



All I see is Christ

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedges
The Sixth Sunday of Easter ~ May 17, 2020*

Acts 17:22-31

Then Paul stood up before the council of the Areopagus and delivered this address: "Citizens of Athens, I note that in every respect you are scrupulously religious. As I walked about looking at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.' Now, what you are worshiping in ignorance I intend to make known to you. "For the God who made the world and all that is in it, the Sovereign of heaven and earth, doesn't live in sanctuaries made by human hands, and isn't served by humans, as if in need of anything. No! God is the One who gives everyone life, breath—everything. From one person God created all of humankind to inhabit the entire earth, and set the time for each nation to exist and the exact place where each nation should dwell. God did this so that human beings would seek, reach out for, and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us—the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As one of your poets has put it, 'We too are God's children.' "If we are in fact children of God, then it's inexcusable to think that the Divine Nature is like an image of gold, silver or stone—an image formed by the art and thought of mortals. God, who overlooked such ignorance in the past, now commands all people everywhere to reform their lives. For a day has been set when the whole world will be judged with justice. And this judge, who is a human being, has already been appointed. God has given proof of all of this by raising raising this judge from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some sneered, while others said, "We must hear you on this topic some other time." At that, Paul left the council. A few women and men joined Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris and a few others.

Psalm 66:7-18

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| 7 | Bless our God, you peoples; *
let the sound of praise be heard; | 13 | I will offer you sacrifices of fat beasts
with the smoke of rams; *
I will give you oxen and goats. |
| 8 | God holds our souls in life, *
and will not allow our feet to slip. | 14 | Come and listen, all you who fear God, *
and I will tell you what God has done for me. |
| 9 | For you, O God, have proved us; *
you have tried us just as silver is tried. | 15 | I called out to God with my mouth, *
and high praise was on my tongue. |
| 10 | You brought us into the snare *
and laid heavy burdens upon our backs. | 16 | If I had found evil in my heart, *
God would not have heard me; |
| 11 | You let enemies ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water, *
but you brought us out into a place of refreshment. | 17 | But in truth God has heard me *
and has attended to the voice of my prayer. |
| 12 | I will enter your house with burnt-offerings
and will pay you my vows, *
which I promised with my lips
and spoke with my mouth when I was in trouble. | 18 | Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer, *
whose love has not been withheld from me. |

1 Peter 3:13-22

Who is going to harm you if your goal is to do what is right? But even if you do suffer for what is right, count it a blessing. Don't fear what they fear. Don't be afraid, and don't worry. In your hearts, set Jesus apart as holy and sovereign. Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply, but speak gently and respectfully. Keep your conscience clear so that, whenever you are defamed, those who slander your way of life in Christ may be shamed. If it should be God's will that you suffer, it is better to do so for good deeds than for evil ones. The reason Christ died for sins once for everyone—the just for the sake of the unjust—was in order to lead you to God. Jesus was put to death in the flesh but was given life in the Spirit. And in the Spirit, Jesus went and preached to the imprisoned spirits. They had refused obedience long ago, while God waited patiently in the days The reason Christ died for sins once for everyone—the just for the sake of the unjust—was in order to lead you to God. Jesus was put to death in the flesh but was given life in the Spirit. And in the Spirit, Jesus went and preached to the imprisoned spirits. They had refused obedience long ago, while God waited patiently in the days of Noah and the building of the ark, in which a few persons, eight in all, were brought to safety through the water. That water prefigured the water of baptism through which you are now brought to safety. Baptism is not the washing away of

physical dirt, but the appeal made to God by a good conscience: it brings salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who entered heaven and is now at the right hand of God, having dominion over angelic authorities and powers.

John 14:15-21

Jesus said, "If you love me and obey the command I give you, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Paraclete, another Helper to be with you always—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you. I won't leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. A little while now and the world will see me no more; but you'll see me; because I live, and you will live as well. On that day you'll know that I am in God, and you are in me, and I am in you. Those who obey the commandments are the ones who love me, and those who love me will be loved by Abba God. I, too, will love them and will reveal myself to them."

I, like many of you, was so moved by Claire's sermon last week about Stephen, a martyr of the Church. How Stephen continued the life of Christ - up to and even beyond his death - through his acts of faithfulness and forgiveness.

Claire pulled on the thread of Stephen's story, and showed us how it is woven into the lives of the broken saints and redeemed sinners throughout the ages. His story - their stories - continue today, in the hearts of those who move towards the world's pain and chaos with love, because they can do no other.

