

Share the Journey

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Colossians 1:1-8

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transform-
ation

Paul wrote to help them remember again the majesty and the greatness of Jesus as the only One who offers true hope for the soul.

A priest and a rabbi take a new pastor in their town fishing. They row out twenty yards from shore and start fishing. The priest suddenly says he has an errand to attend to and jumps out of the boat and walks on top of the water to the shore. After awhile, he returns the same way. The rabbi remembers he's left his lunch in the car. He, too, jumps out of the boat and walks on water to the shore, gets his lunch and returns the same way. The new pastor is feeling a bit intimidated by all this and thinks, "I've got to have faith and show that I am one of them." She jumps out of the boat and, in a great splash, disappears under the water. The rabbi turns to the priest: "Do you think we ought to tell her about the stones?" It's a funny story. We love stories. Stories we read, stories we watch on television or at the movies, the stories of our own families and the stories of our own lives.

For some time, Pastor Pete has been leading us in a study of God's Big Story of creation, fall and redemption, as it is described in the pages of the Bible, and helped us consider how our own personal life stories are a part of God's Big Story. Last year, we focused on God's Big Story in the early church, as described in the Book of Acts. This year, we will narrow

our focus even further by focusing on God's Big Story in the life of one church in the town called Colossae, located in what is now modern-day Turkey.

Of the many letters the Apostle Paul wrote, we have thirteen of them in the New Testament. Some of them are mostly theological treatises, such as the Book of Romans, some of them are letters to people, such as the letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, and some of them are to specific congregations. The four letters known as Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians are letters to individual congregations. They are famously called the prison epistles, the prison letters, because Paul wrote them from a prison cell, probably in Rome. In each of these letters, Paul addressed some situation going on in the particular congregation as he offered both theological perspective and personal encouragement, as well.

The situation in the town of Colossae (and thus the letter to the Colossians) was complex, and Paul addresses a number of issues. The overriding one concerned false teachings. People were teaching the Christians all sorts of ideas about spirituality and God and Jesus that were simply wrong. Paul wrote to help them remember again the majesty and the greatness of Jesus as the only One who offers true hope

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for the soul. Now you might think that, unlike the situation in that ancient church, today we have clarity about Jesus and basic Christian teaching. Yet, you and I know perfectly well our culture is rapidly confusing a true understanding of Jesus with all sorts of religious ideas.

Our family went to see the movie *Avatar* over the holidays. It's a lot of fun to watch a 3D movie and see objects moving right in front of you. The movie portrays a philosophical concept known as pantheism, in which the universe and the concept of God are all joined together into a single entity. In God's Big Story in the Bible, we learn that God is distinct and separate from creation, that while God created the universe and loves the universe, God is not the same as the universe. If you need help, you don't pray to the creation any more than you'd pray to a tree in your backyard or a flower in your garden, but *Avatar* would suggest you do just that! You say, "Come on! It's just a movie!" I agree, and it's a fun movie at that! However, just to help us understand that these sorts of things influence us, last month the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life issued a report with the title, "Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths"

The Pew Forum reports many Americans mix together distinctly Christian, Eastern and New Age Beliefs. For example, 26 percent of Americans and 23 percent of Christians, taken as a group, find "spiritual energy" in physical

things such as mountains, trees and crystals. Twenty-five percent of Americans and 23 percent of Christians believe in astrology, that the position of stars/planets can affect people's lives. Twenty-four percent of Americans and 22 percent of Christians believe in reincarnation and say people will be reborn in this world again and again. You can tell from the percents that Christians have absorbed these beliefs pretty much to the same degree as the entire culture yet, in every case, God's Big Story teaches something else. While we find inspiration in the beauty of God's creation, spiritual energy is from God. We learn that God is separate from the universe, and our lives are shaped by God and not the position of the planets. We are appointed to live one time, and then we each will appear before God, the judge of all the earth.

Our only hope in that moment will be the love and grace and forgiveness of Jesus we receive by committing ourselves to him in this life. Just as we are seeing Christians in our day mix beliefs, beliefs that often contradict the teaching of God's Big Story in Scripture, so there were people teaching the Colossian Christians to mix their beliefs, too. So Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians to help them again remember and to clarify their belief in the majesty and might of the person of Jesus and to find faith, hope and love in Him.

So Paul wrote, "In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ

Jesus is reliable, and when we put our faith in him, our hope that he will come through for us is grounded in his trustworthiness and reliability.

Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.”

The triad faith, hope and love is used many times in the New Testament, although its most famous expression is found in the love chapter of I Corinthians 13, which famously says, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (3:13). So what kind of faith is Paul talking about and what kind of hope? When it comes to “having faith,” which is another expression for “believing,” we discover in God’s Big Story that faith has to do with trusting and not just acknowledging something exists. If I say I believe the front pew exists, I am believing in it intellectually, but only when I sit in it and transfer my trust to it to hold me up am I showing true faith. And because I put my faith in the pew when I sit in it, I have hope that it will keep holding me up, because faith and hope are very interrelated and are utterly dependent on the reliability of that in which we trust. Jesus is reliable, and when we put our faith in him, our hope that he will come through for us is grounded in his trustworthiness and reliability.

