

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Colossians 3:1-4, “Look Up Here!”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 10/18/2020**

Last week we had our first Homegrown Spirituality presentation,  
and we focused on the soil that we are seeking to grow in  
as we follow Christ.

From our politics, to the environment, to digital technology,  
to lack of institutional trust, there’s a pretty daunting mix  
of elements in the soil we’re surrounded with,  
but we have excellent reason to be encouraged:  
Our God can grow beautiful things in even the most challenging environments.

But God’s way of brining life out of death,  
of growing daisies through cracks in the asphalt,  
doesn’t just happen magically.

We participate in the grace of God that is lavished on us through Christ  
so that our lives can adapt and flourish even with such  
challenging conditions surrounding us.

What I’m saying is that we do not want to be ignorant  
of the challenges that we face, because we may need  
to follow the Spirit’s lead in terms of how we  
organize and focus our time and energy.

After the fact someone might look back and say,  
“Wow – look what God did in these people even in a pandemic!  
Even with so much change! Even with such adversity!”

Growth in times of change and challenge comes when people listen well  
and surrender their sense of control of about “the way things ought to be.”

One question that came up last week was a simple but profound one:  
“How do we pay attention to what God is doing,  
when so much is distracting us in our surrounding circumstances?”

There's no cookie-cutter response that fits that for everyone,  
but one strategy used by the Apostle Paul stuck out to me  
and I want to share it with you.

My version of the insight comes from the silver screen classic,  
“The Three Amigos,” with Chevy Chase, Steve Martin, and Martin Short.

In one scene the three of them are sneaking around at night,  
and Steve Martin is trying to give a signal  
that he has made it to the roof top above them.

He starts out with a subtle whistle, and then a more obvious whistle,  
and then a raven's caw, until at the end he's right above them  
yelling out, “Look up here! Look! Up! Here!”  
And of course the others still are oblivious to the whole thing.

While we take stock of our earthly condition,  
we have to, at the same time, see what is happening from God's perspective,  
we have to heed Christ's call to, “Look up here!”

In Paul's version he says,  
**“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,  
set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated  
at the right hand of God.”**

We should focus our attention,  
we should place the weight of our desires, on things above where Christ is.  
In v. 2, Paul continues,  
**“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”**

With this language of “above” and “earthly”  
Paul is describing two different aspects of reality –  
but they are not literally higher and lower.  
If it were literal, then we could dismiss or ignore  
our life as creatures on earth.

That would go against the whole message of Jesus made flesh,  
and it would mean that the physical world is just a drag  
on our spiritual growth that we need to avoid.

Rather, when Paul says, “earthly things” he refers to human power:  
rulers, authorities, and institutions that organize themselves against God.  
“The world” or “earthly things” is a kind of code language  
for humanity organizing itself against God’s reign.

The soil conditions that we exist within very often include some of these  
earthly things that Paul talks about.

So while we want to notice them and account for them,  
they aren’t our primary focus.

We aren’t going to grow in Christ if all we do  
is complain about our adverse circumstances.

Instead, hear that whistling bird – is it a dove? is it the caw of a raven?  
Or is that just Jesus saying, “Look up here!”

Earlier in my spiritual life, I took “set your minds on things above”  
to mean not listening to secular music, not using curse words,  
studying the Bible, and talking to my friends about Jesus.

While there’s nothing wrong with all that,  
it runs the danger of suggesting that our goal is to escape  
the world God has placed us in.  
I don’t think we have to avoid certain music  
or only talk about spiritual things  
in order to set our eyes on things above.

While we go through life, seeking to grow in God’s word,  
surrounded by the various soil conditions that threaten our growth,  
we “set our minds on things above,”  
not by ignoring or dismissing the world around us,  
but by seeing the life of Christ hidden within it.

It's like those hidden image pictures that look all jumbled up  
with crazy lines everywhere, and your first instinct is to say,  
    "I don't see anything in that, and it kind of hurts my eyes.  
    I'll just get a book with better pictures in it."

But if you look at it the right way, if you focus your eyes deeper  
than the surface of the page, those lines connect in new ways  
and the image pops out as a three dimensional world.

That's setting our mind on things above – not escaping the world,  
but seeing through it and focusing on the extra dimension  
of God's activity among us.

Speaking of hidden images, here comes verse 3 right on cue:

**v. 3, "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."**

When we set our minds on things above,  
we sever our allegiance to  
    earthly powers and influences.  
    We have died to that.  
    And in dying, our real life has become...hidden.

We are risen with Christ in his resurrection,  
and so our lives within the created order are already aligned  
    with the ways of heaven rather than the ways of corrupt humanity.  
Therefore, in verse 4, when Christ – who *is your life* –  
appears, *then* you also will appear with him in glory.  
    What is hidden now – life in light of the resurrection –  
    will one day become apparent on the surface of things.

How does all of this connect with our conversation about  
the soil conditions we live within?

We recognize the difficulty of life with family in close quarters,  
of new schooling situations, of being in lock down, of working in new ways.  
Christ invites us to look through those realities and find  
that God walks with us in our weariness  
and offers rest for our souls as we figure out how to  
make it through each day.

Yes, we recognize the tensions of our society,  
and we feel powerless to enact change when the problems seem so huge.  
Christ invites us to look through those realities and see  
that the church is are one people made from all nations  
through the body of Christ.

The strength of the church is precisely what is not apparent on the surface:  
it is the hidden life of the church which matters in times like these.

Setting our eyes on things above is neither ignoring our circumstances,  
nor seeking to control them, but rather understanding them well  
and seeing the mysterious work of God's Spirit  
taking place at depths we hadn't realized before.