

The Image
Colossians 1:15-20
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First Central Congregational Church
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Note: Part of our *Inspire* series in collaboration with the Joslyn Art Museum.
This sermon inspired by [Illustration for Fisk Cord Tires](#) by N. C. Wyeth.

One of the more interesting paintings at the Joslyn Art Museum is this illustration by N. C. Wyeth which hangs in the galleries of American and Western Art. A group of Native Americans on horses in shadow as an early automobile, in sunlight and vibrant color speeds past kicking up dust. The title of the piece in the museum is “Illustration for Fisk Cord Tires.” So, this is not simply a painting, it is an illustration used as an advertisement for a tire company.

I have always marveled over this image and its many layers of meaning. For one, it is well executed. There seem to be two different styles. The Natives in a more realistic style traditional in Western art. Yet the car and the mountains behind it are impressionistic. One side is light and bright, the other side is dark and detailed.

Then there is how we interpret the image. The picture conveys some of the excitement and adventure of the Old West while also displaying that modernity and its technology are leaving the past in the dust. There is humor in the image, and the published descriptions of it point this out. But there is also a darkside to it—the erasure of Native American culture.

The Joslyn sent us a copy of the original Fisk Cord Tires ad that included the painting. The text of the ad reads,

For the long trip the right tire selection is not an incidental matter.

It is essential that the car be as amply cushioned as possible against road shocks, in order to save the occupants from fatigue, to safeguard the delicate mechanism of the chassis, to minimize gasoline consumption and to avoid delay.

For touring or daily traveling the Fisk Cord offers all that can be built into a tire of comfort, convenience, mileage, economy and safety. Its substantial, clean-cut beauty is the final word in tire attractiveness, in keeping with the most finished appointments of any automobile.

So, contrasted from the dust, dirt, discomfort, and danger of the trails of the Old West, the occupants of the car can ride in comfort, safety, and convenience.

But what I found most interesting in the original advertisement was the title of the painting, “Fisk Cord Tires Civilize Savage Trails.” Rather clear why that is not the title the painting goes by these days.

Here we have a rich, complex image with layers of meaning. We live in an image-rich culture. In fact, you might even say we live in a culture where we are daily assaulted by an overwhelming number of images, many of them advertising images.

Bible scholars Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat describe this culture as follows: It isn't difficult to see how the powerful myths of our own culture are evident in the images that surround us in daily life. Corporate logos and corporate advertising not only shape the public space in our culture but also permeate our private lives. The grocery store, the mall, billboards, buses, television, computers, even our clothing, towels and toothbrushes: all may be marked by corporate logos. . . . These images all tell a story of consumer affluence, Western superiority and the ineluctable march of economic progress.

Now, Christianity has had a long, rich, and complicated history with images. There have been iconophiles who believe that we can experience God in images. This is particularly the case in Eastern Orthodoxy where the veneration of icons is an important part of spiritual practice.

On the other hand, there have been iconoclasts who believe such veneration is a form of idolatry. The milder forms have simply rejected most images. Our own version of Protestantism was in this tradition. Look about our sanctuary, there are very few images. Even our stained glass windows are non-representational.

Stronger forms of iconoclasm reject any religious images. For example, many forms of Islam only allow images of words or vegetation and reject that there can be any images of people or God.

Iconoclasm at its worst believed any images becomes an idol and has participated in the destruction of images. During the Protestant Reformation, particularly in Great Britain, churches were ransacked and religious art was destroyed by the people.

The power of religious images has been important in recent years. There have been global crises sparked by publications of images of the Prophet Muhammed. And terrorist incidents in response.

The role of images is a significant religious issue. In fact, what we believe about images and their role in religious practice continues to divide the various major Christian groups and the myriad global faith communities.

In 2010, right before Michael and I moved from Oklahoma City to here, the local Vedic Priestess, who had gone to college with Michael and knew me from our interfaith work, invited the two of us over to the Vedic temple for a blessing upon our departure. She showed us the statues of the Hindu deities and made offerings to them upon our behalf. It was a lovely ritual, and I felt blessed. While also aware of my Protestant nervousness. A reminder of abiding worries about the role of images.

The Image appears in the Bible as a significant theological idea in two places. First is at the creation of the world as narrated in the Book of Genesis. Humans are created in the image of God. In some way—through our rationality, our creativity, our compassion—we are like God.

The other key biblical idea is here in the Letter to the Colossians where Jesus, as the Christ, is proclaimed to be the fullness of the image of God. Jesus is the one who most completely embodied God in human form. So if we want to know what God is like, we look to Jesus.

In writing Colossians St. Paul is offering us an “alternative imagination.” Much like us the ancient readers of this letter would have been surrounded by images. Images of empire, which were intended to teach the people that peace and prosperity were provided by the Roman emperors. But this poem subverts that in a way that Walsh and Keesmaat conclude was “nothing less than treasonous.” The goal of this poem was to provide “alternative images for a subversive imagination.” We are invited to imagine the world with Christ as sovereign and that is a different and better world.

Christian theology, then, presents Christ as “the image.” Theologian Natalie Carnes writes that the power of Christ as image is that this image is inexhaustible. Christ then is the opposite of what idols and advertising images do. Idols and advertising images arrest our desires by trying to satisfy them. “They divert [desire], siphoning it off from its path toward the divine. Such images promise a satiation they cannot deliver,” she writes.

And in so doing, they actually fail to transform us. Instead, they malform us. They “[undo] us into greediness and unhappiness.”

N. C. Wyeth seems to have been aware of this. He became rich making advertising illustrations but worried that these weren’t real paintings—that they lacked depth.

I don’t feel that way about this particular painting, which I marvel at every time I visit the Joslyn. This painting contains multitudes of meanings. Plus, it inspires us into a reflection on the very meaning and power of images for us as people of faith and followers of Jesus.

We need to desire an image that brings us into fullness. And that is Jesus, the Christ, who points us to who we actually are, embodiments of the image of God.

So let me close with a contemporary poem that expands upon this poem of the Cosmic Christ from the Letter to the Colossians. It is written by Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat. [Read page 85 and following]