

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“The Cosmic Christ”
Colossians 1:15-23; 2:6-7
Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 25, 2010**

We don't know for certain how many people lived in Colossae at the time that Paul wrote the letter from which today's Scripture lesson comes. We do know that it was pretty small...a couple of traffic lights at the most...so maybe it was about the size of Davidson. We also know that it didn't rate more than one star in the AAA travel guide. Compared to the other two towns which were nearby, Laodicea, a shiny financial and political center, and Hierapolis, a hot springs resort and shopping mecca, Colossae had frayed a bit around the edges. Some have said that it was likely the least important town to which Paul ever posted one of his pastoral missives.

But, lucky for the Colossians and for us who live in small towns like Huntersville, Cornelius, Mooresville, and Davidson too, I suppose, small town folk mattered to Paul just as much as big city dwellers. Even though he had never been to Colossae or met the Colossians face to face, he had a warm place in his heart for the people in this little church, some of them from a Jewish background, some of them Gentile. Their founding pastor Epaphras was a dear friend. Paul had followed the growth and development of this young Christian congregation not with mere casual interest, but with prayer.

Thus, it disturbed Paul when he got word that the Colossians had begun to string some unnecessary add-ons to their newly received faith in Christ. Some seem to have been Jewish beliefs; others appear to have come from Greek philosophers and religions. Apparently the Colossians were leaning in the direction of worshiping angels and becoming superstitious about “spirits.” Some were insisting on a kosher diet.

And so Paul wrote them a letter. He wrote to the Christians in this small town a personal and encouraging letter about a colossal Christ. (1)

Science. Faith. Can the two co-exist? Can these disciplines be reconciled?

This is not a rhetorical question. I'm really asking you. The possible choices are yes, no, it depends, and I refuse to raise my hands in church lest someone think that I'm one of *those* Christians.

Yes?

No?

It depends?

I refuse to raise my hands in church lest...?

It is a challenging question, and back in 1884, Bishop Joseph Lightfoot who was at the time a well-known Pauline scholar translated the words that Paul had written to the Colossians 18 centuries this

way, “And in [Christ], as the binding and sustained power, universal nature coheres and consists,” (Colossians 1:17), going on to comment, “Thus (to take one instance) the action of gravitation, which keeps in their places things fixed and regulates the motions of things moving, is an expression of [Christ’s] mind.” (2)

The translation clues us into Bishop Lightfoot’s conviction that faith and science fit together and that Colossians offered a revealing word regarding how this was so, but Paul lived in a different time and place, knowing nothing of physics and astronomy. He and the Colossians conceived of a vast blue dome, the firmament, suspended a few miles up, on which were set the sun and the stars, with heaven above that, and hell down under, beneath our feet. It was this kind of pre-scientific universe that Paul said Christ held together. (3)

Today’s second-graders know more about science than Paul and the Colossians did, or more than Bishop Lightfoot did back in 1884 when he affirmed that Christ holds the cosmos together. It isn’t easy to come up with a satisfying answer regarding the relationship between faith and science. It isn’t easy especially in the light of some of the knock-down, drag-out boxing matches which take place from time to time between the stock characters who glove up and go at it in the public arena: In this corner, ladies and gentlemen, the proponents of creationism and intelligent design storming the state and local boards of education, and in this corner, the polemicists baring their teeth in a atheistic sneer. (4)

I needed a great deal of help to even begin writing this sermon. I stacked up all the commentaries on Colossians that I own and leafed through them. I pored over my notes from the Gathering Around the Word discussion. I dipped into the book *The Language of God*, written by Francis Collins, the longtime head of the Human Genome Project and now director of the National Institutes of Health, which one of you had kindly given me as a gift. I prayed for the Holy Spirit to animate my fingers on the keyboard of my laptop. (Just to test out the hypothesis about the merging of faith and science.) And I thumbed through this little book which I had forgotten that I still owned.

This book, entitled *The Cosmic Christ*, is a study of Colossians written for high school students, a part of the Covenant Life Curriculum. I could not believe that it was still on my bookshelf for I read it with my youth group back in the late 1960’s when I was in high school.

In one chapter, the author takes on evolution. Bounding from Paul’s contending in Colossians that there no gods, half-gods, or super-spirits, but one Son of God, and we ought not add on a teaching that makes God less than creator, suggesting that the material world began elsewhere, the author encourages his teen-age readers to think of the long evolutionary processes over billions of years as the sphere of God’s creative activity and to read Paul’s words, “all things were created through him” as being spread out across vast reaches of time and in some measure accessible to the scientist who searches the past. (5)

In another chapter, he invites his teenage readers to view God’s activity in natural laws, known and yet to be discovered, and in events which appear random, chaotic, unpredictable.

In another chapter, he deals with that most difficult of life’s hard questions, “if there is a God, why is there such evil and tragedy in the cosmos?” Longfellow’s poem which is our affirmation of faith today ends the chapter with a confident word of hope toward that day when all such evil will end and God’s creation will be complete.

