**Grace Through Christ**

**Text: Colossians 1:1-14**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I wonder if you’ve ever found yourself saying something like this: you pull into a crowded parking lot, and you find the one remaining spot, and you say, “The parking lot angels we’re good to me.”

Or you’re watching a ball game and your team is getting clobbered and you say, “The baseball gods aren’t smiling on us today.”

Or you’re in a hurry, and you’re just zipping along because every light is green, and you give a nod to the traffic gods.

Raise your hand if you’ve occasionally done something like that.

We say such things sarcastically, but the Colossians really meant it! The Colossians were a congregation of Gentile-Christians in Colossae, a city in what is now Turkey. It formed something of a tri-city region, along with Laodicea and Hierapolis, on the Lycus River, about a hundred miles upstream from the coastal port of Ephesus. As such it would’ve served as a regional marketplace, with goods being shipped up stream from the coast and agricultural produce being brought in from the hinterlands to be shipped out. With such inter-regional commerce going on, you had a mixture of people from many places, bringing a grab bag of philosophies and rituals and beliefs to this market town.

As a result, religious practice in Colossae – as in much of the Mediterranean world – was nothing if not eclectic. The Colossians believed that their lives were controlled by mysterious cosmic forces. Call them angels or elemental spirits or powers or rulers or maybe something else. Folks imagined all sorts of cosmic forces that might not have their best interests at heart. So they hedged their bets – they worshipped at more than one alter – trying to appease as many of these forces as possible. And, of course, there were enough real forces threatening their lives – crop failures and weather and earthquakes and the imperial power of Rome – that we can imagine why they might’ve been apprehensive. Indeed, Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60. Fear tends to beget more fear, hence the frenzy to appease all of the spirits that might do them harm.

Into this eclectic mix of spiritual frenzy stepped an evangelist named Epaphras. He preached the Word. He proclaimed the good news of God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ. And some of the Colossians began to understand what he was saying. And they seemed to agree with what he was saying. So they professed their faith in Jesus Christ and their love for all of God’s people. Later, when Paul wrote to them, he gave them the benefit of the doubt and he spoke of “the day you heard and truly understood God’s grace” (Colossians 1:6). And they did…sort of. Pre-conversion, these early Christians probably engaged in the same eclectic approach to religion that their neighbors practiced. But when they received God’s grace and professed their faith in Jesus Christ, they didn’t completely abandon their old rituals. Maybe they just added Jesus to the pantheon of heavenly beings that they tried to keep happy.

So it’s easy to imagine Epaphras, at his wits end, hopping on a boat and going downstream to visit Paul, who may’ve been in Ephesus at the time. And after the young preacher poured out his tale of wow, the apostle and more seasoned evangelist penned this letter to the Colossians.

What Paul says is this: You don’t need to be worried about all those other forces. Because God’s got your back. The grace of Jesus Christ has got you covered. Christ’s sufficiency needs no supplement. Paul tells the Colossians that grace is the only power that really matters: this grace, poured out freely to all, in Jesus Christ. He says, “You’re worried about all these mysterious and invisible spirits that may or may not be real, but Jesus is someone whom people have actually seen. He is the *image* of the invisible God, the One through whom all things were made, the One in whom all things have been reconciled, the One who has established peace in the universe. He’s pacified all those forces that you fear. You might not see it yet, you might not experience it yet, things might still seem wild and chaotic and scary, but hang on to that hope; that hope that all things have been reconciled in Christ; that hope that has been reserved for you since before the beginning of time. Whatever names you might call the forces that you fear – angels or elemental spirits or whatever – there is one Name that is above every name, and that is the Name of Christ Jesus.”

There are a number of things in this 2,000 year old letter that speak to our situation today; because, you see, human nature hasn’t really changed over those centuries. We’re still aware of a multitude of forces – real and imagined – that are impinging upon our lives: economic forces and political forces and issues of health and environmental threats and family pressures and work-related anxieties, and the list could go on and on. I mean, life is difficult! The possibility of getting sick or hurt or killed is real. Or we might find ourselves out of a job, or homeless, or in some kind of financial crisis. I don’t know about all those elemental spirits that the Colossians were so uptight about, but there really are earthly powers that impact our lives, and no amount of naïve faith in the omnipotence of God can protect us, in the short term, from that threat.

And yet…even in this crazy and chaotic and scary world, things tend to work out. Every morning, when we step out the door, we face innumerable potential threats, and every evening, the vast majority of humanity returns home safely. That by no means diminishes the horrible things that really do happen, but it just astounds me that the outcomes tend to be so good when the dangers are so real. So it’s no wonder that we talk about parking lot angels and traffic gods and other mystical forces watching over us. We think we’re being sarcastic, but on some fundamental level I think we really mean it; at least a little bit.

