

# Above All

Ephesians 1:15-23

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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November 22, 2020/Reign of Christ (Memorial Sunday)

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Today is the last Sunday before the season of Advent begins and with it a new Christian year.

Some churches call this “Memorial Sunday.” Others refer to it as “Eternity Sunday.” Still others refer to this Sunday as “Reign of Christ” or “Christ the King” Sunday.

Whatever term we use, this Sunday functions as kind of hinge week between the liturgical seasons of Ordinary Time and Advent, a Sunday when we pause to reflect on the nature of Christ's kingship before going back to the beginning with the season of Advent and then anticipation of the Christ child.

It is also a Sunday that our church has traditionally devoted to remembering those among us who have died in the past year as well as to more generally focus on people we have loved and lost.

Carol Penner, professor at Conrad Grebel College and crafter of many prayers used in Anabaptist churches, offers this description of this date on the Christian calendar:

Eternity Sunday turns our attention to the reality of death in our community, and it points us to the hope that we have in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever else we might want to say of 2020, it has certainly turned our attention to the reality of death.

Every week since March, our news outlets have solemnly displayed the grim, ever-updating statistics in our region, our province, our country, and our world. We have grown more familiar than we would ever have liked to be with words like “new cases” and “severe outcomes” and “comorbidities” and “recovery rates.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://lendrumchurch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Eternity-Sunday-Hopeful-People.pdf>

And, of course, “deaths.”

As of this morning, 471 Albertans, 11 406 Canadians, and 1.34 million around the world have died as a result of this pandemic.

I realize there is controversy about what counts as a “COVID death” and how these things are measured, and I realize that the restrictions (or lack of restrictions, depending on your point of view), that trying to avoid these deaths has brought to our lives continues to divide people deeply.

But one thing that cannot be disputed is that death has been dominating our media and thus our collective attention this year in a way that few of us can remember.

I text regularly with my brother who is the academic dean at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford (where Claire and Nick are right now). We often talk about, among other things, COVID rates in our various regions and how they are affecting schools and churches.

This week, there was an outbreak at an Abbotsford assisted living home which authorities say is the largest for a long-term care facility in Canada since the beginning of the pandemic.

At least 63 residents and 40 staff in total have been infected. There have been two deaths. This is, of course, desperately sad.

But what caught my attention was when my brother said that there had been a request from this home for some of CBC’s Health Care Aide (HCA) students to help out temporarily while they are struggling desperately with staffing.

As you may know, Claire and Nick are in the HCA program. All of a sudden it wasn’t just a sobering news story from a thousand kilometers away. It was personal! Do I want my kids in a home with a COVID outbreak?!

We have a family group chat where we put the question to the kids: Would you go work in this home if you were asked?

Claire responded, “Well, we’re all gonna die.” She was joking. I hope.

Statistically, the likelihood of a severe outcome for two healthy nineteen-year olds is vanishingly low. And of course, all the proper protocols and protective gear would be in place.

But still, it makes you think. It made *me* think, at any rate.

2020 is indeed a year where sickness and death are ever before us, whether it's in the media that we consume, or the lives of people directly affected by COVID-19.

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And yet, as Christians, our lives are not to be governed by the fear of death.

God is love; we say. There is no fear in love, we say.

Death is a defeated enemy, we say.

Christ has been raised from the dead as the first fruits of all who have died, we say.

"Death cannot separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord," we say.

Do we believe what we say?

Maybe "Christ the King/Eternity Sunday" has arrived just in time.

All of us need reminders from time to time of the hope to which we are called. And perhaps this day where remember our dead on the same Sunday when we acknowledge the kingship and the reign of Christ is just what we need.

Our text this morning is a prayer of Paul's for the church in Ephesus. After giving thanks for their faith and the love that they show toward one another, he prays that they would have a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that their hearts would be enlightened.

Why?

So that they might know the hope to which Christ has called them. And that they might have a glimpse of the power of God.

What is this hope?

Nothing less than participation in the kingdom of God in the new heavens and the new earth. Nothing less than being with Christ, the object of our hope and our longing. “The riches of his glorious inheritance,” as Paul puts it (Eph. 1:18).

And what is this power? What is the decisive demonstration of the power of God?

For Paul, the power and purpose of God is seen in the central event of all of salvation history: Raising Christ from the dead.

The scope and majesty of creation is impressive, to be sure, and it demonstrates the power of God in marvelous ways. But it is the defeat of death that Paul and the early church consistently pointed to as God’s most awe-inspiring display of power.

Without Christ’s defeat of death, Paul says, our faith is futile and we still in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17).

