

“Hidden with Christ”
Colossians 3:1-11
Andrew Foster Connors
11th Sunday after Pentecost
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I don't remember how old I was when I first saw the movie "Jaws," but I know was too young. I know because for months after seeing the film I was terrified of going in the water. And not just the ocean, either. I was old enough to know that sharks do not swim in lakes or pools, and old enough to know that my chances of getting attacked by a shark in the ocean were next to nothing, but fear, once it's introduced to the brain, doesn't always respond to facts. All I knew for sure is that everything below the waterline was hidden from my view. And my fear-infused imagination had no problem supplying all kinds of horrific possibilities.

When my doctor told me he suspected I might have cancer, I felt a similar kind of fear. Before he had told me any of the good news about how treatable thyroid cancer is, my mind had already filled in the blanks with all kinds of unreasonable possibilities. There was so much that I didn't know, so much that I was not yet able to see, obscured from my view.

Standing in the ocean this past week, looking out across the vast expanse of the Atlantic, I wondered if our nation isn't at a similar vantage point – a child exposed to so much violent possibility in recent years that she suspects there is nothing but evil and danger lurking below every surface. A patient who's been told his health isn't perfect and has jumped to conclude that his death is imminent. All we know for certain is that our future is hidden from plain view. But when we are afraid, fear is more than willing to supply the rest.

The writer of Colossians has some good news for people carrying that kind of fear, at least I think it's good news. Maybe it's better to start with the bad news. Our future is still hidden from us. The world can be a dangerous place. Death can't be avoided. There's a lot about our lives, a lot about our world that remains hidden from us – mystery that we can't know. That's the bad news. The good news is that we've been buried with Christ and also raised with him. Our lives are inextricably connected to the one who overcomes death, the source of all fear. So while we can't know the details of our futures, we do know that regardless of what lies below the surface, what we can't see, our future is something we can anticipate with joy instead of dread. It is a future that brings hope because it is a future that belongs to God.

Not everything that is hidden from our view is something to be afraid of. At least that's the way the author of Colossians sees it. Faith is the gift that enables us to trust God when the fullness of our futures hasn't been revealed. It's the relationship that enables us not to give up when circumstances look bleak. It's the relationship that helps us defend against fear.

When I first read this passage I thought it seemed odd that after this glorious conclusion – that our future is not something to fear – the author turns to a list of vices to avoid: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed. After working so hard to convince us that we are saved not because of our own perfection but

because of God's grace, we get a list of do's and don'ts that seem to bring back the old checklists of who's worthy to be saved. After stirring us to believe that our future, though hidden, is worthy of our hope because it's a future hidden with Christ, we are brought down to the ground level.

It seemed an odd turn after the text last week that Tim pointed out rejects the dualism of the Greco-Roman world. That dualistic ideology viewed the elements of the world as lesser and corrupt, while elements of the spirit were superior and pure. How could this author who rejects that dualism, then turn and say "Set your mind on the things that are above not on things that are on earth?" How could the author who encouraged the Colossians to see Christ in the world not absent from it, suddenly turn on his readers?

But these aren't so much lists of vices as they are actions or qualities that betray a lack of trust. Greed is the best case in point. It's not just wanting more for myself. It's believing that this house or this car or these clothes are going to land me the security or the status that I need to secure my own future. It's putting my trust in things that can't save me from sharks or cancer or death; things that don't deliver on their promises; putting my trust in something other than God – the definition of idolatry. It's reverting back to that fearful understanding of the world the Colossians used to know - before they knew the God of Jesus Christ. God has overcome the root of what drives us to chase after wealth so greed betrays your lack of trust. God has made it possible to have real relationships with each other so using other people as objects for your gratification betrays your lack of trust. These are not lists of vices that we must pursue to get closer to God. They are dead end ways of living that expose how we miss the truth of Christ's presence in the world, in our lives.

