**HavING the Time of Your Life**

Colossians 1:24-2:5

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*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of the Body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to God’s saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is Christ whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone spiritually mature. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that God powerfully inspires within me.*

*For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Jesus Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.*

Introduction

We humans have many unique abilities that set us apart from other animals. One of them is our ability to use our minds and our self-awareness to project ourselves forwards and backwards in time and space. We remember the past. We anticipate the future. We consider our context. We think about how we fit. And in doing these things, we tell the story of ourselves and our lives. This is, as philosopher Paul Ricoeur taught, how we become human.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This video of images captured by the Hubble telescope of deep space offers a striking example of this incredible ability we have to place ourselves.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=oAVjF_7ensg> [Stop at 1:28]

Our capacity to place ourselves in time and space as we try to figure out where we fit in the scheme of things is truly profound. Yet, much of our suffering in life, as Buddhism I think correctly teaches, is connected to this ability to project ourselves into different times and places. We fret over, or fantasize about, the past. And we do the same about the future. In our minds, we often get stuck in places that skew our yesterday, twist our tomorrow, and remove us from the grace of here and now.

Side note: Psychologists will talk about “depressive mentation” or “depressive rumination” – these are the downward spiraling thought patterns of shame and negativity that cause deep suffering for people with Major Depressive Disorder. In the last 10-15 years, neuroscience has closed in on the brain circuits implicated in depressive rumination, and one of them is called the “default mode network.” This is a widely distributed brain system that’s responsible basically for our “inwardness” – for all the self-referential processing we do when not paying attention to something “out there.” It’s what our brains do “by default” if we’re not being intentional. In Major Depression, the default mode network is especially active (along with memory systems and salience systems) so that the person gets hijacked by negative “projections.” You know, second-guessing how you handled yourself in that conversation; fretting over what will happen after you send that email. In Depression, our “default” becomes a brain pattern that’s constantly feeling worried, ashamed, and hopeless about where we’ve been and where we’re going.

The point: When we get stuck in anxious or fantastical projections about the past or the future, we lose the time of our life – the time we’ve been given here and now to fulfill the calling that’s before us. (And that’s part of the tragedy of Depression.)

So, how can we attend to the time of our lives wisely?

Currently we’re in a mini-series on the New Testament book of Colossians, and our theme is “Ways to Make Christianity Healthy.” The Christian faith, like the Jewish faith out of which it sprung, is a time-conscious faith tradition. It’s a tradition that keeps a pulse on the bigger narrative, the broader story, the divine web into which we’re graciously enfolded. To *place* oneself and one’s community within a broader context, a sacred narrative—this is a well-honored tradition within our faith heritage.

This morning I want to suggest that Christianity stays healthy, and we Christians stay healthy, when we’re “having the time of our lives” – that is, when we’re staying attentive to divine time, and to our own placement in it. This is perhaps especially important during times of struggle or suffering. We need to be able to placeourselves well, so we don’t get lost in the push and pull of our fears and sorrows, our longings and graspings.

Now

In Colossians 1:24, Paul writes:

“*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of the Body, that is, the church.*”

This morning’s passage begins, “*I am now*.”

What would it be like to just sit with that phrase for a while? I am now… dot dot dot. Right here, in this moment, here’s what’s true of me.

A bit of background to the book of Colossians will help us appreciate Paul’s very public self-placement, here. Most biblical scholars agree that there was a group of Jewish esoterics (or mystics) whose claims were starting to create insecurity in the mostly Gentile Colossian congregation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Members of this group boasted of having experienced heavenly journeys in which they entered the throne room of the Most High, conversed with angels, and received highest wisdom and secret knowledge. What a trip!

Yet it might be said that these mystics were stuck in far-away times and places –heavenly realms that were removed from the everyday struggles and challenges of first-century Jewish/early Christian faith.

“Paul”[[3]](#footnote-3) [Colossians is pseudonymous (soo DON eh mus) but for the purposes of this sermon we’re going to just say Paul] writes to assure the congregation that they need not have had these fantastical cosmic journeys in order to be found in Christ. And so “in Christ” is where he places himself first. Amazingly, he understands his afflictions as completing whatever is “lacking” in Christ’s afflictions. He says, in effect: *“In my life and in my body, right here and now, I am furthering the completion of God’s redeeming work. In my presently suffering mind and flesh, the salvation initiated by Jesus Christ is keepin’ on keepin’ on.”*

Wow! This is quite the claim to make about one’s here and now. But do we understand that this, too, is our honor? Take a look at your hands. Feel your seat in the chair. Become aware of your feet on the ground. Do you know that right here, right now, in your body with all its joys and woes, *you yourself further the redemption of God* inasmuch as your life is “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3)? Let this thought sink in. Let it be ground zero.

