

Sermon: January 22, 2023 – Colossians 1: 9-20

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

On this day of baptism, I decided to take a moment and try to reach back to the first Church memory I have. My Dad was a Minister, so there are lots of photos and home movies of me as a little guy toddling around the Church, but when I try to name what I actually recall, it's the old Sunday School hymns that were part of the United Church's 1930 Hymnary: song like "God sees the little sparrow fall", "When He cometh", and "Can a little child like me thank the Father fittingly." While my understandings of God and life and the world around us have grown and changed almost completely over the past six decades, these songs still touch a place in my heart that is otherwise inaccessible. Music has a wonderful ability to connect us to the events, the feelings and even the physical sensations of certain times and events in our lives, and for many of us, hymns that have entered our lives at specific times and places play a unique role in connecting us to our own faith history.

If we had the ability to go right back to the days of the first believers in Jesus Christ, we might be surprised at the information they did and did not have at their fingertips. The four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – took several years to be written, so the first believers had to go on bits and pieces that they had gleaned from various sources. They may have heard some wandering storyteller tell some of Jesus' parables, or speak of his reputation as a healer, or his overturning the moneychangers' tables at the Jerusalem Temple, and it seems that the reports of his death and resurrection were pretty widespread – but it was all piecemeal.

There is evidence, however, that most of the earliest Christian gatherings would have heard two hymns about Jesus: one in the 2nd chapter of Philippians, about the humility and exaltedness of Christ; and the other one, our scripture reading today, from the 1st chapter of Colossians, a song that sings of the cosmic connection between God and Christ and all of creation, and the depth of God's desire for reconciliation.

Whether they were sung or spoken, chanted to music or recited together in the way that we recited the United Church Creed today, is unclear, but what is clear is that these two hymns about Christ reached into the heart of ancient worshippers in a special way. Before the New Testament was written, before the content and sequence of Jesus' ministry was broadly known, these words were a song in the heart of the early Church.

So, on this day of Blair's baptism, what songs do we hope will live in her heart?

That will be an ongoing question for her parents and relatives and everyone else in her circle of care who have gathered here today, and it would be presumptuous of me to dictate what your hopes for her life might look like. But what I am equipped to do, it to lift up a few key elements inspired by our United Church Creed, and by this reading from Colossians, and offer them as my prayers, my three-stanza song, for her life.

First, I pray that Blair will always know of her belovedness, and believe that with her whole heart.

When I first met Blair, I couldn't help but notice how much she reminded me of our youngest, when he was that age. She's so laid-back but so attentive, calmly engaged in such a happy way, and yep, we had one of those in our home thirty years ago. I mention this because it, well, made my heart sing to be in the presence of this energy again because it just beams "belovedness."

My belief about baptism, is that it's a time when we say out loud what is already a reality from birth: that is, that this child is beloved. This child, is a child of God. And while there will be lots of voices in life that try to imply something different, especially as social media platforms and widespread body shaming continue to undermine young people's confidence, my prayer is that Blair will always know the truth of her basic goodness, her belovedness in the eyes of God, her parents and family, and the whole universe. Life is wonderful, and so is she.

Repeatedly, Jesus says that love is the evidence that we live in God and God lives in us, and authors like Richard Rohr make a strong case that the power of Christ's love is what makes sense of not just life on earth, but life in the whole Universe. May love, and belovedness, have a home deep within this young girl's heart.

Second, I pray that Blair will live in an age marked by respect, understanding, and the kind of peace and joy that arises when everyone has what they need.

The middle of our United Church Creed speaks of these things: "We are called to be the Church: to celebrate God's presence, to live with respect in Creation, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil" and it speaks of Christ whose reconciling power accompanies us on that task. Unfortunately, the world around us seems to have other plans.

I needn't remind any of us, how mean-spirited, untruthful and divisive things have been in recent years, and I cannot pretend that I don't get sucked into that negative energy now and then. In the social discourse of our day. The name-calling, the lack of dialogue, the emergence of voices that have no intention of telling the truth, lead many of us to despair about what comes next.

At the same time, I have a great deal of confidence in the open-mindedness of so many young people. I've been back in Ministry here in the Bow Valley for ten years now, but before that I worked in a K-12 school for a dozen years. As I saw wave after wave of students interacting with one another, reaching maturity in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith community, I saw their deep embrace of world issues, like the environment, or the meaning of equity and equality, or their approach to sexual diversity. In this I sensed a healthy open-mindedness that lifted my spirits, and it got better just about every year, certainly better than I ever saw in my High School experience in the 70s!

I hope and pray that Blair's generation will be shaped by this open-minded, open-hearted practice that I've seen with my own two eyes, turning its back on the corrosive divisiveness that has done such damage in recent years. And if I can put in a good word for the Church, I pray that we will also be part of the picture. When we get it right – when we truly embrace that love, welcome and a commitment to equity forms the foundation of life – a community of faith can be a wonderful thing.

And third: I pray that Blair will be perpetually amazed by the sacred beauty of life and the world.

Children have a built-in sense of awe and wonder about life in general, and most especially toward the world around them. While that sense of awe and wonder often dissipates over the years, in Banff it holds pretty steady, for in this place of outrageous beauty the mountains and waters and trees that surround us, the impressive creatures that are our neighbours, the tiny intricacy of wildflowers and bugs and minnows, all speak to us every day of a creative intent beyond our understanding. I find it both surprising and impressive that two thousand years ago, this ancient hymn from Colossians expresses the central connection between God and Christ and the whole created order, going so far as to say that "all things are held together" –

in Christ. I have to admit that the implications of this statement are a bit beyond me, but it does suggest that if we place our religious understandings of the world over in one place, and the way we approach nature in another place, we've got it wrong. We have lost the sense of the sacredness of nature, and once one's surroundings are regarded as "less than sacred" they also tend to be treated with something less than respect.

This world, and each day we draw breath, are sacred, holy gifts, interwoven in mystic beauty. I pray for Blair's sake, and for the sake of this planet, that she grows up not only with this in her heart, but that she grows up as part of a generation that "gets it" in a way that my generation, sadly, did not.

I pray that the song of Blair's life will be long, and harmonious, and memorable. I pray that it will be a song of belovedness, of understanding, of inclusion and peace. I pray that she will be amazed by the beauty of the earth and the gift of life. I pray that the good news of Jesus Christ, will be good news in her hearing.

Today, all of us are blessed, by the promise of new life: the new life we see in this little girl, the new life of Christ that calls us to be people of love. May this blessedness live as a song in all our hearts. Amen.

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