The Circle of Thanks
Colossians 1:1-14

So today we begin our series on the book of Colossians. Today is also our Thanksgiving service, so you might be thinking, "Hold up, Laura, shouldn't you be preaching on a Thanksgiving text?" Well never fear, good people. Paul begins his letter to the Colossian church with thanksgiving!

But before we get to that thanksgiving, lets set up this letter so we have a better understanding of Paul's words.

From the opening greeting of this letter we know the author to be Paul, along with his faithful sidekick and protégé, Timothy, who probably acted as his secretary. Colossians is included in the group of letters called the Prison Letters – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. There are a few different possibilities for when these letters were written and from which prison, but most scholars believe Paul wrote these letters when he was under house arrest in Rome between 60 and 62 AD.

Under house arrest Paul could still receive visitors, and one such visitor is Epaphras. Epaphras is likely the founder of the Colossian church. Paul himself never visited Colossae, but he spent three years in Ephesus, a major metropolis about 100 miles away.

It's likely that during that time, Epaphras was in Ephesus, heard Paul's message, and returned to Colossae where he then preached that same message, and a small congregation began to form. He's now travelled to Rome, bringing reports to Paul about how things are going in this fledgling church.

And the reports…aren't all good. There's news of a group of travelling preachers who have arrived in Colossae and are preaching some kind of

"Jesus *and*" message. It's all well and good to believe in Jesus, but if you add in some additional practices and follow some specific rules, you can achieve a heightened level of spiritual awareness. We don't know exactly what these practices and rules were, but it's likely they were either a holdover from Judaism or pulled from the secular philosophies of the day. In either case, from references later in this letter we can assume they required a person to deprive themselves or even mutilate their bodies to achieve a greater sense of enlightenment.

So Paul feels compelled to write the Colossians a letter, to remind them that the only gospel is that of Jesus Christ. We'll get into the heart of the issue in later sermons, but even as Paul opens his letter, we can see this direction in his writing.

And like almost all of Paul's letters, he begins with thanksgiving.

Now some of you might be aware that Paul is known for his run-on sentences. Colossians 1:1-14 is a prime example of this, because in the original Greek manuscript, verses 3-8 are one sentence, and verses 9-14 are another *one* sentence. This makes them particularly dense to read, so we're going to pick them apart clause by clause.

One So the letter begins: "[3]We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you." So far so good. Why do they give thanks?

Two [4]"because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people." Not all the reports from Epaphras are bad. The Christians in Colossae believe in Jesus, and their relationships with each other are characterized by love. And what's the root cause of this faith and love? Paul continues:

Three [5]"the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel [6]that has come to you."

Paul is famous for his trinity of faith, hope, and love, found through his different letters. Often love plays the primary role, as it will in chapter 3. But here faith and love are grounded in hope. It's because the Colossians have hope that they are able to live in faith and love. And what is this hope?

Hope can be a subjective thing – an attitude we have, or an objective thing – the thing itself that gives us hope. "I have hope that it will be sunny today" is subjective hope. "The sun peaking through the clouds is my hope today" is objective hope.

Paul says the church's hope is "stored up for you in heaven," which indicates this is an objective hope. And that hope is nothing more or less than the salvation that has been given to them in Christ Jesus. This is a forward-looking, anticipatory hope. One day, the gospel says, you will know and experience the fullness of your salvation, both as an individual experiencing a fully restored relationship with God, but also as the world is made right and whole again.

Four But this hope isn't *just* a future thing. This is the kind of hope that can be experienced even now, the kind of hope that bears fruit in the present even as we await its fullest reality. It's like an apple tree, which may not reach peak production until fifteen years after its planted, but will begin bearing fruit after just two or three years, becoming more and more its fullest self every year.

The gospel – the hope of salvation – bears fruit in the present, even as the church awaits the culmination of the new creation. And what is that fruit? Faith and love.

This brought to mind for me one of my favourite psalms and one of my favourite artistic depictions of this psalm. **Five** John August Swanson painted this incredible image of Psalm 85. This is a picture of fruitfulness, of flourishing. Birds nest in trees, the harvest is collected in full, men and women and children laugh and play together, chickens cluck contentedly. And if you can see, written between the roots of the tree and the rows in the field and the rays of the sun, are some of the words of Psalm 85:

"Love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps."

