

Transcript of Sermon By
Dr. Joel Snider
First Baptist Church
Rome, Georgia
January 3, 2010

The Fullness of Christ

Colossians 1:15-29

Meditation Text:

If, as in children's stories, you were promised the fulfillment of one wish, just one, the most intense, most ardent, the one on which your life and death depended. Do you know what you would say? Or have you lost the memory of paradise, its desires forgotten, buried in the daily routine, mediocre and inexorable?

— from *I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body* by Rubem Alves

It is hard for me to believe that we are at the beginning of 2010. In looking back over my preaching in the year 2003 which is seven years ago, I preached on 50 passages of scripture that everyone would want to know. I find it hard to believe that has been seven years ago. Some of you marked your Bibles and tried to keep up with that. I have come to a commitment for this year that there are more than 50 passages that everybody wants to know or should know. I am trying to go back to those great texts, those passages of scripture with which we would all want to be familiar and that stand out in the faith and influence what we believe and guide who we are as believers.

The text for today talks about the supremacy of Christ and Christ being above all and over all. This is a great text with which to begin the New Year.

If you worship with us regularly, something that I come back to many, many times in the course of a year is an observation about the spiritual lives of people in society. It always surprises me when some poll is taken and the news commentator says this as if this is a brand new idea that no one had ever thought of before. The tendency in our culture is for people to describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. I can't tell you how many times I hear it and how many times when it is said that people are shocked that folks would describe themselves that way.

When people describe themselves as spiritual but not religious, it usually means that they believe in God, but church is entirely optional. If they believe in church, it might as easily be a

hike in the woods as a seat in the pew. People want to say that their church is here, there, wherever it is that they might want to go. They experience God in nature. We believe in Jesus but we want him on our own terms. We want to have the parts of Jesus that really appeal to us but those that we don't like, we just might leave that part out.

This whole concept of being spiritual without being religious is an absolutely perfect faith for people who don't want to have any commitment in their lives. This is the perfect faith for people who don't want to have any commitment.

All the world's great faiths have always asked something of the people who believe it. The great faiths always ask and demand something of a person's life. What does the concept of being spiritual but not religious ask of you? What does it require?

All the world's great faiths always have some path that believers are on. They are on a path toward something that is higher or better or nobler. They are on a path that leads them from some place where they started which is less than where they hope to go to.

If you are spiritual but not religious, what is your path? Where are you headed? What does the path require of you?

All the world's great faiths, at some point, assume that there is something about faith and something about life that will coincide at some place that will ask a person to sacrifice.

If you are spiritual without being religious, that is the beauty of it. It never asks you to sacrifice anything. If it does, come talk to me about it. I would like to hear it. It is the perfect faith for an age in which people don't want to be committed to anything. I have found that when people talk about being spiritual without being religious that it usually doesn't mean anything. It is very difficult to define what a person means by being spiritual. But I will say this: In my study, I have come across a Roman Catholic theologian that has actually given me the best handle on how you would describe a spiritual life without any trappings of religion in any way.

Ronald Rolheiser says that a spiritual life is what you do with the fire in your soul. Just in case you think I am going to preach a little bit of Rolheiser today, I will tell you this, he gives three examples on how you might handle this and they are: Mother Teresa, Janis Joplin, and Princess Diana. This is where we are going to part ways.

Does anybody doubt that there is a fire in the soul? If you are attending church at First Baptist today, either somebody really twisted your arm or you are here today because there is a hunger that growls in the spirit. There is a thirst that feels parched in the soul. There is a fire that demands more than we can see, more than we can touch, more than we can hear. There are so many different ways that we ask, "Is there more to life than what we have seen and what we put our hands on?" That is where that fire is burning. The spiritual life is the life that is determined by what we do with the fire in our souls.

Here we are at the New Year. If you have a fire in your soul somewhere or a hunger that is not satisfied by anything else, what do you do with the fire? Some people do ignore it. I don't

know if they cannot figure out what it is or if they are afraid of it, but they just ignore it. It seems to me that it all but goes out.

Other people just look at it selfishly. The spiritual life is something that only seems to be for their benefit and for what makes them feel good. The spiritual life is all about comfort and assurance. Nothing is ever asked of them, so the fire is hoarded. We try to burn it as bright as we can, but it is just strictly for our own personal warmth and light.

