

## “Holding All Things Together”

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Colossians 1:9-20

Christ the King Sunday, November 22

Rev. Jennifer Dunfee

Christ the King Sunday marks the end of the church’s liturgical year, as we flip the calendar to the beginning next Sunday, the first week of Advent. Since there are usually 52 Sundays in the church year, Sunday 1 is always the first Sunday in Advent and Sunday 52 is today, Christ the King. In 2023 January 1<sup>st</sup> is a Sunday, which means an extra one, so the Christ the King in 2023 will be the 53<sup>rd</sup> Sunday.

That is how it works, but why end this way, with a focus on Christ the King? How does ending the year with a focus on this theological claim help us on this New Year’s Eve of the church, as we end one year and begin another?

How does it help us make sense of our year in review:

Advent and Christmas in masks, no singing, sneaking past the pulpit to use the bathroom in the Bethany room and hoping you weren’t going to be on the livestream. Closing for most of January into February for a Covid surge, setting up propane tanks for outdoor services, youth wearing coats to meet in the Pavilion; the weeks spend figuring out what boxes to keep and where to put everything before welcoming people into the new space with ribbon cutting, open house and a dedication service and party; having office space again, for the first time for Pastor Layne, celebrating 175 years of our shared journey of faith together, further developing our livestream of worship and services, the return of in-person Messy Church, as this morning, now singing, worshipping maskless if one chooses to, education and formation, worship, music, and mission in beautiful, renovated spaces.

The Covid precaution and construction of last Advent and winter might feel at once very far away and very recent, like we have moved through and emerged from the wilderness, while at the same time still feeling our way through the impact of so much recent disruption in our life together.

That feeling, emerging yet lingering impact, might describe our individual lives last year, in our mental health and wellbeing, our relationships and our energy, our sense of purpose and vocation, and for with those we care about. A friend I hadn't seen since the pandemic began recently said she felt as if the two years of Covid aged her husband 15 years. Another friend recently, simply put it like this, "When I look back on what this year has been, I just don't know if I'm okay." She said she was in a good place in November of 2022, things going positively and comparatively better for her and her loved ones than they had in a while, but she still had that lingering question from all that had built up in her system.

Last year was also acutely hard for many: the deaths of loved ones, difficult medical diagnoses, treatments, mental health challenges. And in our world: a 9-month war in Ukraine, another shooting at an elementary school, or UVA or all the other ones, economic hardship of inflation and supply chains, leadership turmoil in countries around the world, climate disasters of hurricane, flood and drought here. For all those whose year included this or another kind of crisis, the calculus of the year review likely centers on that event. Christ the King Sunday is the right time to ask what do we do with what is emerging and still lingering, the acutely challenging, or simply, are we okay? because we do so with scriptures that broaden our perspective with their own definition of okayness. With a reminder at the turning of the calendar that each year, and every minute in it, is part of Christ's kingdom, that as verse 20 says, through Jesus God is reconciling all things, in heaven and on earth, back to God where they belong. There are only three times in the New Testament when the Greek prefix apo is added to the word for reconciliation and two of them occur in Colossians chapter 1. It denotes a return to the created order, where all things dwell fully within God. It is like a recall, where the way something was created has been altered in a negative and potentially dangerous way, has gone off the track.

Everything is being recalled to God through Christ, who created everything, is first and before all things and in whom all things hold together. And in whom, as verse 14 says, we have redemption. Again, the prefix apo is added to the Greek word for redeeming, and highlights the distance, the safe space that is put between the rescued person and what previously enslaved them. The word denotes our continued moving further away from the reach of all that we needed to be

delivered and saved from. and it connects with the phrase in verse 13, where we are rescued from the powers of darkness and then transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved son.

