

So What?

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Colossians 3:1-4

Sermon Series:
Journey of Transformation

“I gradually became more attentive to the Bible.”

- Karl Barth

After 30 years of delivering sermons in this church, I have settled into something of a preaching style. I typically begin with a story or illustration. My intention should be obvious by now. I want to draw you, the listener, into the sermon. Those who study public speaking have determined that people decide in the first 90 seconds of a speech whether or not to listen to the message. That means you are likely formulating right now whether or not to pay attention to this sermon.

I use the introduction to transition into the heart of the sermon. The body of my sermons center on the morning Scripture lesson. I invite you to follow along in your pew Bibles or Bibles from home. For auditory or kinesthetic learners, seeing the text may not matter as much. But for visual learners, seeing is an indispensable part of the learning process.

In this church, we typically preach sermons in series. Presently, we are preaching three months worth of sermons on the book of Colossians. Our sermon series are designed for people who have never read the Bible and don't know where to start. Or for those who have read the Bible but don't understand how the whole thing fits together.

I have become more Biblical in my preaching through the years. I used to read the text and make some passing comments on it, using it primarily as a jumping off point to expound my theories of Christian living. Increasingly, I find myself drawn toward preaching the Biblical text and discovering how God speaks to us through Holy Scripture.

Someone asked the great theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth, why he became more Biblical in his preaching through the years. His answer was rather simple: “I gradually became more attentive to the Bible.” I am far more attentive to Scripture today than I was when I started in ministry.

On every airplane trip I've ever taken, flight attendants ask passengers to stop what they're doing and give attention to the overhead monitors outlining safety procedures. I don't always pay attention to these routine instructions, but I decided to listen on a recent trip. I noticed the people around me didn't bother to look up from what they were reading. They didn't take the safety instructions from the seat pockets in front of them. It got me thinking. Do those people seated closest to the emergency exits really know how to open the emergency door? Would we really know how to utilize our seats as flotation devices in the unlikely event of a

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water landing? Would we know how to activate the flow of oxygen from the masks from the ceiling if we experienced a sudden drop in cabin pressure?

We ignore safety instructions until there is an emergency. Some of us essentially give God the slip until believing becomes a life-and-death matter.

A soldier was fighting for Italy during the Second World War. He jumped into a foxhole to escape enemy fire. He frantically tried to dig the hole deeper for more protection. He unearthed a silver crucifix, left by a former resident of the foxhole. Another man jumped into the foxhole beside him. The soldier recognized his new foxhole buddy as an army chaplain. He held out the crucifix and said, "Am I glad to see you! How do you work this thing?"

Don't wait to be in desperate straights to call upon God. "Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6).

The final portion of my sermon could be called the "so what?" section. I make it patently obvious when I come to this point in the sermon. I typically pose the "so what" question to you. So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Each time you hear one of us preach from this pulpit, we want you to mutter "so what?" under your breath. What difference does this sermon make in my life? This book is not concerned solely with our religious life, it deals with our whole life. How does the faith I profess make a

difference in my real life? If a sermon has no practical application, it's probably not worth much.

We arrive today at the "so what?" portion of Paul's letter to the Colossians. For the past two months, we've been focusing on the first two chapters of Colossians. Paul has been writing about the supremacy of Christ in the first two chapters of his letter. Jesus Christ is in a class all by himself. He is without peer and without equal. Jesus Christ is uniquely qualified to save and redeem us. In God's Big Story, God creates, sin restores and Jesus redeems.

Paul begins chapter 3 with the adverb "so." It's Paul's way of asking what difference it makes that Jesus Christ is in a class by himself. This little connecting word "so" connects all that Paul has written about Christ in chapters 1-2 with the ethical implications that follow it in chapters 3-4.

Paul writes in verse 1, "So if you have been raised with Christ," and indeed we have been raised as believers. This phrase, "raised with Christ," appears in past tense, indicating completed action. Jesus Christ has already been raised to the right hand of God, meaning Jesus Christ reigns as God with God from now into eternity.

Jesus Christ raises believers to new life. There is a real sense in which our resurrection has already taken place. We are not only raised to new life when we die and go to be with the Lord. We can be raised to new life now and into the future.

"So if we have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are

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above.” Seek doesn’t mean to go looking for something as we would on a scavenger hunt. We are to continually orient our lives on the risen Christ. Now the tense shifts to present imperative. Paul commands us to keep orienting our hearts on “things above.” Paul is not only calling for a once-for-all decision to follow Christ. He summons us to a continual day-by-day reorienting of our lives to “things above.”

Paul reinforces his point in verse 2 with words that sound nearly identical to verse 1: “Set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Paul elaborates what he means by earthly things in verse 5: “Fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed, which is idolatry.” Eugene Peterson’s translation in *The Message* is helpful here: “And that means killing off everything connected with that way of death, sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like when you feel like it and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy.” Paul adds to this sobering list of earthly things in verse 8: “Anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language.”

We get the point, Paul. We must set our minds on things above. This phrase, “things above,” isn’t a reference to a religion we can’t possibly use until we get to heaven. I’ve heard it said that some people are so heavenly-minded they’re no earthly good. Setting our minds

on “things above” has everything to do with life on earth. Paul elaborates on “things above” in verses 12-13: “Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another and forgive one another.” These are precisely the sort of things we need for living this life. Is there anyone who doesn’t need more compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and forgiveness in his lives?

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a traditional 40-day period of reflection and repentance leading up to Easter in the church. People often speak of Lent in terms of what they will give up. You know, things such as fast food, chocolate and coffee. Someone told me last week that she is giving up Facebook for Lent.

I invite you, this Lent, to think in terms of what spiritual practices you will incorporate into your lives. How can you set your minds on things above? How will you, this Lent, orient your lives around such things?

The new life in Christ is not something we achieve on our own. Only Christ is capable of raising us to new life. Yet there are things we can do. We can seek things that are above. We can set our minds on such things.

You might think of this Lenten orientation in the same way you do your computer. Your iPhone or Blackberry requires periodic updates. Just as there are updates to be made to your phone or computer, so there are updates to be made to our lives with Christ.

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We need, on a routine basis, to calibrate mechanical things in our homes such as clocks or thermostats. Our cars, as well, require regular tuning. Our lives need periodic recalibrating on “things above.”

The design of our Sacred Rhythms retreat next month is intended to help us update and recalibrate to “things above.” Think of it as a spiritual tune up or perhaps a jump start.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Some Christians regard Jesus' resurrection as strictly a past event—as something that happened 2,000 years ago. Or we imagine that he will raise us to new life when we die and go to heaven. Christ wants to raise us to new life now. You don't need to live your life into the future the same way you are living it now. Jesus Christ can raise you to new life.

Let me speak to those here today who find life to be particularly challenging right now. You may be wondering whether there is more to life than what you are experiencing right now. You find it difficult to communicate with family members or close friends. You face mounting debt. Test results reveal an uncertain diagnosis. You're wrestling with a chronic, debilitating illness. You are worried about someone close to you. You are anxious about something you must attend to this week.

Have I missed anybody? Jesus Christ can raise you to new life. I invite you to enter into this new

life that Christ promises. You can do so this morning by saying yes to Jesus Christ. Yes, I want this new life you promise me. You might have made this decision in the past. But you need an update. Your life needs recalibrating. Set your hearts on “things above.”