Remember that in baptism you stripped off that old self, the author writes, so don't go back to that worn out garment. You've put on the clothing of the new self – the one that makes everything new. That new self is where all the possibility lies – the possibility for joy and hope and love – which is to say, the possibility for real relationship – with our creator and with each other. That's the garment that we get to wear, Colossians argues, the only one that brings our future with God into the present. The only one that brings our future with each other into the present.

David Brooks pointed out a few days ago that both the Republican and Democratic conventions featured a lot of grieving parents. "The fear of violent death," he wrote, "is on everybody's mind — from ISIS, cops, lone sociopaths. The essential contract of society — that if you behave responsibly things will work out — has been severed for many people."¹

Brooks, who seems kind of close to despair himself, goes on to argue that if this is the case, then the rules may have changed in politics – that civility, optimism, humility, and gentleness – all virtues that he sees in American political history – may be no more. The country may have thrown out these virtues in favor of fear, cynicism, anxiety, and extreme pessimism.

I would like to argue differently. Often I do. But in times like these, it's important for the church to be reminded that our hope is not rooted in virtues. If

¹ David Brooks, "The Democrats Win the Summer," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/opinion/the-democrats-win-the-summer.html?_r=0

our hope was rooted in virtues then we would despair every time those virtues diminish in our public life together, or when we fail to uphold those virtues in our own lives. Our hope isn't rooted in the Messiah complexes of nations or of individuals – we have one Messiah – his name is Jesus. Our hope is rooted in Christ who is all in all. Who is never more present in the world than when human hope is most absent from it. *Christ* is the source of hope. The one who gives us a future. If Christians are going to be good for anybody including good for the country, we have to remember that. It's the source of what propels us to seek justice in the public square but also what keeps us going when justice is delayed.

That's what the author is trying to get across to the Colossians. It's what Colossians trying to get across to us. If you want true hope, don't go back to that fearful worldview that wants you to be afraid of everything you do not know, everything you cannot see. Don't go back to worrying over your future, to fretting about your own security. That life has already been put to death for your own sake. There's a new you that's possible even in the midst of this fearful world, maybe especially in the midst of it.

Mark Whatney, stranded on Mars, seemed to find that kind of new self in the movie, *The Martian*, which I saw for the 2nd time with family this week. Short on food and running out of options, he typed out his last wishes to his commander traveling thousands of miles away on the space craft that had inadvertently left him behind. Please tell [my parents],” he said, “tell them I love what I do and I'm really good at it. And that I'm dying for something big and beautiful and greater than me. Tell them that I said I can live with that.” I'm dying for something big and beautiful and greater than me. Whatney came to that conclusion only when he felt his death was imminent. Christians can come to that conclusion the moment we learn about baptism. All of our lives, we are dying for something big and beautiful and greater than me. The new life – shaped by the God of the cross. The new life where death is gone, the old life is gone, regrets, failure, guilt – all gone. Just a glorious life – full of hope and beauty and love for those whose faith allows them to loosen their grip on themselves and the people they love, knowing that Christ is all in all.

On Thursday, standing waist deep in the ocean with some of my family, suddenly, not 15 yards away, a pair of dolphins powered out of the water, their exhalations bursting sprays of water loud enough to thrill the congregation of people assembled in their chairs on the beach. Then another dolphin emerged, then two more, and finally another - a chorus of angels emerging from their shrouded lair to remind us that though we had no power to force them appear or perform, still they were there. 3 or 4 strokes would have put me in reach – they were that close. They were so close to me though I had not known it. They were hidden below the surface of what I could see. Not everything hidden from our view needs to be feared. Why did they wait to show themselves at that moment? I don't know. There is so much I still don't know, so much hidden from view.

What I know is that Christ is close – in you, in me, in neighbors near and far. Which means that heaven is close – not some special place above the clouds, but God's dream which has become our future – it's that close. It's big and beautiful and greater than you and me. The future we are all dying for.