Today, I want to take a closer look at one of those earliest interlacing threads.

We're standing in Athens, in the first century CE, the one-time center of philosophy, politics, and culture. Filled with schools of thought and temples for gods. Another follower of Jesus stands before the council of Areopagus, proclaiming the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

The person is Paul, considered one of the greatest leaders of the Church.

We know this was not always so. Paul, when he was still called Saul, was a persecutor of the church. He was even present at the stoning of Stephen. Do you remember?

"Then they dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."

Like all mob violence, the stoning of Stephen relied on a frenzy that fueled people's passions over their compassion or conscience. What might happen if people had to walk away for a moment? They might catch their breath, slow their racing hearts. It seems acts of hate often rely on impulse and escalation.

That's why so many lynchings in America happened right after an arrest, long before a trial. Why we continue to see modern day lynchings of people of color - the murder of Ahamud Arbery for taking a jog, Breonna Taylor needlessly shot to death by police in her own home, because they had the incorrect address.

We meet Saul in the heat of the crowd's anger towards Stephen. He's the person saying, "Go ahead, drag him out. Don't worry, I will watch your belongings. Here, let me hold your coat."

If any one in the crowd went home that evening and thought, "What have I done?" it was not Saul. The verses that follow say Saul was in full agreement with Stephen's murder, and that he began to wreak havoc against the church, dragging off both men and women and throwing them into prison.

Paul's transformation, from persecutor to apostle, is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible: Saul, traveling along the road to Damascus, encounters the risen Lord, and is transformed into Paul.

I've kind of always thought about Paul's conversion as an about-face, a 180-degree turn. Once he tried to destroy the church, now he lives to build it up. Once he was a bad guy, now he's a good guy. Once he hated Jesus, now he loves him. Once he was on their team, now he's on ours.

It's kind of a flat image of transformation, isn't it? Defined by opposites, opposition. Everything stays the same, except which side of the line you stand on.

I also want to name the potential for anti-semitism, a form of hatred on the rise in our country. It suggests Saul, the Jew, was bad, and Paul, the Christian, is good. It reduces Paul's transformation to a Jesus-sanctioned tribalism. And a moralism that doesn't really shake out in history. The Church's supersessionism and long line of persecutions kind of take the cake.

We've been reading *The Universal Christ* by Richard Rohr, and it's got me reimagining how I think about transformation, by inviting me to reimagine how I think about Jesus the Christ.

Most of us are thoughtful and seeking people. We do not think Christ is Jesus' last name. We know and believe it is a proclamation - Jesus is the messiah, the savior. Through him, we receive God's grace, know God's love, and reconcile ourselves to God and our neighbor. To do this, we commit our lives to growing closer to Jesus Christ. We study his teachings and try to live as he would, with help from the Holy Spirit and one another.

I think Rohr would agree with this. And he invites us to imagine: what if growing in the Christian life is more than a tunnel-vision focus on Jesus, what if it is the freedom to see Christ everywhere?

“What if Christ is a name for the transcendent within every ‘thing’ in the universe?

What if Christ is a name for the immense spaciousness of all true Love?

What if Christ refers to an infinite horizon that pulls us from within and pulls us forward too?

What if Christ is another name for everything - in its fullness?” (5)

For Rohr, the “proof” that you are Christian is that you can see Christ everywhere else. “Isn't that ironic?” he writes, “The point of the Christian life is not to distinguish oneself from the ungodly, but to stand in radical solidarity with everyone and everything else.” (33)

I was reading the story of Paul in Athens as a story of distinguishing, where the true religion stands up to the false and empty religions of the world.

In this interpretation, Paul is still as rigid and singularly-focused as Saul was that day at Stephen's stoning. Still fairly manipulative, convincing others to do what he thinks is right. It's just now he's trumpeting a set of beliefs that work for me. Maybe even inciting my own passions, against those who are different from me.

Let's reimagine this story, through the invitation of the Universal Christ - as if Paul sees that “the indwelling of the Divine Presence is in everyone and everything since the beginning of time as we know it.” (1)

It means Paul could be genuine when he says, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” He believes the Athenians desire to grow closer to God. He respects and relates to them; mourns the limitations they feel. What if Paul sees the altar with an inscription “To an unknown god” not as ignorance or empty worship, but as longing. Not as indiscriminate, hedge-your-bets worship, but a recognition by those who built it of all we do not know and yet still hope for. That is powerful.