Well, on some fundamental level, there really is a power at work that has our best interests at heart. It’s called grace. Not parking lot angels or traffic gods, but grace. And while this gracious care of God – this providential care of God – this care of God that extends over the whole cosmos; while it doesn’t completely prevent suffering and evil in time and space, grace at least mitigates it to a large extent. The philosopher Charles Hartshorne once described Creation as being mitigated chaos. He said without God it would be *unmitigated* chaos.

By grace we have been saved. And I’m thinking especially of what theologians call prevenient grace. By the time we conclude this series on Colossians we’ll also address saving grace and the fruits of grace, but let’s first consider prevenient grace. The United Methodist Book of Discipline defines prevenient grace as "the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses.” God’s grace embraces us, God’s grace embraces all people, God’s grace embraces the whole universe. Grace is before us and behind us and above us and below us. It precedes and follows all of our conscious impulses and somehow – subconsciously – we know this. That’s why we have this unspoken sense of some kind of benevolent mystical force nudging and cajoling and influencing the events around us. We speak sarcastically of parking lot angels but on some deep level we really mean it. Because on some deep level we all have an inkling – believers and unbelievers alike – we all have some kind of perhaps unconscious inkling about from Whom we have come and to Whom we will return and in Whose image we have been created. And we have some kind on inkling as well that in this One whom the Bible calls God all things do indeed hold together. Otherwise we’d be too petrified to get out of bed in the morning! If we didn’t trust on some fundamental level that all things hold together, then we’d be afraid that the bedroom floor would collapse beneath our feet, that all the cars on the way to work would crash into each other, and that by the end of the day the world would dissolve into a disorganized jumble of sub-atomic particles.

But we do get up in the morning. And at the end of the day, the foundations of the universe are still in place. We trust this. We trust that somehow all things do hold together.

How do we account for this? According to biblical faith, it is the grace of the Cosmic Christ that makes this all possible.

The prevenient grace of God. It embraces everyone. This is why, in Jesus’ words, God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good alike (Matthew 5:45). So great is God’s love that everyone – from the purest saint to the most evil sinner – is embraced by such grace.

As I said, on some fundamental level we all believe this. That’s why there are no atheists in foxholes. When it looks like your life is on the line, even non-believers have been known to pray.

Which brings us to the story of John Newton. He was a young British sailor involved in the slave trade. One night, in 1748, his ship ran into a severe storm. Newton was not a particularly religious man. In fact, he was a hot-headed, free spirited and somewhat self-absorbed young man. But the storm was so bad that even young Newton got down on his knees and started to pray. Fearing that the ship was sinking, he begged for God’s mercy. And in that moment, Newton experienced a spiritual conversion. Well, the storm subsided, the ship didn’t sink, and Newton began to read the Bible and other religious literature. By the time he reached port, he had become a Christian.

Now, the air-brushed version of the story is that Newton immediately left the slave trade and became an abolitionist. And eventually he did, but it took another 6 years and another life-threatening experience for him to leave the slave trade, and another 30 years after that before he became an abolitionist. And it wasn’t until that point, when Newton dedicated the rest of his life to fighting slavery, that he considered his conversion complete. You see, even when we become conscious of the way in which grace uphold us, it takes a long time for it to transform us. Just ask Paul and Epaphras and the Colossians. But grace does transform us, and upholds us, and weaves us together with all people and all things and all Creation and Almighty God. Grace does this: prevenient grace and saving grace: the amazing grace, of which the Rev. John Newton wrote many years later; amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like John Newton, and you and me.

Pastor Newton’s famous hymn goes on to proclaim:

Through many dangers, toils and snares

I have already come.

‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.

Grace is indeed before us and behind us and above us and beneath us. It is why we ultimately have nothing to fear. Though there may be very rough seas ahead, there will always be a safe harbor reserved for us on the other side of the storms of life; a safe harbor, where all will live in peace, and unafraid.

I’ll probably still give the occasional nod to the parking lot angels, even though I know they’re not real. And while baseball is God’s favorite sport, I know that the Lord has more important things to do than to intervene on behalf of the White Sox or the Cubs…or the Reds or the Cards…or even the Mets! But when it comes to the truly important things of life, the grace of Jesus Christ and his sufficiency needs no supplement. The all-encompassing, all-sufficient, all embracing grace of God, revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.