Looking Back

Paul goes on to narrate the meaning of his current suffering and toil in the context of, first, his own calling. In other words, he looks back. Chapter 1, verse 25 says this:

*“I became [Christ’s] servant according to God’s commission that was given to me…”*

Here Paul pauses to remember who he is, and how he got to be who he is.

Intentional, prayerful remembering is especially important to do, I think, in times of suffering and hardship. When we’re stressed or in pain, we’re especially vulnerable to losing perspective, to letting the larger and truer story slip away. It’s then that we start to feel truly lost. It’s then that we begin to forget how to hope.

One of the most healing spiritual exercises I’ve experienced is to intentionally, meditatively, project myself backwards and forwards in my mind. This is a way of placing myself well, of remembering where and who I am. I regularly meet with my past self, the impressionable young girl inside who is hurting in various ways but is keenly sensitive to the voice and leading of the Holy Spirit. I also have regular meetings with my future self, an old woman not too far from death, who’s compassionate, wise, and eminently comfortable in her own skin. Sometimes I even introduce these selves to one another. It’s amazing how God works through this exercise to help me remember who I am, how I got here, and where I’m going.

What about you? Can you remember a time when you felt yourself sink into your identity as God’s own? I’m not necessarily talking about an altar call experience, here. I mean any moment or life-season in which you felt yourself awakened to the larger and truer purpose for your life. Such moments tend to be accompanied by feelings of gratitude, humility, and deep passion. If you can think of such a time, even if it’s not in your actual past but you’re trusting that it’ll be in your future, bring it to mind now. Feel it’s power. Feel it bring home to you who you are and what you are to be about. Feel it lend comfort in the midst of your present trial. Feel it shine light in the midst of your present fog.

Looking Around

Moving on in the passage, Paul then places the time and meaning and experiences of his current life within the life of the Church – the Body of “saints.” First he looked at “NOW,” then he looked “BACK,” and how he looks “AROUND.” Here again he is resisting the approach of the esoterics with their heavenly flights. His feet are on *this* ground, with *this* people as they seek out God’s wisdom in *this* time and place. Paul speaks of

*“the mystery that has been hidden… but has now been revealed to God’s saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”*

Paul is pointing out that the church is, right now, in the midst of a revelation of a great mystery. An ancient treasure is being uncovered. It’s this: In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the incredible *breadth* of God’s presence has been made known. *“Christ lives in you! You Gentiles, of all people! – you folks we used to think were beyond the pale! What this means is that God is literally happening everywhere! No need for astral projections to angelic throne-rooms; nope, the mysterious glory of God shines in the very faces of all y’all!”*

As I read this part of the passage, it seems to me that even though Paul is talking about the church and the treasures it holds, he’s still thinking out loud about who he is and how he fits into what God is doing in the world. His persecutions and imprisonments make it even more urgent that he try to locate his own story within the church’s story, which is also God’s story.

Here’s my paraphrase of Paul’s self-reflection: *“It’s becoming clearer and clearer to me (and to all of God’s people, actually) that there are no longer any “outsiders” to God’s presence through Christ. And so, together with all God’s people [“saints”], I want to plumb the depths of this unbelievable thing—God’s indiscriminate welcome—all the days of my life. Only in this light does my suffering make sense. Only in this light is my pain tolerable at all.”*

What about you? If God’s indiscriminate welcome is a truth that’s still being brought home in the church and in the world, then how does this shape your story?

Let me ask it another way. If the mystery of “Christ in you” is for everybody, and if God’s children are still learning just how true this is, what then for your life? For your identity? For your here and now?

I wish I could sit down with each of you to hear your answer. I imagine I’d hear many different things – especially depending on whether you yourself have experienced life as an “outsider.”

God’s indiscriminate welcome through Christ. What would it mean to place yourself in the midst of this ever-unfolding-mystery, and to let it be your center?

