

This is that one year in seven when the church calendar plays tricks on us this day: I hope none of us gets dizzy from the sudden changes, between this morning and tonight, in altitude, in time, in theme. This morning we consider the heights, the power, the End, the Grand Finale; tonight we focus on the depths, the vulnerability, the beginning—and at the end of the day we recognize all over again they're both elements of the same divine love. (Somehow this day we also need to take a tour thru Good Friday and Easter Sunday, also—Christmas is only as good as Good Friday and Easter. You know the rationale: how do we know that birth in Bethlehem is Good News for all people? Why are people still celebrating it two thousand years later? In what way was it distinctive from the miracle of any other birth? Because of how the life of that baby turned out—and for that, since we are dealing within the realm of human history and not merely mythology or legend or the merely theoretical, we depend on the cruel events of Good Friday and the actual empty tomb discovered on Easter Sunday, both of which took place just there on the map, at Jerusalem.)

This Advent season we have been focusing on the nature of the one God, and the ultimate intention and action of this God. This is always a central question to Christians, and to every religion, and to every human being. What is God like, and how do we know? If the birth of the Messiah, “Emmanuel” (“God with us”) among us marks the beginning of this new era in human history (“The time is at hand; the Kingdom of Heaven has come near—so repent, and believe in the good news!” [Mark 1:15]) then during Advent traditionally we also turn our attention toward the end of this era. What will happen in the End? What does our faith, our Bible, our Christ have to tell us about what becomes of the world, the angels and demons, all people everywhere when we die, or at the End of time? Has this universe been set in motion by a random sequence of mindless events, leading to nothing, so that the spinning of the earth on its axis, the passing of time, is no more than “the dreaming dark dumb thing that turns the handle of the idle show?” (Thomas Hardy, quoted in *A Spiritual Autobiography*, William Barclay.)

A brief review: the Bible apparently teaches, and the Christian Church historically has taught, that each of three premises are true. (First: God is love; therefore God wills to enfold every creature and all Creation back into unbroken communion, into His love, into “heaven” in the end; second: God is all-powerful, so God is capable of accomplishing this ultimate purpose, this final triumph; and third: some human beings are destined for heaven and some for hell (understood at the least as eternal separation from God) thereby defeating both the will and the power of God.) The simple problem of logic, never mind theology or faith, is that all three cannot be true, no matter how creative we try to be at interpretation or synthesis.

Both our Scripture lessons this morning shed more light upon this dilemma. (Incidentally, it's worth noting that we heard two already-existing hymns or creeds this morning—included in the epistles cited, but quoted, not composed, by the author. If Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians toward the end of his ministry, around 60 AD, he was including in his letter a song or creed the church was already singing, already knew by heart. This creed or hymn (scholars can't be sure whether they were set to music or not—only that it was already in common usage) therefore had to have originated

significantly earlier than 60 AD because by then it was already commonly recognized and affirmed by Christian churches. If Jesus was raised from the dead in 33 AD then this confession Paul is quoting, and what it affirms, goes right back to the beginning. They show us not some wishful thinking of a Church trying to rationalize back into the story its wishes from centuries and centuries later: they show us the core beliefs in at least some of the churches going right back to the first few years after Jesus—and, it seems obvious to me, right back to His teaching and to Him. There wasn't time for fancy theories to have been “thunk up” and added back into the Church's memory.)

What the already extant creed or hymn quoted in Colossians (perhaps somewhat later—same principle) is that thru Jesus Christ the Son, God delighted in reconciling all things to Himself. “All things” means what it says, because the text defines it for us: “all things...in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers: all things.” [v 16, repeated at v 20] Not much wiggle room here. All persons, all spiritual beings, all created things will be reconciled back to God. All of creation will ultimately be redeemed, swept up in the love of God. You noticed: this is written in the past tense, although it refers to the distant future, the End. I assume the writer is so confident of God's unending love and God's invincible power, that the will and promise of God is good enough: the end is already as good as done. Past tense.

This word used for “reconciled” here has an intensifier; it's used only 4 times in the entire New Testament and it means “completely reconciled” or “super-reconciled.” That can only mean one thing, when Jesus is the One who reconciles all of creation back to God. (Another sidebar: never once in the Bible is it ever stated or implied that God is reconciled back to us—always that we need to be, and are, reconciled back to God. This means God's constant love has never wavered; like the mother with the newborn in her arms full of hope and expectancy for what her little one will grow up to become; like father of the prodigal son, God stands always waiting to receive us Home, back into His love and His Way. It is we who need to repent, who need to be transformed—who need to be reconciled to God. Never God to us—God already loves us, and always will: God's love for the world and everyone in it has never deviated one millimeter.

