

“The Winter Seasons of Our Lives”

Colossians 1:15-23

My brother, Don, works for Metroparks. One of his duties is cutting down dead trees and then cutting them up. When I'm available, I occasionally go and load up my pickup. I take it to a farm near Valley City where I stack it behind a barn where I store my splitter. I get enough split each year to bring it to stack behind our house. When I'm home at night, I start a fire that heats the house through the night thanks to our fireplace insert and blower. Because we heat with an electric heat pump and the wood is free, we save significantly on our heating bill.

At this point in the winter, we may begin to wonder if it will ever end. During the winter time's of our lives, we may be tempted to think that nothing will ever change. Our colorful flower and vegetable gardens of summertime seems far away.

The winter season of the heart is the waiting season, the season of good-byes, the season of losses, and the season when we're just not sure if we will survive the bitter cold.

In this season, we can think of the psalmist David, when he was afraid for his life and unsure of his future. And just as we see in the psalms he wrote, we must rest in our faith in Christ during the wintry season of the heart, but it is God who is at work in the unseen, beneath the surface, in the dirt, behind the seemingly impossible hope for new life.

So, the most impossibly bleak situations are God's opportunity to reveal that He is always with us, especially in the wintertime's of our lives.

Last week, we focused on the first half of Chapter 1 of Paul's letter to the Colossians. We focused on faith, love, and hope. This week we focus on the second half of the chapter, verses 15-23.

In these verses, Paul is responding to one of the heresies surrounding the church which was the rejection of Christ's true identity as God Himself. So, Paul describes ten characteristics of Jesus as the Son of God.

1. Verse 15 – Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Jesus reflects the glory of God and is of the same nature. Jesus is what God looks and acts like.

2. Verse 15 – Jesus is the first-born of all creation. When we are conformed to the image of Jesus, we live with faith, love, and hope.

3. Verse 16 – Jesus is the creator of all things. Jesus was the breath of life from the beginning.

4. Verse 17 – Jesus holds all things together. We are held together in the body of Christ especially during the wintertime's of our lives.

5. Verse 18 – Jesus is the head of the church. We are his body doing his work.

6. Verse 18 – Jesus is the beginning of our being made holy and blameless through our faith in Christ.

7. Verse 18 – Jesus has first place in everything because he is perfectly obedient even to death on a cross.

8. Verse 19 – Jesus possesses the fulness of God. Jesus and the Father are one.

9. Verse 20 – Jesus reconciles all things to himself. He reconciles each of us to God. The cross bridges the gap between us and God.

10. Verse 20 – Jesus made peace by the blood of His cross. Jesus is the peace that breaks down dividing walls that keep us separated from God and one another.

Paul convinces the Colossians and us that God and Jesus are one with the same 10 characteristics. I know that Jesus has held me together during the wintertime's of my life just as he had held each of you together during the wintertime's of our lives.

Last Sunday I told the story of Danette's and my faith being deepened at Dollywood when we listened to the quartet called the "Kingdom Heirs." That faith in God was almost immediately challenged during our drive back to our room that night. Our GPS told us to avoid the stop and go traffic on the main drag between Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg by taking a mountain road in the dark. I immediately observed that there was absolutely no traffic. Then the very sharp switchbacks started.

Danette was telling me that the view of the Christmas lit Gatlinburg below us was incredible. My eyes were glued to the road. I had a firm grip of the steering wheel. We almost came to a stop on the sharp turn of each switchback. Why did I follow the advise of the GPS lady?

It took us that way because we were staying part way up the mountain. When we finally reached the road to descend to where we were staying, I thanked God, and Jesus for saving our lives. God and Jesus was with us on a dark and scary Smoky Mountain road.

God not only cares about the wintertime's of our lives, but he gives us the freedom and skills to deal with the small stuff. If we can be open to the guidance of the GPS lady, we ought to be open to the guidance of Jesus! Where do you need guidance in your life? Where do we as Divinity need guidance? How is God guiding us through the wintertime's of our lives?

In the last 3 verses of our Colossians text, Paul describes how God has guided the Colossians from "being estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds to now being reconciled in his body by his death so that they can be presented as holy and blameless provided that they continue in the faith, stable and steadfast in the hope of the gospel."

It seems simple enough. We just need to continue in the faith, stable and steadfast in the hope of the gospel.

After surviving the harrowing Smokey Mountain drive home, we decided that it was a sign from God that there was an ELCA church directly across the street from where we were staying. The next morning was Sunday and according to the sign, worship began at 10:30.

We walked across the street at 10:15. There were few cars in the parking lot. We entered a very nice, smaller sanctuary with maybe 25 of us ready to worship. The pastor immediately recognized who was visiting and is in the practice of having us introduce ourselves and where we were from. The first couple was from Chicago and finished their introduction with “Go Bears.” Another couple ended with “Go Packers.”

I confessed that I was a Lutheran pastor in a Cleveland suburb and ended with “Go Browns.” The pastor observed that we seemed to have a divided house, but we are one in Christ.

This pastor did it all. His cell phone was the camera. He changed the slides from his I-Pad. He lit the Advent wreath. He distributed communion at a short kneeling rail with no kneeling cushions. We're spoiled. We were impressed with his sermon. Following the service, we visited in the aisle.

He had been a full-time pastor in a large Methodist church for 20 years on an island off the coast of Georgia. When his parents retired from running the 3 jewelry stores in the Gatlinburg area, he came back to take over the business. This congregation could only pay him for Sundays.

An 89-year-old Lutheran pastor then approached us to introduce himself. He had retired from being the pastor of this congregation 20 years ago when the pews and the Sunday School rooms were full.

He lamented the interim pastor who was there for 18 months after his retirement who he said decided to change everything. Many families left the church back then and more didn't come back after Covid. Unfortunately, it was a story, a lament for the church that I have listened to many times over the years in a variety of denominations.

He was doing his best in the wintertime of his life to remain faithful, loving, and hopeful. People had filtered to the fellowship hall where tables were filled with snacks, toiletries, and other supplies that people were placing into pull string bags as they made their way in a line along the tables much as we do in our fellowship hall on Rally Sunday. The bags would be dropped off at one of the dorms where young people from other countries were staying while they worked at Dollywood or other tourist attractions. They continued to be a church in mission.

What some might have considered a bleak situation, was God's opportunity to reveal that He is always with us, especially in the wintertime's of our lives. Springtime is coming. New life is coming.

God is at work in the unseen, beneath the surface, in the dirt, on the windy road, in the smallest congregation, behind the seemingly impossible hope for new life.

We can be thankful for the blessings of faith, family, continual forgiveness, love given and received, and the promise and hope of eternal life.

May the peace of God . . .

#638 – Blessed Assurance