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**The First Reading is from Jeremiah 23:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. <sup>2</sup> Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. <sup>4</sup> I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD. <sup>5</sup> ***The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.*** <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

We heard the prophet Jeremiah proclaim, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” From our historical perspective, we understand Jesus Christ to be the righteous Branch of David. Christ’s reign of justice and righteousness began with his coming, “For unto us a child is born, a son is given; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Yet, tweets and headlines, internet news and radio blasts constantly remind us that Christ’s Reign of Peace is not yet fully realized. As we live in this tumultuous time, between the ushering in of the reign of peace present, but not yet fully, we have to ask ourselves, “How are we to live faithfully? How are we to live into this kingdom of justice, righteousness, and peace that Christ ushered in?” With these questions hanging in the air, let us listen for God’s word to us through our Second Reading.

**The Second Reading is from Colossians 1:11-20**

<sup>11</sup> ***May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks*** to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup> ***God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.***

<sup>15</sup> ***Christ is the image of the invisible God***, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> Christ himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> Christ is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, ***so that Christ might come to have first place in everything.*** <sup>19</sup> For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

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The Message is entitled, *First Place!*

**“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks.”** I begin today with the last three words. **“Joyfully giving thanks.”** Since we last met together, what are you most thankful for? Was it your Thanksgiving gathering? Was it the opportunity to gather with family and friends? Was it a delicious meal or engaging conversations? Was it the simplicity of time away from your normal routines? I am thankful for my family’s opportunity to spend time with Paul’s extended family. We traveled to Atascadero for a few days and enjoyed our time together around the fellowship of food and conversation. What a blessing it is to have family and friends who welcome your presence into their homes and lives.

Thanksgiving, as well as the whole season of autumn, seems to cause gratitude to well up within me. As leaves change colors and began to dance to the ground, as they beautifully did in Atascadero and the surrounding the communities – brilliant yellows, radiant oranges and deep reds - I seem to realize more clearly the reality of transitions in all of our lives. The preciousness of life takes on deeper meaning and gratitude for the gift of each moment seems more palpable for me at this time of year. Maybe, it is because the holidays cause us to remember those who have joined the church triumphant. Those who no longer gather around our tables in person, like my mom and dad. Yet, gratitude wells up, as I gave thanks for the years of love they poured into me and all my siblings. Whatever causes your gratitude to well up at this morning, may we heed Paul’s words and joyfully give thanks.

Apostle Paul gives his disciples as well as us a reason to give thanks, for he says: **“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God’s glorious power.”** Our strength for each day is made possible because of God’s glorious power at work within us. Our strength comes from God, for we are beloved by God. We are part of God’s family, so we are not alone. God’s power is present to us and when we recognize this truth we are strengthened, so that we **“may be prepared to endure everything with patience.”**

**“Endure everything with patience.”** Really? How is your patience barometer these days? Especially, with the news of more senseless shootings and the death toll which continues to climb in the Camp Fire. I know my patience at times is running a bit short given our inability as a nation to seek common ground on issues of justice and peace. We can’t seem to determine how best to participate in ushering in Christ’s kingdom of justice, righteousness, and peace, where war will be learned no more and spears will be turned into plowshares, where everyone will have a seat at the table.

Instead, we seem to settle for the cultural values of our time that celebrate the individual while neglecting the community, the free enterprise of capitalism regardless of its impact on mother earth, the luxury of elitism which denies the worth of those with less, the obsession with materialism that celebrates success through accumulation, and any other “ism” that places self-interest over and above the common humanity and good of all people.

Notice what Paul says about Christ, the one who is image of the invisible God, **“that Christ might come to have first place in everything.”** Self-interest is not to have first place, Christ is, and this revelation is at odds with our culture and our world. Self-interest is supreme in our world today, but Paul says, “Not so.” Christ is to be first place

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in everything. First place in our lives. First place in the life of this church. First place in our communities, our state, our nation, our world.

