

Colossians 2:6-23
Instinct for the Center
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As a child, growing up on Buckingham Drive, we lived in a neighborhood filled with young families. It was a dream setting for my brother and me. In fact, my mother says she chose the neighborhood because of the number of swing sets she counted in peoples' backyards. Peter and I knew everyone in that neighborhood, and as you can imagine, some of the kids we knew were better influences than others.

At the center of our neighborhood was a playground with a ball field, and on the outskirts of this park was something that came to be known in our house as "the raspberry bush." It really wasn't a bush at all, but rather an overgrowth of low-lying trees and weeds and a well worn path to the middle. Once you went in, there was an open space sheltered from the outside where all sorts of mischief could take place—and it did. As you can imagine, this was the place in our neighborhood where lots of firsts took place, which is why my brother Peter and I were not allowed in the raspberry bush.

My parents knew that we were young and vulnerable and therefore needed guidance on how to navigate the raspberry bushes of life.

Paul knew that like my brother and I, the Colossian Church was surrounded by competing voices and views that made them particularly vulnerable every wind of change and worldview. They were surrounded by varying viewpoints and competing voices. And Paul knew that in their youth, it was very possible for this group of new Christians to be drawn away from the center. He knew it was important for the Colossians to cultivate an instinct for the center.

So today we're going to look at this question: How is it that God keeps our lives, and the lives of his people, rooted in the most important thing?

So as we look once again at Paul's Letter to the Colossian Church, I want to invite you, out of respect and reverence for the Word of God, to stand with me as I read Colossians 2:6-12. If you are following along in the Red Pew Bible, it can be found on page 185. And when I'm done, I'll say, "This is the word of the Lord." If you believe it to be true, you can respond by saying, "Thanks be to God."

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the

flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Paul begins with this interesting exhortation: receive Christ, and walk in him. There is a moment in the life of the person who has received God's free grace, when it dawns on you—something is different about my life, and not just something, everything! We see people through different eyes, the air smells sweeter, birds sing prettier, water is no longer just plain ol water, IT'S LIVING WATER. Ok, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but we are left with a question: "What do I do now?" Well, there is still your job to do, there are still groceries to buy, errands to run, children to be raised. But now all of these seemingly mundane tasks appear to us in a new light, because Jesus goes with us.

What makes Jesus of Nazareth such a compelling person is that his entire ministry, his entire way of being with people was in and amongst their daily lives. Jesus met people with challenges of all sorts – physical, psychological, and even vocational – and he invited them to walk around and spend time with him. Jesus has such a wholistic way of being with us. What Paul is saying to us here is, when you meet the man Jesus right where you are, walk around with him, literally take Jesus for a walk in your daily routines.

Judy Waggoner encouraged us to do just this last week when she issued the challenge to all of us to put a smile on someone's face. Take that grace and love of Jesus with you, walk around with it. Like a new pair of shoes, stretch it out, let it grow into the contours of your life, find your sweet spot because we know that walking around with Jesus will not always be an easy or comfortable thing.

That's why Paul begins this passage with this call to be rooted and built up in Christ, because taking our faith into the various places of our lives means that we are going to be confronted daily with what Paul calls empty deceit, human traditions, and the elemental spirits of the world.

What are these elemental spirits? Well, the Greek phrase here (*ta stoikaia tou kosmu*) literally translates to the base elements or rudimentary parts of the cosmos. And it suggests that the Colossian believers have been led astray by astrological teachings that looked at the moons and stars for insight. The Colossian believers were picking up the National Enquirer in the checkout line at Kroger and looking to their signs for wisdom, these elemental spirits, hocus pocus religion.

Being people who are always on the move, life has a way of becoming rather chaotic, does it not? So we have the tendency to look for things to center our lives around. This is

what the Colossians found themselves doing. They tried worshiping the earth, fire, stars, and the four winds. They tried worshiping idols that they created with their own hands. They tried worshiping classical philosophy, which began as a form of religion. But everything about life kept moving. Their center would not hold.

The Colossians were particularly vulnerable to these elemental spirits. But we are 21st century modern people; we're not susceptible to this stuff, are we? We're far too sophisticated to be taken captive by empty deceit and idols. But I wonder if that is true. When life is chaotic and moving too quickly, to what do we turn to today to find the center?

Do you turn to your job or commerce? When the world becomes confusing, do you lean into your job? How about government? When things begin to spiral, do we turn to the government? After all, when things are moving quickly, we can count on political gridlock of our representatives to slow things down a bit, right? Do we turn to the arts or to entertainment? Most of our art and entertainment these days actually reflects the disjointed and chaotic nature of life...but hey, at least they're honest, right?

How about family? Family is the most cherished and important human institution we have, but even family can't be a center point because people grow up, children move on, parents pass. As precious as family life is, and in no way am I degrading the importance of family, but the fact of the matter is even our family is in motion, and trying to make family the center will not work.

In every element of these facets of culture, we find a world that continues to turn. Everyone is in constant flux, shifting and changing with time. And so as we take Jesus, as we walk around in these various areas of life, he invites us to hear his gospel message. The Good News is that in Christ we have that center. We've been talking about it throughout these messages in Colossians. And what Paul wants to press upon this young church is to cultivate that instinct for the center.

Paul tells them, in yet another remarkable Christological statement, that in Jesus Christ **the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily**. In Jesus Christ, God entered every darkened corner of the world as the light of life. He is the lost key for which you have been searching. He is the still point to the turning world. And that is all because Jesus has brought heaven to earth.

How do we protect the center, so that when the waters of life rise, we can stay firm and grounded? We do so by digging a trench. Digging a trench? Yes – by daily taking the time to fortify our lives by through Bible study, quiet time, and prayer; intentional and covenantal relationships with others who hold us accountable; etc. Digging a trench so that when the waters and the tides of life rise and we are tossed around to and fro in chaotic and uncertain ways, that as the tide rises and we lose our footing, when the waters reside, the trenches will still remain and we will still have that instinct for the center.

There's still another way that we can protect the center. And it is by remembering and remaining rooted in our baptisms. By remembering that we were once buried in the waters of baptism, then raised by faith in Christ, we will always have that center in the midst of the surrounding tides. Baptism is our center. Our baptism in Christ is that still center of our lives when everything else around us is shifting. And the one who makes it possible, the one who always welcomes us back, the one who reaches down when we feel like we're sinking is Christ Jesus, the Lord, the **one who disarms the rulers and authorities and puts them to open shame, by triumphing over them**. Jesus, the one in whom God's presence dwells bodily and who walks with you daily. Jesus is the one whom we can trust, and he is the one who is inviting you today to find your center in him. Amen.