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St. John in the Wilderness, Flat Rock, NC
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Hosea 11:1–11

Psalms 107:1–9, 43

Colossians 3:1–11

Luke 12:13–21

Our New Testament epistle reading today takes us into a creative tension right at the very heart of the Christian life—what we might call the perpetual tug of war between Incarnation and Ascension. “Incarnation” is God coming to earth in the fleshly human body of Jesus Christ, and “Ascension” is Jesus Christ leaving earth to take his resurrected and glorified body to Heaven. This tension, this tug of war, between Incarnation and Ascension is presented to us in the opening lines of Colossians, Chapter 3: “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

This really is an amazingly remarkable passage of Scripture. First of all, note what it clearly assumes. It assumes that we are, in fact, somehow, already, even now, “raised with Christ”—that is, there is some very real sense in which when *Jesus* was raised from the dead and then ascended into heaven, then we who are joined to his death in baptism were *also* raised from the dead and ascended with him. That’s quite a lot to try to take in on a summer Sunday morning. But, the practical consequences of that mind-blowing fact are then presented to us as well: that is, if we are in some sense already ascended with Jesus into heaven, then we should “seek” and “set our minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

On first glance, then, this passage from Colossians presents us with an entirely *other-worldly* vision, with an exclusive emphasis on the Resurrected and Ascended Christ, who has now left behind this material and social reality we call earth for a heavenly home instead. And it is there, we are told, that we should fix all our attention, all our hopes, and all our desires. As the passage continues it then even draws the yet more dramatic conclusion that, as in one sense we are *already* dead and raised and yes even ascended with Christ, we must therefore actively *kill* whatever in us remains “earthly”: as it says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).”

So we must, it seems, to the greatest extent possible, live as citizens of heaven, and not as citizens of earth. We must follow Christ's own example and strive to ascend. And of course our gospel reading from Luke presents us with a vivid example of what *not* to be like with the parable of the foolish and greedy rich man who, instead of being generous with his excess wealth and giving it away, stupidly “store[d] up treasures for [himself] but [was] not rich toward God.”

And yet, within this amazing passage from Colossians there lurks a curious paradox, the tension and the tug of war between Incarnation and Ascension that I mentioned a moment ago. For to focus our attention on the Ascended Christ is precisely to focus on One who became *incarnate*. That is, ironically enough, Jesus himself did not “set his mind on things that are above”, but rather he “set his mind on things that are on earth”—namely, on *us*! “For us and for our salvation *he came down* from heaven...” And, indeed, some theologians insist that the Ascended Christ *remains* the Incarnate Christ, with a fully human body, even now in heaven itself. So in this amazing passage from Colossians we encounter the profoundly paradoxical and counter-intuitive claim that at the heart of heaven is one who came to earth.

Now, this is actually the fourth week in a row that we have heard a lesson from Colossians as our New Testament epistle reading. In Chapter 1, we heard that that in Christ “all things in heaven and on earth were created,” and that through him “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.” Earth and heaven are not opposed in Christ, but in him they are both created by and reconciled to God. Moreover, earth and heaven are reconciled through *Christ's body*—indeed, we were explicitly told through “his fleshly body”, or “the body of his flesh.” Likewise, in Chapter 2 last week we were told that in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells *bodily*”—again, not spiritually, but bodily. The fancy theological word “Incarnation” that we often use here literally means “enfleshment,” and to help you remember that, consider that we more frequently encounter the same Latin root-word for “flesh” from “incarnation” in “chili con carne”—which we normally translate not as “chili with flesh” but as “chili with meat.” It may sound odd or funny, and you may even laugh when you hear it, but I am not being at all disrespectful or flippant when I say that Jesus Christ is *deity con carne*! This is what we proclaim in the Nicene Creed when we continue reciting the passage I quoted a moment ago:

For us and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven:
 by the power of the Holy Spirit
 he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
 and was made man.

And while we Christians are used to this idea of “deity con carne,” it is always worth remembering that Jews, Muslims, and Unitarians all think that it is indeed profoundly disrespectful and even blasphemous to say that God became a human being, that God took on a fragile and mortal body of flesh and blood.

So why am I belaboring all of this? I want us to see that when the New Testament talks about things that are “earthly” and “fleshly” it uses these terms in two entirely different and even contradictory ways, and we have to know which meaning is being used on a given occasion. Sometimes “earth” and “flesh” are employed *negatively* to refer to all that is in sinful opposition to God. But sometimes “earth” and “flesh” are used *positively* to refer to good things made and redeemed by God in Christ—that is, the beautiful world in which we live and the wonderful bodies that make us who we are, including the human flesh in which Jesus Christ became God incarnate, deity con carne.

We thus have to do some mental translation when reading a passage like today’s lesson from Colossians, to clarify what the author means by “not setting our minds on things on earth,” or by “putting to death whatever is earthly in us.” These passages have often been taken out of context in ways that are quite damaging to human beings and the world around us. But “not setting our mind on things on earth” does *not* mean not caring about human society or the natural environment, and “putting to death whatever is earthly in us” does *not* mean neglecting, abusing, or even hating our bodies.

My whole point in this sermon is that the tension between Incarnation and Ascension or between earth and heaven is built into the Christian life. Therefore, the path of wisdom is not to focus on one at the expense of the other, but to recognize the tension and seek to pursue both simultaneously, in the right way. As I said earlier, Incarnation is God coming to earth in the fleshly human body of Jesus Christ, and Ascension is Jesus Christ leaving earth to take his resurrected and glorified body to Heaven. We are thus called to set our minds on things above, but there we find a God who came to earth. We might call this the incarnational impulse: valuing of the material world, as such, as good and created by God, and both endorsed and redeemed by Christ’s Incarnation. And yet Christ’s Ascension means that this world is not all that there is, or our final destiny, but we are summoned to something yet more wonderful and surprising, beyond our comprehension, still to be revealed.

And so to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be ascribed as is most justly due all might, dominion, majesty, and power, now and for ever. Amen.