Sweet images of mothers nursing their babies and fathers welcoming home their wayward children are nice—but the reality of this image of ultimate reconciliation requires that we confront a different possibility. The nursing baby has done nothing to hurt the mother or itself; the prodigal son has already come to the end of himself and has chosen to return back to the father. What about those who choose to continue to go their own way? What about the butchers and torturers, the demons and the devils? What about us regular folks, who can be both “naughty” and “nice” in the same minute? What about those who simply assume that since God is love God is “easy,” and that we can make the choices that please us without reference to the guidance of the Holy Spirit or the will of God or the moral laws of God, but we're “cool” because everybody knows “Jesus loves you”? What about “normal” Christians who cry out “Lord, Lord” and maybe even attend worship—or don't even fear God enough to play pretend anymore—but then set our priorities, and go our own way as the television culture and our overpacked schedules carry us, as if so many other things are actually more important to us than Jesus and His Church and His Way? (I mean church can be pleasant and all, but real people have their real lives to lead and their pleasures to grab and their futures to secure and their careers to

build—and what could baby Jesus have to do with all that? For that matter, what could the grown-up Jesus Christ the Judge have to do with all that?)

The real question is how does God manage this final reconciliation, in the End, with people who are His enemies, literally dead-set against Him—people and “dominions” and “rulers and authorities and powers” and whatever other sorts of “miscellaneous” spirit creatures there may be in the various realms dwelling in and between earth and heaven who are His enemies?

This is a lot more difficult for God than we may imagine. When people want to gain victory, or buy-in, or compliance, or allegiance, or a truce, or an apparent peace—forms of counterfeit, “external” reconciliation—then force and threat and coercion work. [Iraq, in retrospect, is a terribly bitter example: compared to the chaos of competing forces unleashed there today, the constant threat posed by the former Baathist Party and its police state kept external order quite effectively. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed, tortured, or emigrated—but order was preserved. Apart from the estimated 250,000 Christians locked up and starving in concentration camps in North Korea, I’m sure Pyongyang looks quite orderly.]

Human tyrants, if they want to be ruthless enough, can compel orderliness and conformity; a simulated, external “peace” of a kind. But God’s ultimate victory, God’s ultimate reconciliation, can never be won in this way. (The birth of the baby Jesus in Bethlehem is a huge clue.) God is King and Judge, and in either role would be justified in throwing the troublemakers and the guilty into prison. But God is Father (or Mother) first.

No mother is happy as long as even one of her children is alienated. (I remember visiting the Chino prison facility one time: a mother beside me was heartbroken, pleading and praying at a hearing for her incarcerated son who was almost 30. He may not have deserved it, but I’m confident to this day she has never given up on him.) A father might finally give up on her wayward daughter and quit worrying about her every day, quit letting her foolishness ruin all his waking hours and drain his resources and feed his ulcers—but he will never really be at peace or happy until every member of the family is assembled together back home (if not geographically, then in spirit and in fully restored, genuine relationship—this is what reconciliation means.)

It is no triumph to the parent to have cut off or given up on the disobedient children, to lock the door and keep them away so as to insure there’s no disagreement at the Christmas dinner table. What a pitiful family scene: familiar Christmas carols playing merrily in the background, the turkey, the ham, the cranberry sauce, the pumpkin pie, the finest silver and china—all the trimmings—and only the parents there, staring vacantly at each other surrounded by a lot of empty chairs. Well, what could they do? The children just didn’t measure up; their table manners were not adequate—they had to be disinvited from the Christmas dinner, and disowned... There will be a counterfeit of peace and quiet at their table—but no triumph at all. Not any kind of triumph God would recognize!

The final triumph of God will not be the absence of life, the “peace and quiet” of loneliness or lockout or death. Nor will the final triumph of God consist of external assent, an enforced or threatened subjugation. The only reconciliation desired by God will be when every friend and foe, human being and spirit being, freely accepts the divine offer of grace and forgiveness, and gladly responds to the invitation of Christ to come

Home again. “Come, come, to keep the Feast, all you in the backalleys and gutters and the highways and byways! You are My honored guests!”

If there is anyone, at the End, bending the knee to Jesus out of fear of hell or punishment or retaliation; if there is one rebellious sinner who is only “going thru the motions” but whose will remains set against God—then still that single unredeemed will would be frustrating, defeating, the will of the loving Father. The desire of God is that every being choose to accept the divine reconciliation. The only response acceptable to love is loving response. Love is not pleased by a cowering conformity—outer behavior is not the point. (None of you would settle for a marriage based on fear, based on threat or battering. An abusive husband may gain a sick kind of control, but this has nothing to do with love.)

Love, if it’s love, needs to be an inside job.

