

“Don’t Lose your Heading”

Deuteronomy 6:4-15
Colossians 1:11-20

Have you ever been on a boat out at sea or anywhere on the water for that matter? If you have not, I invite you to consider a voyage, any voyage. It is easy to see how that voyage is fraught with peril. Besides sinking, storms, collisions and pirates; there are the simple yet daunting external factors of wind, current and weather that one has to deal with. If your boat is trying to get from A to B and a line is the quickest route, then it should be easy to set the ship’s heading for whatever direction B is, in order to reach your destination. The problem as a navigator is that the current and wind push the boat off course. We may think we are steering straight when in fact we are influenced by these external factors and lose our heading. For those landlubbers here today, imagine driving on a road or walking on a path that is moving beneath you and not just forward or backward but left and right. In order to get where you are headed you have to point yourself, focus yourself, orient yourself in a way that compensates for the set and drift. Set and drift is what seamen call the wind or current that pushes the boat off course, you are set in a particular direction measured in degrees and your drift is how fast you are moving in that direction measured in knots. You may have to steer your boat (or walk if, say, the wind is blowing that hard) 10 degrees off course in order to keep your heading the same and end up at your destination, your goal.

Paul writes this letter to the voyagers and landlubbers who are living in Colosse. Paul is in prison, in chains in fact, and he is concerned that the Colossian people are losing their heading. The purpose of the letter was to combat errors in the church and to show them that believers have everything they need in Christ. The church had been subject to what is called syncretism- that is the practice of combining ideas, religions or philosophies. The folks in Colosse were combining pagan, Greek, Christian, and Jewish thought into one theology, one idea, one teaching. Paul is worried that these false teachings, vain deceits, and worldly philosophies were acting like the wind and current on a boat at sea. If the church is the boat in this metaphor, they are getting pushed off course but do not realize they are losing their heading due to the false teachings. They think they are steering in a straight line while in fact; the religious relativism in their community has gotten them off course. Paul is trying to correct their course. In 2:4, Paul warns them to be on the watch, “lest any man should beguile you, trick you with enticing words”. Listening to those false words was like Adam and Eve listening to the serpent in the garden, and it led them astray. Furthermore, in 2:8, he says, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.” Christ is supreme to all other schools of thought and belief.

Aha! There is our heading.
Christ is the heading that the church at Colosse needs.
Christ is the head of the church, the “head of the body”.
It is Christ in “whom all things were created”,
it is Christ in whom “we have redemption and forgiveness of sins”,

it is Christ “who is the image of the invisible God”, the “firstborn of every creature”.

Christ is the beginning, Christ is preeminent, and Christ gives us our heading. Praise be to God! Amen?

Paul puts these verses first in his letter intentionally, after the thanksgiving and praise, before the warnings and other words, ... because Christ is supreme. “By Christ were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, ALL things were created by Christ and for Christ.” Christ is our point B, our destination, our goal. Christ is before all things, (which sounds like John’s Gospel where the Word was in the beginning and with God) and by Christ all things consist. Christ made peace for us; much like the disciples when they doubted during the storm on the Sea of Galilee, Christ stills the winds and calms the seas for us. When life is tossing your “boat” to and fro, when you are getting side tracked by the distractions in life, and when you can’t quite find direction in your life-

Don’t. Lose. Your heading.

Every time we lose our heading, Christ is there for us bringing us back on course and back to God. When we lose our way in the storms and tempest of life, Christ is our beacon showing us the way. When we are led off into the wilderness and tempted there, Christ leads us back to the paths of righteousness for Christ’s namesake. When we are lost in the desert, Christ is there for us as a pillar of smoke and fire.

Have you ever been hiking in the woods or wilderness? Hikers often use landmarks such as ranges, or stacks of rocks called cairns, or if trees are present, they may be marked with paint or placards as guideposts. To keep from getting lost, a hiker will look back at where they came from and forward to where they are headed, using the guideposts as sights to line themselves up and stay on course. Cairns have other uses as well- they have been used by Canadian mariners with a fire placed on top, kind of like a mini-lighthouse. They were used by hunters to drive buffalo in America and reindeer in the Arctic tundra- kind of like rock scarecrows.

Our guidepost should be the cross of our Lord; Christ should always remain in our sights first and foremost. Christ is our beacon, our lighthouse. Christ drives us to how we should live. Christ leads us to true humanity, which requires us to look back at where we come from and ahead to where we are going.

Well, that makes for a great story, doesn’t it? The idea of boats and trails and guideposts seems pleasant, makes us feel good, and probably brings back fond memories. But what does all this metaphorical language *really* mean? How do we make this story a reality in our lives? What does this ancient letter to these ancient people have to say to us? I think the answer, at least in today’s text, is to put Christ first. Christ is first, Christ is preeminent, and Christ is supreme. You might be thinking, “That’s great..., but what does *that* mean?” For us to be, live and act like Christians, it requires us to put Christ first since we are followers of Christ. All false teachings, vain deceits and worldly rudiments must be left at the wayside. Easy to say, hard to put into practice. Any distractions that lead us astray should be forsaken in order to stay on course, they

should be jettisoned overboard. Verse 11 tells us that we are made strong in Christ, the king, and therefore prepared to endure everything with patience and joy, while giving thanks to God the Father.

Christ as king... In medieval times, the king offered protection from bandits, robbers, and enemies. Folks paid a tax to the King and could enter the castle for protection when danger sprang up. They were given food and shelter until the danger subsided. We have been rescued, like a medieval king who lets us into his castle, we are protected from enemies and darkness, we have entry into the kingdom that is tax free, all we must do is believe.

Our belief is the only requirement to gain admission to the voyage and entry into the kingdom. But there are certain ways we should act while onboard- for instance it’s a good idea while on a boat that you wear a life jacket, and it’s never a good idea to ride on the bow, you should probably know where you are going, and keeping one hand on the boat at all times lest you fall. So what behavior should we exhibit in life? Further into the letter, Paul tells us in 3:8, to cast off, “anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, and lies.” And we should “put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Above all these things we should “put on charity” like a life jacket that we share with others when they are drowning in poverty, letting the “peace of God rule in our hearts” and the “word of Christ dwell in us richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Christ.” “For he has rescued us from the one who rules in the kingdom of darkness, and he has brought us into the Kingdom of his dear Son. God has purchased our freedom with his blood and has forgiven all our sins.”

When you get distracted, don’t lose your heading, get back on course with Christ.

And now may all glory, laud & honor be yours Eternal king, Amen.