Those are strong words. Paul knew that without the defeat of death, Jesus was just another idealistic teacher who met an early end. And we are without hope.

Do we still believe this?

It’s not very fashionable to talk about Jesus as the victor over death anymore. At least it doesn’t seem to be in more “progressive” Christian circles.

We’re fine with talking about Jesus’ social ethic, with his words about love and peace and forgiveness. We like the idea of Jesus cracking the whip in the temple and putting all those greedy religious merchants in their place. We’re quite fond of the Jesus who came to proclaim good news to the poor and to challenge a corrupt and brutal empire.

We are happy to jump on board the Jesus train so long as we stay on the track of mostly this-worldly concerns, as long as Jesus basically conforms to and validates our image of a good twenty-first century postmodern citizen with their collection of social concerns.

But sometimes we’re a little embarrassed about the other Jesus. The Jesus who performs miracles and casts out demons and raises up little dead girls and summons people from the tomb and talks about his father’s house with many rooms.

These are mostly metaphors, aren't they? All this supernatural business, all this talk of "heaven," all these stories about "resurrection"—this is all mostly just a bit of poetry, right?

Nobody takes all that stuff literally anymore, surely.

We know that Jesus' concerns were mostly political and social in nature. All that supernatural language is mostly poetic window-dressing around the call to be better people and make the world a better place. Right?

Wrong.

For starters, we've proven, by now, that we're not actually so good at becoming better people and making the world a better place on our own.

2020 has been a year where some of the worst human tendencies have been laid bare for all to see. Ugly confrontational politics. Racial injustice. Self-righteous virtue signalling of all kinds. Disregard for the planet and for our neighbours. Ways of living in the world motivated by fear and anger and suspicion of others.

These tendencies have always been a part of the human condition, but they have certainly been visible in unique ways during this highly unusual year.

(I hasten to add that Jesus has without doubt improved this world! We likely can barely imagine what our world would look like today were it not for the reality of Christ's teaching and the influence of the church over the past two thousand years!)

Viewing Jesus solely as an inspirational resource for the ongoing project of fixing the world ourselves has never been an adequate understanding of who he is or what he was about.

But this year has done more than just reveal our insufficiency to usher in the kingdom of God. It has, again, forced us to confront our oldest enemy, death.

Perhaps this pandemic has reminded us of just how fragile life really is.

It has reminded us that while the way of Jesus certainly *is* good news for this life, and while the teachings of Jesus, if broadly followed, would lead to a more just and peaceful world, at the end of it all we need a victor, a Saviour.

We need a strong and sure hope. We need to be reassured that God has set eternity in our hearts for a reason.

And this is what Christians have proclaimed for the last two millennia. That Christ has put all things—even death—under his feet. That there is hope for newness and wholeness, for justice and peace. That we can be with Christ in eternity.

And that Christ is, indeed, the King over all creation. The word “all” shows up five times in the last three verses of this passage:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, **far above all** rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put **all things under his feet** and has made him the head over **all things for the church**, which is his body, the fullness of him who **fills all in all** (Eph 1:21-23).

All, all, all.

To quote the twentieth century Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!’

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In a few minutes we are going to light a candle in honour of those we have loved and lost.

There is sadness attached to each one of the names we will speak aloud, I know. But I hope that there is also great joy and hope as well.

We don’t light these candles purely as tokens of memory or grief but as declarations of the hope to which we have been called.

For those who died in Christ, we have confidence that they are with him.

For those who died and had little interest in Christ, we know that it is a dangerous thing for us to place limits on the mercy of God.

I don't say this to in any way trivialize the importance of the decisions that we make on earth. But it is God alone who judges. It is God alone is truly just and merciful. We must never forget this.

We are servants of the who is Lord who truly is above all. The risen Christ extends his wounded hands over all things. There is nothing that can befall us or our world that takes place outside of the scope his reign. He is indeed the one who fills all in all.

We stand at the hinge of a door swinging open into a new year. Next week, Advent begins, and we once again rehearse our anticipation of the coming of the Christ child—perhaps this year, more than ever!

We don't know what the future holds. We don't know if we will be allowed to physically gather together, even in limited forms, in the days and weeks ahead. We don't know what Christmas will look like this year. We don't know if 2021 will bring with it better days than 2020. There is so much that we don't know.

But we do know that Christ does indeed reign over all. That Christ does, indeed, stand over our world, over the church, and over our lives, and say with love, "Mine!"

This is good news.

May our living and loving, our mourning and remembering, and ultimately our dying bear witness to this hope.

Amen.

