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Pentecost 2

Colossians 2:13-17

CHRIST HAS ELIMINATED YOUR DEATH WARRANT

On special festivals we oftentimes opt to conduct a processional during the singing of the opening hymn led by the processional cross. The congregation turns to face the back where the cross awaits. As the cross processes down the center aisle to the front the congregation turns with it. It is a visual way to celebrate the reality that the victorious Christ is coming to us in that worship service through Word and Sacrament. It's like we're welcoming Him.

If we wish it, today's reading from Colossians 2 lends itself to give that little tradition even deeper symbolism. Briefly stated, using the processional cross can remind us why Christ descended into hell. You heard me right. In the Apostles Creed we declare that we believe Christ

descended into hell. Colossians 2 contains one of the passages that explain why.

In Bible times if one city conquered another city in battle they would celebrate with a military victory parade -a processional. In particular, they would parade captives of war through their home city - maybe in cages, maybe with a hook in their nose, maybe with chains around their hands and feet -while the citizens cheered on their victorious king. This not only demonstrated their bragging rights, but it was deeply humiliating to the conquered -a devastating sign of utter defeat. That is the picture being described in this passage from Colossians 2: *And having disarmed the powers and authorities* (that would be the powers and authorities of hell), [Christ] *made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.* After He rose from the dead Jesus descended into hell to conduct a victory parade so it speak. He did it to demonstrate that He has completely stripped satan and his demons of all their powers.

But we have to ask, how did Christ strip them of all their powers? After all, it seems satan and his demons can still wreak plenty of havoc in our lives. Colossians

2 reveals that Christ has stripped them of their powers by stripping them of your death warrant.

Imagine some government officials knocked on your front door to take you into custody. They did not come with a search warrant. It is not your house they are interested in. They came with your death warrant -an official document stating all the laws you are guilty of breaking and why you are deserving of the death penalty.

This is the picture described in Colossians 2. Satan and the powers of hell had a death warrant for us. The document they held in their hands was God's own Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are our death warrant. They spell out every law of God we have broken. The Ten Commandments give satan and his demons ammunition to accuse us before God. The worst part is that satan is correct. He can accuse us of sin and he'd be right. Any sin. He has the Ten Commandments to back him. That's our death warrant. By God's decree anyone guilty of any sin is dead. Not only does sin kill our relationship with God right now, but it condemns us to the never-ending prison of hell where God's love, joy, mercy, kindness and grace are

completely blocked out and absent. The Bible calls this the second death.

But Christ has eliminated the death warrant on us. Listen again to Colossians 2: *When you were dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code [that is, the death warrant] with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.*

That's what makes us alive: Christ's forgiveness. Think of it. Every time the minister announces you forgiven at the beginning of the service, you are made alive in Christ. Christ took the death warrant and nailed it to the cross. Christ was nailed to the cross. The death warrant was on Him. He died the death decreed by God that we deserved. The warrant was fulfilled. Jesus fulfilled it by dying in our place. In so doing, He eliminated, wiped out, erased the death warrant on us. That's how the original Greek expresses it.

By eliminating the death warrant on us, Jesus has stripped Satan of His power to accuse us before God anymore. Satan has no more influence or basis of

argument as to why we should belong in hell with him. He is utterly defeated.

But of course, satan is not going to sit back and say, “Oh, too bad. I guess I lost!” He immediately went to work to create another death warrant -one not based on the Ten Commandments.

At the time Paul wrote this letter to the believers in Colosse some people wanted to add extra requirements to the Ten Commandments. Before Jesus came God had given the Old Testament Jewish people extensive religious rules with the purpose of keeping them focused on the coming of the promised Messiah. Now that Jesus had come, the Jewish people no longer needed those rules to remind them about Jesus. That’s why Paul wrote, *These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.* Even though the religious rules were no longer necessary, some people still wanted to make all believers morally obligated to follow them. If you want to be a “true” believer who is really saved, you must be circumcised or observe the Sabbath or avoid eating pork. They wanted to burden people’s consciences before God with these rules.

Maybe the Old Testament Jewish religious rules don't plague us so much. But notice how readily people still create a set of rules apart from God's Word, apart from the Ten Commandments, and make them to be moral obligations: paper or plastic, big box or local, organic or non-organic, caged or free range, gas or electric, renewable or disposable, real fur or fake fur, environmentally friendly or conventional, omnivorous or vegan, union or non-union, human-caused or naturally occurring climate change -things God has neither commanded nor forbidden. Without realizing it, maybe even without believing in God per se, they want to add these requirements for you to be truly socially responsible, truly a good person. They want to burden people consciences with these rules as if to say a person can't have salvation without them.

You can see satan at work in this. The absurdity is, on our own, we can't begin to keep the Ten Commandments let alone additional socially-prescribed rules. Few, even among us believers, can recite what the Ten Commandments are, much less follow them. If we're not all that clear on Ten Commandments, think how continuously we must be lapsing from what they require! Why would we want to add rules to that?

When we let ourselves feel guilty or conscience bound the manmade rules we are playing right into satan's trap and signing our own death warrant before God.

But Jesus has eliminated the death warrant for us. Granted, God still condemns anyone who adamantly refuses to obey any one of the Commandments. And when we don't keep them, we certainly will suffer the earthly consequences. Granted, satan can still tempt us and can still wreak havoc in our earthly lives. But as we trust in Jesus to forgive us our sins, neither the Ten Commandments nor satan can keep us out of heaven or can withhold us from a totally good relationship with God. Trusting Jesus we are released from the Commandments, released from the guilt, released from satan's claim on us, released from being condemned to death before the bench of God's courtroom, released even from any hesitation of God to love us. By His forgiveness we are alive to God. Even physical death for us means life for us believers.

If Jesus has saved us from the death warrant that the Ten Commandments held over us, then He has most definitely released us from any manmade rules as well! That's why Paul wrote to the believers in Colosse about the Jewish religious rules: *Therefore do not let anyone*

judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. We could add, “Let no one judge you regarding paper or plastic, big box or local, etc.”

Dear believers, do not live out your life thinking you have to do this and this and this and follow such and such a set of rules to be a good person or to be OK with God. If you do, you are still in satan’s death grip. Christ descended into hell as a victory lap to demonstrate that he has crushed satan and has released you. Instead, as someone who has been rescued and redeemed and given a new lease on life by your King, live a life of glad service to your King by obeying the very Commandments He has set you free from -without any fear that you won’t measure up or make the grade. That’s what He set you free to do.