When the baby Jesus grew up, He continued to choose to obey the Father in all things—and in the End, future tense, we’re told the Son will still freely choose to be subject to the Father “When all things are subject to the Son, then He Himself will also be subjected to the [Father] who put all things in subjection under Him, so that God may be all in all.” [1 Corinthians 15:28] At the End of this age no less than during His life, Jesus chooses the way of absolute obedience to the Father. It’s hard for us to imagine that Jesus only consented to do the Father’s will because He lacked the power to resist and He knew the Father would come down hard on Him, maybe send Him to hell, if He disobeyed. Can you picture it? His heart wasn’t in it, but He did what the Father asked with dragging feet and drooping shoulders, muttering under His breath all the way to the cross? This is a ridiculous image, because we know this would not be true subjection to the Father, or pleasing to the Father, or to the Son, at all. The Son obeyed the Father, subjected Himself to the Father, wholeheartedly.

This is what it is to be reconciled to God: freely, gladly, wholeheartedly. Rightly understood, this is the exact image Paul uses (quoting that earlier confession of the wider Church) when he says “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Don’t worry: there are no menacing musclebound wardens with cattleprods lurking in heaven to beat up anyone slow to hit the deck in worshipping the Lord. (Jesus is “the Truth;” God cannot pretend to confuse outer action with inner motivation.) In the End, every being will have been won over by the unceasing love of God; there will be no rebellion left. Not because God has beaten or burned it out of every person, but because the refinement of God’s infinite love and patience, God’s love which appears both as mercy and severity, will have won over the heart of every one. This will be the final victory of God. [I have not forgotten the issue of our free will, and how it is I believe God shall win us over, heart and soul, thru His persistent love. We’re out of Sundays in Advent, but I’ll come back to this question in January. In a brief, inadequate analogy: picture yourself playing a chess master. You have free will to move every piece every move however you choose—but still, sooner or later, the master will prevail and your free will, to win the game, will have been overcome.]

Paul’s wording used to convey the image of “every knee shall bow, every tongue confess” that Jesus is Lord also signifies, were there any doubt, that every one will gladly recognize and proclaim Jesus as Lord. (Jesus uses this word gladly to “confess” to the Father in final approbation the name of those wearing white robes [Rev. 3:5] Throughout the Septuagint, the earliest Greek language translation of the Hebrew Bible, this is the

same word used to offer praise and thanksgiving also [according to Thomas Talbot, *The Inescapable Love of God*, who treats also this concept with sharp insight.]) Those who confess Jesus as Lord are those who do so freely, and from the heart—this is what the earliest church is describing. There is no other possibility.

On this day of all days, we can be sure God will not be satisfied with clinical behavior modification, or with torturing sinners into submission, as if God were a cosmic-sized B. F. Skinner, or Saddam Hussein and the afterlife, for some, a hellish and permanent Abu Ghraib. Who do we think we're here to worship? God has come into the world in the baby Jesus, born of Mary, away in the manger, asleep in the hay, no crib for a bed, and He grows up to become a sadistic genocidal maniac? He did not come to win over our knees or our vocal cords only, or to silence the dissidents—He came to win over our hearts and our wills. He wants all of us. Until Christ completes this “inside job” within every creature, His saving work is not done.

Christmas is only as good as Good Friday and Easter; both our lessons this morning revisit Good Friday. We heard in Philippians how the Son could have chosen to remain, pain-free, in the spiritual, heavenly realm—but chose to humble himself, in the first place to become a human being, and then to become a human being willing to be humiliated and to go even to the cross if that's what it took to show us the love of God. The way of Jesus, the way of the living God, is not the way of the sword or the whip or the threat or the shout. It is the way of service; the way of obedience to God which allows for God-exaltation; it is the way of self-giving which allows room for God-filling; it is the way of love.

The Colossians text reminds us of the same heart of our faith: the final reconciliation which God will bring about is the reconciliation of peace. In that ancient image, the final peace has been accomplished because “all things have been reconciled by the blood of His cross.”

The only blood to be shed in the reconciling of all creation, the good actors and the bad, is the blood of our Savior Jesus Christ. The only reluctance is our own; the only hesitancy is on our part. The only real question is how long we want to hold out, in this life and the next, separated from the inexhaustible love of God. God allows us—love can do no less, cannot compel—but as C S Lewis notes of Dante's description of the deepest level of hell, the shivering cold dark place, the lock to the doorway leading out is on the inside. God does not keep anyone locked away in the cold and dark prisons of our own independence and ego and pride. The table is set; the invitation, in Jesus, has been issued. You, and every child of God, every single one created in the image of God—like it or not, know it or not, worthy or not—is invited. Now and forever.

The divine invitation is too good to refuse, in the end. Sooner or later, God gets us every one. God wins.

[Here's how the author of Revelation describes this heavenly scene: “Then I heard *every creature* in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the One seated on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and power forever and ever!” [Rev 5:11-13]

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

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 should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

### **Colossians 1:13-20**

He [God the Father] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him 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.