Our 21<sup>st</sup> century struggle with placing Christ first is not new. Listen to what Jeremiah had to say. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture.” During the time of Jeremiah’s writings, the term “shepherd” meant “king.” If we take into account the context of the preceding chapters of Jeremiah, we can see that Jeremiah’s use of “shepherd” is directed at the kings living during his lifetime – Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin. Jeremiah makes it abundantly clear that the demise of Israel’s power is directly related to the poor leadership of these kings, including their dereliction of duties to uphold justice for the poor, the widowed, and the oppressed. These kings dethroned God, for God was not first. Their greed for power and prosperity blinded them from their call “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” Jeremiah declares that the way things are under their leadership, is not what God intends.

Jeremiah is issuing a wake-up call, not only historically to the people first hearing our text, but to us as well. The king and his kingdom is not aspiring to what God intends. And so Jeremiah tells of a radically different king, the Righteous Branch of David. This king will not be a king of military might, as they expect. This king will not advocate for his own power and prestige. Instead, this king will advocate for the poor and the marginalized. This king will lay down his life for the sake of all others. This righteous Branch of David, this Prince of Peace, will usher in a radically different kingdom where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, where to gain life you must lose it.

This radically different kingdom is the one to which you and I are called to live and move and have our being. A kingdom rooted in compassion. A kingdom saturated in love for all of God’s creation. A kingdom that looks not to its own interests, but to the interests of others. A kingdom that doesn’t do things out of selfish ambition or conceit, but with a sense of humility that regards others better than itself. A kingdom that is willing to empty itself and become obedient to the way of love.

I long for such a kingdom here on earth. Where violence against one another is no more. Where relationships are guided by compassion and love. Where communities humbly recognize their own limitations. Where self-interest is set aside and our lives are reframed by the lenses of justice, righteousness and peace. Paul longed for the Colossian church to participate in this radically different kingdom, too.

Yet, it seems they were struggling, too. Listen to how Apostle Paul describes the outside influences impacting their lives, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, and not according to Christ.” Don’t buy into the cultural rhetoric, cautions Paul. Don’t buy into the empty deceit it is offering. Yet, we all do. We all fall prey to the human traditions of our culture that place anything but Christ first.

And so, we need to hear anew the Christ hymn, as it is called by scholars and translated by Eugene Peterson:

<sup>15-18</sup> We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—**everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him.** He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right

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up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.

<sup>18-20</sup> He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. **So spacious is Christ, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies,** all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.

From a prison cell, Apostle Paul writes to the gathered people at Colossae and says, "When Christ has first place in your lives, then the reign of Christ, the reign of justice, righteousness, and peace will be ushered in."

Neta Pringle shares this story as a window into the radical nature of this new kingdom. She writes, "Some years ago a young couple in a church I was then serving adopted children, a two and a five-year-old, from Russia. As the congregation watched them come into our midst, I was continually struck by just how greatly the children's lives had changed. It was not simply a matter of moving from institutional living to a home and a family with people they did not know, or of English words serenading them at night instead of Russian. Everything, everything was different: the food, the smells, the sounds."

She continues saying, "Paul is trying to convey to you and I that becoming Christian is like that. It is not simply a matter of fitting Jesus neatly into our thinking." No, by placing Christ first, "We are transferred, moved, deported, from one kingdom to another. Nothing is as we have known it."

"Wow," is what I wrote in the margins of Pringle's commentary. Placing Christ first is that radical; and knowing this, I would dare to say that most of us, and I would include myself, have not yet placed Christ first in everything. We like the shepherds, rule our own lives, sometimes to our own demise.

Yet, on this last Sunday of the church calendar before we enter into our Advent Season, are we willing to try? Are we willing to relinquish our grasp on what we want and consider what Christ's wants? What would our lives look like, if Christ would come to have first place for us?

I don't have any easy formulas for what your life or our collective life as a church should look like today. Yet, surrendering first place to Christ, will usher in ever more fully Christ's reign in us and through us, for we will have the strength to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks. Christ's reign in us and through us brings together all that is broken and dislocated to create vibrant harmonies where everyone has a seat at the table. May this be so among us. Amen.