This is a picture of shalom, of everything dwelling with each other in right relationships, defined by love, held steady by faithfulness, guided by righteousness. This is the fruit that is born of the gospel, born out of the hope that God alone is the giver of all good gifts, that salvation is only found in him. Resting in that truth, we move forward in faith, our interactions with one another marked by love.

So. Paul gives thanks for this fruitfulness.

And then he pivots, moving from thanksgiving to prayer.

Six 9" For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you." This is interesting to me. Often we pray for people because something's not going well in their life – they're sick, they've fallen away from the faith, they've experienced loss.

But here Paul is praying for the Colossians because they're responding to the gospel! Just because people have accepted the gospel doesn't mean Paul can rest on his laurels. He urgently desires that they

continue on in the faith, that they continue to believe the gospel, that they continue to bear fruit. The people of Colossae have received a gift – and now Paul prays that they would live into the reality of that gift.

Seven "We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives."

Here we see a glimmer, a foreshadowing, of what Paul will get into in greater depths later. If the itinerant preachers are bringing a message of some greater enlightenment that can be achieved through human behaviours and practices, Paul counters that by reminding the people that only the Spirit can give us insight into the ways and will of God, can help us receive in our hearts the truth of our salvation.

And that knowledge isn't just some head knowledge, something we need to do well on a test in Bible class. This is a knowledge that transforms.

Eight 10"so that," writes Paul, "you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way:"

What does this life look like? **Nine**

> "bearing fruit in every good work,"
>
> "growing in the knowledge of God,"
>
> 1"1being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,"
>
> 12"and giving joyful thanks to the Father,"

A life shaped by knowledge of God will be marked by fruitfulness, increased knowledge of God, which isn't just head knowledge, but a deeper relationship with God, a reliance on God's power to withstand temptation and hardship, and thanksgiving. And what are we to be thankful for?

Ten 12 and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to
share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. 13 For
he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into
the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the
forgiveness of sins."

Paul brings us right back to the beginning. We give thanks because of the truth of the gospel. Because we have been rescued from the dominion of darkness, because we have been made sons and daughters of the King through the death and resurrection of the Prince of Peace, because we are forgiven, and stand before God clothed in Christ's righteousness, not the rags of all our sins and missteps.

And so we come full circle. Paul urges us to give thanks for our salvation. Giving thanks for our salvation leads us to contemplate our salvation, to be reminded of the truth of the gospel. This gives us hope, which bears in us the fruit of faithfulness and love. In faithfulness and love we go into every nook and cranny of creation, living as changed people, preaching the gospel and joining the Spirit at work in bringing shalom and restoration to a weary world.

And so the gospel bears more fruit, as people come to know the hope it proclaims, moved by the Spirit to grow in knowledge of God, and so moved to live a life of fruitfulness, trust, and thanksgiving. And the whole circle starts again.

You know, all week as I've been thinking about this text and this idea of fruitfulness and thanksgiving, I've been singing the Johnny Appleseed blessing in my head. If you know it, join on in:

Eleven Ohhhh the Lord is good to me
and so I thank the Lord
for giving me the things I need,

the sun and the rain and the appleseed,
the Lord is good to me!
Praise the Lord *clap clap*
Amen.

I just discovered this week that the song has a second verse:

Twelve And every seed I sow,
will grow into a tree,
and someday there'll be apples there,
for everyone in the world to share,
the Lord is good to me!
Praise the Lord *clap clap*
Amen!

If ever there was a picture of the circle of thanksgiving and fruitfulness, it's here in this song. God gives the apple tree what it needs to grow. The apple tree, in turn, produces fruit with seeds which spread and fall to the earth, where they, blessed by God's provision, grow into apple trees themselves.

Thirteen Thanksgiving leads to fruitfulness which leads to thanksgiving which leads to fruitfulness.

So today we give thanks. And tomorrow, and the day after, and every day. Thanks for the gift of God's son, thanks for our salvation, thanks for God's faithfulness to us, thanks for every blessing we have received. May our thanks lead us to live lives worthy of the Lord, that we might bear fruit, that the world might know God's shalom.

Would you pray with me?

And so, Lord God, we give you thanks.
Thank you for the hope of our salvation,
thank you for rescuing us from the powers of darkness

and for bringing us into your kingdom of light
and beauty and goodness and shalom.
May our gratitude lead us into holiness,
to live lives of fruitfulness,
proclaiming the truth of the gospel to a world desperately in need of hope.
May we never stop offering you our thanks and praise.
We pray this in the name of Christ, our King,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.