And, in a chapter entitled “Lord of the Church,” he points readers to the double thread which runs through Colossians 1: 15-20, the way in which in verse 18, Paul moves from the lordship of Christ over all creation to Christ’s lordship over the church, using some similar descriptive phrases—Paul’s way of encouraging the Colossians to understand that in the life of each individual Christian, in the collective life of the church, in the church’s work in the world, the cosmos is moved so much the more toward Christ’s completion of what he began in the beginning. (7)

Who is the author of this little book? On the final page of this little book, here is what one reads, “The writer, Holmes Rolston, III, is pastor of the Walnut Grove Presbyterian Church in Bristol, Virginia. Dr. Rolston holds degrees from Davidson College, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, and the University of Edinburgh.” (8)

Yes, Holmes Rolston III. The same Holmes Rolston III who is known around the world as a founding father of environmental ethics from his post at Colorado State University as a professor of philosophy. The same Holmes Rolston III who was awarded the Templeton Prize. The same Holmes Rolston who contributed this prestigious prize money to establish a chair in religion and science at Davidson.

Back in the day, this Holmes Rolston wrote a little book for high school students on Paul’s Letter to the Colossians to help them to think deeply with open minds and hearts about the relationship of Jesus Christ to their study of science.

It makes sense, though. In Christopher J. Preston’s biography of Holmes Rolston, a book entitled *Saving Creation*, Preston writes engagingly of the influence of biology professor Tom Daggy upon this young Davidson student. Daggy was a spectacular role model. The study of science seemed like a life and death matter to this professor that his students called “Buggy.” Hanging around Buggy Daggy, Holmes Rolston learned that other interests came second when there was some serious insect gathering to be done. Professor Daggy took his students to south Florida during spring break to do hands-on natural history. The students trailed behind their professor, scratching notes onto damp sheets of paper and peering through hand lenses at flower heads and beetles. Glass-bottomed buckets allowed them to encounter coral reefs peppered with sponges, anemones, urchins, and sea cucumbers.

The students were mesmerized. Professor Daggy could draw their attention to what they were not seeing. When sitting around an evening campfire swatting the bugs drawn to the firelight, Daggy kept his eyes peeled for anything interesting. When he spotted an unusual insect, he would jump up and yell “Stop! Don’t swat that one!” and use his tweezers to pop it into a vial of formaldehyde he carried in a shirt pocket, informing his students, “We will look at that more closely when we get home.”

Months after one of the trips to Florida, Rolston was working late in Daggy’s lab completing a report. Daggy summoned Rolston over to inspect one of the insects they had brought back from the Everglades. Rolston removed his glasses and peered into the microscope at an insect vaguely familiar to him from one of the sweaty excursions earlier in the year. His eyes had scarcely focused when Daggy leaned over and said in a voice scarcely concealing the excitement it contained, “That, Rolston, is a creature new to science.” (9)

This got me to thinking. What if we became very intentional around here about doing what Holmes Rolston did when he wrote that little curriculum piece to help teenagers link their faith in God, their calling to follow Jesus Christ, and the science that they are studying? What if those of you who are

mathematicians and physicists and chemists and biologists and doctors and nurses and engineers and avocational scientists were to see your ministry here at DCPC as designing and implementing a laboratory for science and faith...a real hands-on laboratory for linking faith and science in intelligent ways, a lab where kids and teenagers and adults feel at home and absolutely safe to ask any question that strikes them? What if we were to engage one another, especially elementary and high school and college students, in intentional conversation around hot scientific and environmental topics, learning to use the language of science and faith in complementary and not competing ways so that when we are being pummeled by the creationist crowd or assaulted by the agnostic army, we are confident and competent to speak our minds and our hearts? What if one of you who know him were to invite Holmes Rolston to come to DCPC, not to meet and speak only with the future Templeton and Nobel prize winners on campus, but with kids and teenagers at DCPC and in the community? What if we were to take what we've done and learned and create curriculum that would be a gift to the larger church?

I haven't said a word about this to a soul before now. The ideas just started popping about as I sat on my bed yesterday with my Bible and books and papers spread out around me after praying that the Holy Spirit would animate my fingers on my laptop keyboard, and I'm just tossing out the ideas as a kind of catalyst to get us thinking and talking about whether something like this or something entirely different might be within the realm of possibility.

Science? Or faith? Or science and faith?

If you are interested in exploring how DCPC might go deeper with this question, then raise your hand.

Or if you are reluctant to raise your hands in church lest somebody think that you are one of, you know, those Christians, call or email me. Or better yet, call or email our Director of Christian Education Dr. Linda Steber.

1. Holmes Rolston, III, *The Cosmic Christ: Themes from Colossians for an Expanding World* (Richmond: CLC, 1966), 12-14.
2. Samuel Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1884), 144, 150. Quoted by Rolston, 21.
3. Rolston, 21.
4. David Van Biema, "Reconciling God and Science," *Time*, July 17, 2006, 47.
5. Rolston, 16, 18.
6. Rolston, 39.
7. Rolston, 48.
8. Christopher J. Preston, *Saving Creation: Nature and Faith in the Life of Holmes Rolston III* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2009), 34-35.