

Once, long ago in the land of Judah, about 600 years before the birth of Jesus, there lived a good boy-king named Josiah, who began his reign when he was only eight years old. Josiah’s ancestor, King David, had reigned 400 years before, and was the apple of God’s eye, for David loved the LORD with all his heart and did his best to lead his people to God.

Josiah, like David, also grew up and sought the wisdom of the LORD God, and worked hard to teach his people that the God of Israel was the one, true God of all. He destroyed the worship places of Baal, and forbade the worship of false gods that had been made by human hands; for the true God was the Creator of all things, and could not be seen.

The true, everlasting God had made the stones and trees from which the false idols were made! There was no God like him, nor would there ever be another. God was and is our forever-God: eternal, almighty, and glorious in the power to love and save his children of every time and place.

King Josiah made the temple of the LORD beautiful and holy again. He reigned for 31 years, and he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and walked in the ways of his ancestor David.

But the people of Judah were used to holding their false gods in their hands, and talking to them like a child’s toy; and since they couldn’t see the eternal God, it was easy for them to fall back into the habit of enjoying their toy gods.

But their toy gods could not speak; so the people decided what the toy gods were saying to them. And their toy gods often gave them bad advice that led them astray from a good, upright, and prosperous life. For when we decide what is good for ourselves, we often choose the easier or more attractive option, and not the option that will lead us toward the good of all. And this is what happened with those who didn’t believe in the LORD God. They sinned against one another and made their lives miserable by their own mistakes.

Jeremiah, the great prophet, was a friend of King Josiah, because they both loved God and his people and wanted the best for them. However, when King Josiah died, two of his sons became king, and they went back to the old, bad habits and worshipped Baal. Soon after this, God sent armies from Babylon to conquer Judah and take the Israelites to Babylon as captives.

Zedekiah then became king over Judah and Jerusalem. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the true word of the LORD to the Israelites. Zedekiah became stubborn and hardened his heart and would not turn to the God of Israel. All the leaders, the priests, and the people became more and more unfaithful. They followed the wicked practices of the nations and trampled and violated the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem. Despite how hard Jeremiah tried, the people never truly changed. Their evil continued, and finally God used King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to conquer Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and take the Israelites captive back to Babylon.

Jeremiah was heartbroken. He had tried his best to bring God’s beloved people back and listen to him.

And, as God had decreed through Jeremiah, it came to pass that seventy years later, the LORD gathered his people and brought them back to their land; and the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ, came down to earth for a ministry of love, grace, and redemption among his people.

Jeremiah’s prediction of a Messiah, a Savior, became the wondrous news to all the people that God’s promise had come true. And it came to pass, that a baby was born from the righteous Branch of King David.

All babies are miracles, but this particular baby was more miraculous than any baby ever born, for he was also God, brought to earth in the form of a human baby. He came from heaven where he had been with God from the very beginning. He is completely holy, and is Lord of all; and he has authority to judge the world. This means that Christ is over all creation, including the stars of heaven and all of the universe, most of which we haven't even seen yet, even if we were able to look through the most powerful telescope. Jesus is our Cosmic Christ, who is supreme before all things; he is the ultimate super-hero, who holds it all together. And God dwells in him and he dwells in God. They and the Spirit are one. This is Jesus' hope for us, that by the Holy Spirit, we will also be pleased to dwell in him and he in us.

As Jesus grew, those who heard him recognized that, even at 12 years old, he held great knowledge and wisdom of God; and as he became a man, people followed him all over the countryside, asking him to share his wisdom, grace, and healing powers.

More than anything else, he taught us that we also have power – the power to love each other as he loves us. And he taught us how to live with peace of mind, no matter what happens to us or what we might have to endure; and that we can work together in harmony and live in joy as we work together to accomplish God's mission: that we will strive to pass on his vision of Grace, Love, and Peace.

This is God's master plan! God's inspiration turns his words into our actions; and we are to trust in his guidance. We are asked to look to the mighty power of God, and how we may glorify him and his creation. . . to leave as our gift a better world than the one into which we have come.

We look at his Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at his Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank of angels – everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him.