I still remember when I really “got,” for the first time, that God’s presence in Christ was something I could live forth in my body, through my gaze and my words and my actions and my way with others. That this was what the Incarnation bore out and bears out. Latin: “*in carne*,” in meat. In the “meat” of my body, God is happening. *What*?! And when, around the same time, I realized that this mind-busting miracle is available without restraint or discrimination to literally everyone, it changed the way I experienced others. I started slowing down and really looking into the eyes of people, really paying attention to them - without fear. And this became my worship. *“Here is a new person. Here is someone I used to be afraid of. But here, in this face, I am beholding a holy sight. Here is someone in whom divine Life is bubbling – maybe not boiling over, maybe only secretly simmering. But still.”*

I remember one Sunday morning during a worship service, suddenly finding it crazy that we were all worshipping God by facing the same direction (rather than facing each other). And most of us had our eyes closed, too – hoping, maybe, for some mysterious otherworldly flight, like a Colossian mystic. No. The worship-worthy incredibleness is right here [gesture to someone’s face], and here [gesture to my face], and most of all, here [gesture/motion to the interpersonal space between].

Looking Ahead

So Paul has looked at “NOW,” looked “BACK,” looked “AROUND,” and now he looks “AHEAD.” In some of the final words of today’s passage, he projects forward, in hope, things toward which both he and Christ’s church are being called:

*For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that God powerfully inspires within me... I want [your] hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that [you] may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Jesus Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

OK, another slapdash Pauline paraphrase by Andrea: “*The goal ahead of me, dear ones, is to see your spiritual and emotional and communal situation vastly improve as you stop comparing yourself to these heavenlyminded mystics, and start really knowing that, through Christ, all of God’s good stuff is already among you, in you, through you!”*

By doing this future-minded encouragement, Paul also reminds himself of the greater purpose for his present afflictions. Because it’s really awful to be hurting without a purpose, isn’t it? And most of us, even if we aren’t imprisoned for the sake of the gospel, are having a hard time of it somehow. Suffering is everywhere. Some degree of pain is sort of a baseline in life. It’s enough to be struggling, but when we feel that there is no point to it, no ultimate goal toward which our hardships tend that will make it all worthwhile - it’s then that soul-crippling suffering can set in.

The crazy thing Christians dare to say is that through Jesus and the Spirit, God’s redemptive presence is always, somehow, at work. Somehow, right now, God is birthing a healing, or a reconciliation, or a righting of some wrong. How am I involved in this labor?

Whenever I personally am having trouble placing myself within the birth pangs of God’s love and wisdom and justice in this world, I try to take time to give this question some attention…. in conversation, in prayer, in meditation.

Here’s a spiritual exercise that can help with this. Sit down in a quiet place, with an open heart and a blank journal page in front of you. Write down Paul’s sentence in Colossians 1:29 - “For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that God powerfully inspires within me.” Put a colon or a “dot dot dot” at the end of that sentence. Start writing.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to share with you a daily ritual that helps both me and my (now almost one year old!) son Bennett to “place” ourselves well at the close of each day. First, I lay him on the changing table and softly say, “It’s time to rest, time to be still, time to be thankful.” Then we name a few things we experienced that day that made us thankful to God, and then we thank God for those things. (Right now it’s all me talking, but soon Bennett will be able to join in!) Then I pick him up and we go to the window, where the shades are open. As I hold him close and slowly draw the shades, I say this: *“Time to say goodbye to the day. Goodbye, day. It was a good day. Where does the day go when it’s done? Nobody knows, it’s a mystery. We believe each day is held in the heart of God.”*

Let’s pray.

Prayer:

*And so it is with us, Lord. We do not know where the days come from, nor where they go. The vast reality we’re part of – the billions of galaxies, the countless light years, the moments that fold in on themselves at the farthest reaches of the curved space-time continuum – all of it is baffling, surprising, amazing. Help us to make sense of our journey within this mystery. May all our days be found and held within the center of your grace, so that the time of our lives is truly had rather than being lost in the abyss of our anxious ruminations. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.*

Benediction:

*If you feel that the time of your life is slipping through your fingers like water, may you know that your entire story, from start to finish, is placed eternally in God’s cupped hand, where nothing is ever lost.*

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Cf. also Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J.H. Roberts, “Jewish Mystical Experience in the Early Christian Era as Background to Understanding Colossians,” *Neotestamentica* 32, no. 1 (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Most scholars believe Colossians is a Deutero-Pauline epistle. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)