

## **The Real World**

**Chris Currie**

**Colossians 1:9-23**

November 20, 2022 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

We often talk about pilgrimage or religious pilgrimage or spiritual pilgrimage and we think of walking the Camino de Santiago de Compostela or visiting a holy shrine or having a retreat at a monastery where we follow the rhythms of the monastic hours of prayer. But to make that the main category of pilgrimage discounts other pilgrimages that may seem mundane but are just as significant. For instance, I think it is a spiritual pilgrimage and minor miracle when people get out of bed on a Sunday morning with a long list of things that need to be done and not much rest from the work week not to mention the challenges of homework, the demands of the schedule, the social and sports calendar, and still, a spiritual pilgrimage happens when those things are put on hold and you show up for worship. Your driveway, your home, your streetcar ride, your walk, your commute, is a spiritual pilgrimage, a courageous one at that, and nothing less. Sometimes the spiritual pilgrimage can take other forms. Walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965 was a courageous spiritual pilgrimage that required lots of prayer and willingness to suffer for the consequences. Sometimes we make the spiritual pilgrimage to the hospital room or the fractured relationship or the person who found us at the gas station or bus stop and is hungry and depending on the compassion of strangers. The final hymn we will sing today, 'I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light,' was written by an Episcopalian musician who entitled the tune 'Houston' because she composed the tune in her car driving to visit her mother who was dying of cancer in a hospital in Houston. Such beauty can be squeezed out of concrete expressways and 8 lanes of traffic signals to me that the Holy Spirit can take pretty much any journey in our lives and bless it into a spiritual pilgrimage. Another hymn, 274, 'You, Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd,' was written on a commuter bus after 'a particular bad day' of prison ministry, again, a strange backdrop for a spiritual pilgrimage.

And the New Testament is no exception to spiritual pilgrimages, certainly we all remember Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, but I am sure he and his companions had many other spiritual pilgrimages less noteworthy as they sang or even composed hymns on the road from community to community to help sustain them in their spiritual pilgrimage whether in prison or floating out in the sea and or on their way to a new land. Our scripture lesson today is grounded in what is called the Colossian hymn which is made up of verses 15-23 of our lesson, and most likely pre-dated Paul and was something familiar that was sung throughout the early Christian communities and a familiar hymn to the Colossians but also to all the communities in which Paul traveled. Perhaps you have heard these words from the second chapter of Philippians: 'let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.’ That is known as the Philippian hymn which was a familiar hymn in early Christian communities prior to Paul. Steven Blackmon has mentioned that he once heard that most of our working theology comes, not from Sunday School lessons or confirmation class or even serviceable preaching, but from the hymns we sing. And that is certainly true for Paul’s letters to the earliest Christian communities. He uses their hymns, songs, and spiritual songs to God as a way to anchor them in their life together and point them to the ground of their being and their deepest reality in Jesus Christ. Paul quotes the verses of the hymn to remind them that Christ is the visible reality of the invisible God, the one who was with God in the beginning and through all things were created. Christ is the beginning and the end, and the pendulum on which all things swing and the reality that holds all things together. Paul uses the words of the hymn to make the astonishing declaration that the fullness of God has come in Jesus Christ and even more astonishing, in Jesus Christ’s coming, in Jesus Christ’s life and ministry and teachings, in Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, death, and resurrection, God has reconciled all things to himself. Even us. As he says clearly in verse 21, ‘and you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled.’ I know we all want a carrot. If I confess all my sins and make amends then I’ll be reconciled. If I know the right things or give away all my possessions or do some amazing act of charity, then I’ll be reconciled. But Paul says no... you have already been reconciled in Christ before you had faith before you ever thought about serving him, before you tried to do better, before you thought about loving your neighbor or giving someone an extraordinary gift. In Christ, Paul tells us and sings to us through the Colossian hymn, you have already been reconciled...so don’t keep living your lives as if you are unreconciled to God or if you have to do 5 steps before being reconciled with God...you already are this...in Christ. Don’t spend your whole life trying to undo it or pretending it that it never happened. Don’t spend your whole life thinking you have to do it all by yourselves. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Christ has reconciled you to God. That is reality. That is the real world. Everything else is superficial. Everything else is a mirage. Everything else is fleeting. Everything else is momentary.

There is a highly popular movement of biblical scholarship and a cottage industry of popular religious history that has had a lot of influence on us from Dan Brown to modern Gnostics to the historical Jesus movement that has basically said something like this: Constantine and the church councils and bishops of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries created the Jesus who was divine, the Jesus who was God, but the historical Jesus did not view himself that way, he was a wise teacher and spiritual leader who shared certain parables and teachings, not a Savior or the incarnation of God. That Jesus was created by the church much later.

They even say, Jesus came so people would follow him not worship him, as if you cannot do both. What I want you consider is that some of the earliest texts of the New Testament that we have, texts that pre-date the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John by generations, are these letters from Paul. And some of the earliest parts of these letters are these hymns that even pre-date Paul and that were sung by the earliest Christian communities. And what these earliest Christian communities sing about Jesus is a way greater and grander cosmic reality than the most high-flown words of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds much later. 'All things were created in him and through him...He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together...he is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything...in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself and became a human...this was not created by some cardinal in Rome looking for greater uniformity and control. These are the earliest confessions, songs, hymns, and teaching of Christian communities in the days after Christ's life, death, and resurrection. From the very beginning, these communities recognized the divinity of Jesus Christ and made the confession that Jesus was Lord, not the half-man half-God Caesar whose imperial coinage made the same claim. The real world, these early communities bravely declared to the world, is not the world where Caesar is Lord, where might makes right, where he who has the gold makes the rules. The real world is where Christ is Lord, where Christ is King, where we share what we have, where we try to live together with people from many backgrounds in common service and life together in Christ. Where we worship Christ and practice, often failing, sometimes failing miserably, to live our lives to the drumbeat of that real world where Christ is King and where our lives are reconciled by Christ to God.

Christ the King Sunday is that reminder in our lives and in the rhythm of the church calendar that the fullness of all creatures reconciled to God and the fulfillment of all things held together in the presence of God is not a pipe dream or a sentimental thought or some version of a Christian utopia that will never come to be. Rather it is the bookend to what we hear in these words to the Colossians and what we hear through the voices of the earliest Christian communities as they sang. The real world is not our brokenness, but our mended brokenness in Christ. The real world is not our frail lives and our social fragmentation and our wrecked relationships. That may seem like reality, it may feel permanent, but it is passing away, and cannot stay fragmented and unreconciled because it has already been reconciled to God once and for all through Jesus Christ. In him, all the wrongs are righted, all the injustices are rectified, all the imbalance of creaturely existence is put right. Everything else will pass away. Everything else will bend to his reconciliation. Everything else will be brought to fulfillment in him. In him, all things hold together. That is not just a nice Christian sentiment. That is reality. That is real world. No go live like it. Amen.