And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together. And all the broken pieces of the universe – people and things, animals and atoms – get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his sacrificial death on the cross. We cannot turn, or walk away from such wonderful Grace! The focus of our mission in this church today will be unprecedented, for we have not previously experienced the past 3 years during our lifetime.

We are in a new age, a new situation that is constantly churning and unfolding before us. And it is for this reason that we must listen to Paul's advice to the Colossians: we are to focus only on God in Christ and his wisdom.

There will be many ideas thrown about and to the winds from "experts" who say this or that about the future of the church! **But we are each unique** -- and if we focus on the teachings of Christ and his church, we will find answers. Paul has something to say about this in Chapter 2 of his letter to the Colossians:

I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know about God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else.

Just before my retirement from NMSU in 2013 I felt called to begin a College and Young Adult Ministry in our church, but I asked myself,

"Where will I find enough young Presbyterians in Las Cruces, NM?"

I stepped out, often with fear that I would fail to gather them. During the first year of our Dinner Nights, I was very reluctant to ask the students about their religious backgrounds, yet I wondered why they came. On our very first Dinner Night, we greeted seven young adults, most of whom were my music students whom I had invited; but as the months passed, and as God brought new students into

our church on a Sunday morning, the group began to grow. Finally, in April of the first year of ministry, I gathered the courage to ask around the dinner table about their individual spiritual backgrounds. Their answers both surprised and encouraged me.

One after another, they shared that, as their families moved to different cities, they searched for a church in which they felt welcome, comfortable, and valued. Evidently, they were searching for a warm and gracious family of God, not a particular church denomination. The group has been organized for nine years now, although Steve and I were already taking college students under our wing as they came to the church.

Just before the Covid virus descended upon us, we had approximately 35 Young Adults with which we were engaged in various ways. If they weren't able to come to the Dinner Night, there were options for Bible study, lunch, lemonade, or tea, day trips to the lake or mountains together, any activity that might bring us together to foster closer relationships. Our Bible studies changed venues many times as we experimented and tried to accommodate those who did not have transportation. We have counseled and supported those who have needed particular, personal help.

In the beginning, I tried to find books to read about young adult ministry, and called other churches that were known to have vibrant ministries, but our culture is moving and changing so quickly I was told by a minister in Little Rock, AK that any published book on the subject would already be obsolete by the time it was available in book stores. I was forced to trust God and my own instincts, and it has been a most enlightening and fulfilling journey.

Yet, as the fall semester begins each year, after several students have graduated and moved on, I still have that question in my mind . . . where will I find them? And God has always provided! Steve and I are blessed, beyond measure, to be parents and grandparents to so many remarkable young adults -- and their children.

In retrospect, I muse over the past ten years and ask, what if I had gone forward with my first naive perceptions of the ministry I had envisioned, and ignored the work that God was already doing for us? What if I had ignored the stirrings of the mystery of Christ and restricted in some way those who are always welcome to our Dinner Night ministry –friends of friends, strangers, those of other faiths? The threads of color in our tapestry would not be nearly as vibrant, for we would have limited our potential and opportunity to bring all people together in love.

The truth is that God strengthens us in our work; work that may take longer than we ever imagined, and that perhaps may not be finished in our lifetime; yet our real challenge is to pray for God's present vision for us, and our own faithfulness, sense of hope, and perseverance.

Paul prays for the faithful Colossians, as translated in *The Message*:

We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul –
not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength
that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy,
thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part
in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us.

We celebrate today the timeless Reign of Christ the King, who has been with us since the beginning of time and who will certainly endure, for he is King of kings and Lord of lords. . . . and he loves us with an incredible love. Incredible, indeed! Thanks and praise be to our risen Lord who loves us, hopes for us, and has redeemed us.

Let us pray:

Gracious Lord, you have been with us and for us since time began, you are with us now, and you will be with us forever. We search for the mystery of the depth of your love, knowing we will not fully understand it until we are in your glorious arms of love and peace. In the meantime, we cherish the gift

of your Spirit's presence. Strengthen us for our journey together, in Christ we pray. Amen.