Then there are those people who light a fire as brightly as they can and use it so that the light can be like a torch. It is held up for other people to see in the dark. It can be like a fire that burns so hot that you cannot see the flame but it will forge steel. It is a tool to be used in the service of the things in the world that God cares about.

What do you do with the fire? If you have the fire and acknowledge the fire, what do you use to feed it? What do you use to help this fire burn more brightly?

We live in a world where few people have to build a fire. We all have the starter logs that we put in the fireplace. Better yet, we have a gas switch that we can turn on that will make anything burn. Few of us ever have to go out and really light a fire. But we all know that if we are desperate to build a fire, there are some things that just won't burn. We can put some things on a fire and they just smolder and smoke and do nothing. There are other things that we can put on a fire that flare up and then they are gone. If we really want a fire in our souls that burns brightly and satisfies and is useful, then how do we feed the fire?

This passage from Colossians 1 has Paul dealing with much the same question. Almost 2,000 years ago, there was a Church of Colossians and they were dealing with some kind of controversy. We can read between the lines when we read the book. The controversy, in part, was that Jesus was one answer among many. Jesus was one of many possible solutions about how to feed the fire. When Paul starts writing to the Colossians, he is trying to say that Jesus is not one among many and Jesus is not simply a choice. He starts off with all of these superlatives. "He is the image of the invisible God, he is the firstborn of all creation. For in him, all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible." He just goes on and on and he is trying to say the best he can say. Finally, in an effort to say it all, he said, "The fullness of God was in Christ." What would that be? What would that include? What would be the fullness of God in Christ?

If we are sitting around and trying to sound real theological, we can say that God knows everything. Then somehow the knowledge and the wisdom of God are fully in Christ. This makes perfect sense to me. We read the Gospels, and the Pharisees, Sadducees, and all these other people are always trying to trick Jesus. Have you ever noticed how brilliant Jesus is in his answers? Nobody ever gets the upper hand on him. When somebody asks a question, he tells a parable that is an incredible illustration. We can hear it and see it in earthly terms and understand what Jesus is trying to say about God. The wisdom and knowledge of God dwells fully in Jesus. We think God is holy, that Jesus is sinless, and of course God is love. Do you ever see Jesus retaliate? Do you ever see Jesus being vindictive? Do you ever see Jesus doing harm to any person? The fullness of God dwells in Christ.

If we can read this passage without getting lost, what Paul comes to is this: Christ wants to give it to us so that the hope of glory and the fullness of God will dwell in each one of us. Will that keep your fire burning? Will that satisfy that burning that sometimes we are not quite sure how to define? This is what Jesus wants to give to all of us—the fullness of God.

If you are not going to use this, where are you going to go to feed the fire? What are you going to do?

I read a quotation last week by a man who, a few years ago, was the head of the American Psychological Association. In the 1990's, he said, "We are finally going to have self-help books that work." They have been publishing those books for decades. Are we just now going to have them that work? They can be very helpful but they are not going to satisfy us.

We can take the cafeteria approach where we just pick and choose what we want from the spiritual realm, but that is like letting a child go down a cafeteria line and only take dessert. We would never get the balanced diet that we are supposed to have. We can hope that, just by accident, something is going to come into our lives to keep that fire alive.

In this New Year, many people come the first Sunday because of some kind of commitment, some draw, because they want to start the New Year off right in their spiritual relationship with God. I am not going to say that you have to be a member of a particular church or that you have to be Baptist but what I will tell you is that if you just have the sense that, *I think I will just be spiritual this year*, where and how do you feed the fire?

The Christian faith and all that comes with it which I think includes being a part of a church family and a congregation, the Christian faith which includes the whole scripture and not just the parts that we would like to read, the Christian faith that includes obedience to Christ and trying to fulfill the demands that God places on our lives, all of this is to bring us to the place that God can give us his fullness in Christ to our hearts. That will feed a fire that burns within our souls and it will burn in a way that we cannot imagine before. We can leave it up to a do-it-yourself spiritual experience or we can take it all. We can experience the fullness of God in Christ and have a life that burns brightly, not for any given year, but for eternity.

The fullness of Christ is a gift that God would like to give to you? Will you take it?

Copyright 2010. P. Joel Snider. All rights reserved.