Francis Schaeffer posed this dilemma: “Suppose you were hiking by yourself in the high mountain Alps of Switzerland above the town of Zermatt near the fabulous Matterhorn Mountain. Suddenly, a dense fog begins to roll in and you realize there is no way to find your way off the mountain but the alternative is to stay there and freeze to

death. You see a cliff edge in front of you but you can’t see anything below a few feet because of the swirling fog. You think, ‘If I hang and drop, perhaps there is a ledge down there and I will be sheltered from the freezing cold and perhaps I will be found in the morning.’ If you drop you are literally practicing blind faith— you have no reason whatsoever to believe there is safety. You could drop with the hope of landing on a ledge but who wants that kind of baseless hope. In fact, if you dropped with no idea if there was a ledge below you might be wishing there would be a ledge, but certainly not hoping in the biblical sense because biblical hope is always grounded in a reason to believe—a reason to have faith.”

“So,” said Francis, “suppose as you consider the cliff in front of you and the fog closes in around you, you hear a voice calling to you. The voice said, ‘Just before the fog rolled in I could see where you are. If you hang from the edge of the cliff and drop there is a ledge eight feet below. You will be safe there until morning and I will come and get you.’ What would you do? I’ll tell you what you would do! You would begin to ask questions? You would ask, ‘Who are you?’ to the voice out of the fog and how do you know there is a ledge eight feet below the edge of the cliff? The person replies, ‘My name is Giona.’ ‘Where do you live you ask?’ ‘I have lived my entire life in the village of Zermatt.’ ‘How well do you know these mountains?’ Giona replies, ‘I have walked these mountains every year and in every season.’ After you

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ask enough questions you realize she knows what she is talking about, she knows other people you know and she is offering you a way out of your crisis, and suddenly you feel hope surging through your chest—not the wishing hope of blind faith but the grounded hope of one who has found someone to trust. You turn around, kneel on the edge of the cliff and drop—and the moment you let go you have put your faith in Giona relying totally upon her—and immediately land eight feet below. You are saved.”

So, we discover faith and hope are deeply related to one another, and both faith and hope also connect with love. “⁴...for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.” What kind of love is he talking about? Once I was reading what is famously called the New Commandment of Jesus: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). I love that verse but hadn’t paid much attention to what Jesus said directly before saying, “love one another,” and it really surprised me. He says, “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come” (13:33). Clearly Jesus intends his command to love one another to be his parting word but Peter replies, “Lord, where are you going?” Peter’s only interest is

that Jesus is leaving and totally misses Jesus’ parting command to love one another! As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Love is patient, love is kind, it is not arrogant or rude, love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, love does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right. Love believes all things, endures all things, hopes all things, love never fails” (I Corinthians 13:4-8a).

We believe God wants to use this short letter to the Colossians to change your life in the next few weeks. For you to grow in faith, surge in hope and discover new ways to love the people in your life with the love of Jesus that will transform you if are willing to give it a go. Beginning this week, our congregation is beginning a new adventure, a ten-week “Journey of Transformation,” in which all of us are invited to be a part of a small group studying the wonderful letter to the Colossians.

Do you know the difference between the word “conform” and the word, “transform?” To conform means to change the shape of something. Take a handful of soil from your yard and you can mold it into all sorts of shapes—you are conforming it, shaping it with your hand. However, if you could change that handful of soil into gold with the Midas Touch, that would be transformation (and rather useful at that). Conformation changes the shape of something. Transformation changes the essence of something. So the Apostle Paul wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your

So we urge you to join a “Journey of Transformation” small group. It is an experience in which our Lord will begin to change your deepest self into the likeness of Jesus.

minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). So we urge you to join a “Journey of Transformation” small group. It is an experience in which our Lord will begin to change your deepest self into the likeness of Jesus.

One of the most interesting aspects of healthy fellowship that we discover in the New Testament is something called “large group—small group balance.” The Christians joined in larger groups for worship and teaching and encouragement just as we are doing at this moment. They also joined in face-to-face, smaller groups where everyone had the opportunity to speak and to ask questions. We know that people who only participate in worship services receive some encouragement to grow in their faith, and people who only participate in smaller, face-to-face groups also receive some encouragement to grow in their faith. However, people who participate in both the larger fellowship gatherings—worship—and the smaller, face-to-face groups are the people who typically are the most deeply encouraged to experience the life-changing transformational power of God. Contact Shannon Jordan in the church office, and she will connect you with a small group (Shannon.Jordan@viennapres.org) to encourage you!

At times, you and I can get so enmeshed in all of the stuff going on in our lives that even as we attend worship weekly and read our Bibles and pray at home,

somehow the essential ideas of faith, hope and love get obscured by the various demands of life. Over the recent Christmas holidays, I awoke in the middle of the night and my mind was stewing over all sorts of work-related anxieties, issues surrounding product development and the marketing and delivery of services to clients who can be a challenge to engage. After a fitful time of tossing and turning, I fell asleep and woke again in the middle of a dream in which, out of the clear blue sky, words had begun to sing in my mind: “Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in you.” Over and over, affirming and comforting with a beautiful melody: “Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in you.” I got up and sat on the sofa, trying to remember where these words came from, and slowly, wonderfully, the words of the worship song, *You are My Hiding Place* by Michael Ledner came to mind.

You are my hiding place,
You always fill my heart with
songs of deliverance.
Whenever I am afraid, I will
trust in You.
I will trust in You.
Let the weak say I am strong
in the strength of my Lord.
I will trust in you.¹

A huge sense of relief flooded my soul as I again remembered the majesty of Jesus who loves me, and the faith, hope and love that is the gift of our Lord to you and me. Whenever you are afraid, you, too, may trust in Him! At times, we have to again remember our hope is in

¹Michael Ledner
Copyright You are My
Hiding Place 2001
Maranatha Music.

***I urge you to
once more
remember the
power of faith,
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again.***

Jesus as we trust in him by faith, as we experience his love in our own lives and share his love with others. I urge you to once more remember the power of faith, hope and love our own lives this day and trust in him again.

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