This kingdom is so vast that it holds everything, all things as Colossians says twice, together inside of it. Every single thing I've mentioned about this past year, about our church, about your life, about the world, maybe especially the significant things about the church, your life or the world this year that I didn't mention, but came immediately to your mind, all are part of Jesus' kingdom. Which means he is at work in them, moving everything, *apo – from, away and back into ...* reconciling, redeeming, transferring, rescuing, all things, all people, all powers, all creation, back to where they should be and how they should be. Because God cares that they are not that way for you. And for us. And for all of humanity. And right now God is recalling everything into his kingdom of power and glory that has no end. In creation there was reconciliation and harmony, and God through Christ is bringing us closer in and further from harm. But today, the mountains might still shake in the heart of the sea and inside my heart, your heart, and we might feel more fragmented and falling apart than held together, and see fewer signs of God in real time recalling and reconciling the lingering, confusing and acutely hard things than we hoped, than we thought we would as transfers into the kingdom of Christ. Today maybe our hope is just for respite, refuge, ever present help for what is hard or not okay because the ultimate redemption and reconciliation, although coming, might feel far off, and doesn't always mean now.

Michael Gerson, speech writer to George W. Bush, columnist for the Washington Post, who died this past week: wrote that “any thinker who takes the authority of the Bible seriously must wrestle with the meaning and implications of one idea: the kingdom of God.” Through Jesus “the rule or reign of God has broken into human history in some new and different way. And the evidence is provided by people who will live by the values of this divine kingdom in the midst of every earthly kingdom.” [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-few-evangelicals-forge-a-path-back-to-gods-kingdom/2018/04/19/30c814fc-43f0-11e8-bba2-0976a82b05a2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-few-evangelicals-forge-a-path-back-to-gods-kingdom/2018/04/19/30c814fc-43f0-11e8-bba2-0976a82b05a2_story.html) Gerson suggests that evidence for the kingdom, is provided by people who live by the values of the divine kingdom in the midst of every earthly kingdom, or as H.R. Niebuhr puts it, “those who were first in love with ourselves and all our little cities, and now are falling in love with the city of God.” (H.R. Niebuhr, *Responsible Self* 177-178) As our youth are learning about

and discussing kingdom values this weekend with Pastor Layne and Cathy Saunders at the Matthew 25 retreat in Massanetta Springs, how to bring the justice of the kingdom of Christ in Jesus' parable in Matthew 25, it is a king on a throne who requires care for the least of these, closer and closer to reality. And they are exploring kingdom values of good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed in the midst of the lingering impact, acute crises and questionable okay-ness that is the context of our teenagers.

The Fairfax County youth mental health survey results were released last month <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news/2021-2022-youth-survey> and here is a staggering statistic for you: **38%** of the students surveyed, in 8th, 10th and 12th grade reported **feeling so sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in a row** in the past year that they stopped doing some usual activities (persistently sad or hopeless). 38% of the study is 12, 722 students in Fairfax County, in our neighborhood schools, who reported that level of feeling persistently sad or hopeless. a significant jump over previous studies. The results were even higher for Hispanic students, students who are transgender or LGBTQI+, and those in food insecure households.

It is remarkable that youth from our church would carve out a weekend to go and learn about their responsibility as citizens of the kingdom of Christ to spread God's love into everything that tries to challenge or obscure it. To bring the injustices of the world closer to their reconciliation in God, in real time, through following Christ the king in the midst of their complexly challenging earthly kingdom. The more we all live like we are part of Jesus' kingdom the more we ourselves and others see signs of that kingdom. The more we know that Jesus holds things all together *when* we hold all the things of Jesus *together*, with and for each other, including this promise of Christ the King Sunday:

In the cosmic big-picture sense of this scripture, no matter what last year brought and this one brings, we are ultimately okay, because all things have been created through him and for him and he holds all things together, and we know that at last our redeemer shall stand upon the earth, and the light will never overcome the darkness, and no powers or principalities will ever separate us from the love of God made known to us in Christ Jesus. It is our challenge to live like this is so. Thanks be to God.