Rohr writes, “Just because you do not have the right word for God does not mean you are not having the right experience...Authentic God experience always expands your seeing and never constricts it. What else would be worthy of God? In God you do not include less and less; you always see and love more and more.” (51-52)

Then Paul says, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” That's the cue, right? Make

your case! Distinguish yourself!

But Paul's first word of proclamation is not about Jesus or the required tenets of his faith. For Paul, Jesus Christ makes God's broad, deep, and all-inclusive worldview available to us, and he begins there: with an eternal and cosmic God who created, loves, and has been present in the world from the very beginning. Why would you want your religion, or your God, to be any smaller than that?

With this image of God, Paul shares an inclusive image of humanity, and the inherently relational connection between the two: From one person God created all of humankind to inhabit the entire earth, and set the time for each nation to exist and the exact place where each nation should dwell. God did this so that human beings would seek, reach out for, and perhaps find the One who is not really far from any of us— the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As one of your poets has put it, 'We too are God's children.'

We could go on. This is a person who has been transformed by Christ: From living a life based on control, rigidity, and exclusion to one that is open, connected, and free. My view of Paul goes from "All I see is Christ." to "All I see is Christ."

The experience of this shift is transformative, most of all because it honors transformation!

On the road to Damascus, Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice, "Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?" Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are harassing." Saul did not say, "But you're dead!" He realized: The one speaking to him is Jesus Christ. And Christ lives in each of those Saul has persecuted. Christ lives in Saul, whose own life is being destroyed by his fear and hatred. In Damascus, when the flakes fell from his eyes, Paul saw Christ then, too - in the face of Ananias, someone Paul would've once seen as an enemy is the one who can restore his sight.

Paul is broken open by God's love. Imagine fists clenched and then hands opened. Paul sees as Christ sees, and a Christ-soaked world looks back at him.

In some way, we can understand Saul's desire to hold tight to what he knows, especially in our own time of change and uncertainty. In crisis, we tend to shut down, not open up. To close ranks, fend for ourselves. Just look at America's toilet paper crisis in the first weeks of quarantine.

But does this hold up to our image of God? Not just God's love, but how God lives. This is probably my favorite passage from the Universal Christ: "Did it ever strike you that God gives up more control than anybody in the universe? God hardly ever holds on to control, if the truth be told. We do. And God allows this in every way. God is so free." (51)

Whether the invitation of the Universal Christ speaks to you or not, ask yourself, "What am I holding too tightly in my life right now?"

I want you to think of something, really! Maybe it's something tangible; maybe it's a fear, a relationship, a belief. Some things are worth clinging to, but not if they close you off, make the world smaller, rely on scarcity...here's the hard one: not if their only purpose is to give you a sense of control.

I will share mine: On April 19th, the second Sunday of Easter, I was supposed to baptize two children at St. Peter's. I was so excited. There are no words to describe your feelings when you baptize someone. The connection you have, not only with the child and the family, but everyone in the room. I held tight to this possibility as we went into quarantine in March, even though part of me knew there would be no safe way to make it happen.

In the weeks following - in Eastertide, no less! - I went from holding on to the possibility, to cradling my disappointment, to tightly gripping my anger. I could not let it go.

It's definitely a little embarrassing to admit that. Because you see the transitions, don't you? From holding onto hope to not letting go of anger? From the power of the communal experience to the power of my own wants? Reducing this outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace to only outward actions, somehow denying myself any grace in the process.

When we baptize someone, we are recognizing and affirming a promise God has already made to that person. We bear witness and commit ourselves to this promise. Baptism is the way we recognize and celebrate Christ within and all around us.

It's just not the only way. That's what I couldn't see; what my hands were not open to receive.

What are you holding too tightly in your life right now?

Close your eyes, clench your fists, and say what it is you're holding. Imagine it there, in your closed fists. Now open your hands and name that same thing - holding it out - in offering, in release. Now place your hands on your heart. And, once more, say what you've been holding, say it with a loving tone worthy of your heart. Take these words - this promise - from today's gospel into your heart, too: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

Today, we celebrate a Litany of Life's Moments. We lament not being able to mark these milestones like we normally do. And yet, even in crisis, so much of life continues. And God blesses it. So we will too. In the ways available to us. In ways that can still transform us, if we let them. This is God's hope for us, even now.

May it be so. Amen and Alleluia.