour-reflection-following-election/) website: <https://cac.org/wisdoms-hour-reflection-following-election/>

⁵ From Chardin's *Hearts on Fire*.

We can't change the past. We can't control the future.

But we can be fully invested in the present. And that is exactly where we are called to live our lives, trusting that God in Christ is with us—all along the way, the crucified and risen one, in whose hands our destiny is not one of despair but of hope.

Amen.