

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. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Colossians 1:13-20

Jesus is the Greatest!

Who do you think is the most admired man in America? According to a recent Gallup poll, it's Barack Obama. George Bush comes in second, although it's a distant second. Who do you think is the most admired woman in America? According to this same survey, it's a virtual tie between Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. Why are those four individuals admired? And if you changed the question slightly – if you asked, who is the greatest living American, what response do you think you would get? Well, it would depend on what makes a person great, wouldn't it? If you think that power and politics makes you great, you might pick one of those four people. But if you have a different standard, like creativity or heroism or personal sacrifice, you might give a different answer.

One thing that I can say for sure, though, whatever answer you gave, someone would argue with it. But if we turn to spiritual affairs and ask who is the greatest person who ever lived, wouldn't you think the answer would be obvious? It's Jesus, right? Sadly, even there, you will get an argument – and sometimes even among people who claim to be Christian. St. Paul wrote the book of Colossians – the book we have before us this morning – to a Christian congregation that was being confused by false teachers. The heart of their false doctrine was downplaying faith in Jesus and focusing on things we do and things we can discover to get us to heaven. Rather than answer each false teaching point by point, St. Paul simply wrote and told them that **Jesus is the greatest!**

I.

Now what makes him great? Paul puts it very succinctly this morning. He says, **“For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”** Now, Paul is actually talking about the Father with that sentence, but the point is the same. **Jesus is the greatest because he rescued us.**

That's what salvation really means – being rescued. Of course, the whole idea of being rescued implies that you were helpless, like a person trapped in a burning building. They were going to die, but the firemen rescued them. What did Jesus rescue us from? You could use the image of a burning building to make the point, but the Holy Spirit gave St. Paul a different image: we were rescued from darkness. Think about what darkness means to us. We associate darkness with evil, with the power of the devil lurking hidden, waiting to attack us. We associate darkness with fear and being unable to see what dangers are out there. But darkness also carries another set of associations: sadness, even depression. People who have suffered a terrible loss often describe their feelings in terms of being lost in darkness and not having any way out.

All those images work for what Paul is saying. We were all born under the dominion of the devil. We were chained in his kingdom in darkness, in despair with no hope of reaching God, in fear, surrounded by the hidden powers of the devil. Every human being is born a sinner and so every human being is born in that dominion of darkness. Every human being except for Jesus. He alone was born without sin in his heart. So he was born in the light. The truth is Jesus is the Light of the world. He invaded the devil's kingdom and he cut our chains and carried us out of that land of gloom and shadows into the light of his own kingdom.

Jesus set us free. But that does not mean that we can do anything we want. He moved us from one kingdom to another. Now we serve God. Is that really freedom? Well, think back to the time when the Berlin Wall was still standing. West Berlin, which was under the control of the West, was completely surrounded by East Germany, which was under the control of the communists. The communist government built the Berlin

Wall because their people kept running away to West Berlin to be free. For decades, people risked their lives, trying to cross that wall. They climbed over it and tunneled under it and even launched balloons to fly over it. Many died trying to get to the West. Those who did rejoiced because they were free. But did that mean there was no government to rule over them? Of course not! The West German government still made laws and they had to obey those laws or go to jail. But they were free from their former government which treated them like slaves. They believed their new government cared about them and their welfare.

Of course, you would find people in East Germany today who would say that the worst thing that every happened was the fall of communism and the end of the Berlin Wall. Many people there are disillusioned with the freedom they wanted for so long. But with God, it's different. We were all born slaves of the devil. We were all doomed to spend eternity in prison with him in hell, but Jesus rescued us. He brought us into his kingdom where he does rule over us. His rule is absolute, but he is no tyrant. He gave his life to save us. He loves us more than he loves himself. All that he does for us and even all that he commands of us are blessings. We are truly free from darkness. Now we serve the Lord of Light.

Paul says that in him, we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. That's how we got out of the darkness. Every human being is born a sinner. If you doubt that, you only have to consider how easy it is to be cruel and selfish and how hard it is to love and serve others. That difficulty demonstrates the reality of our sin. But the depth of our sin is something that we could never accept if God didn't tell us. Our sin is so great that it ruined every part of us. There was no good left in us at all. Sin didn't just damage us. It didn't just weaken us. It destroyed us. It left us dead spiritually. The sin in our own hearts put us in the darkness. It was our own fault. But Jesus rescued us by paying for that sin. His blood shed on the cross was the payment God demanded to free us from that darkness. Jesus paid it for you and me and all people everywhere.

In fact, Paul says that God was pleased **“to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”** Sin made us God's enemy. When we served the devil, we waged war against God. We may not have realized it at the time. Many of us were so young when God rescued through baptism that we don't even remember the time when we lived in that darkness. But we were born at war with God. The blood of Jesus not only paid for us, it caused us to change sides. It ended the warfare between us and God and made us God's friends. It moved us into the light. Now, we have the light of Christ in our hearts and minds to recreate us to serve God.

Does all that still matter today? Many people would say that there are much more important things that we should be talking about in church. President Obama recently told a bunch of school kids that Christmas means that we should try to help each other and get along with other people. That's why Jesus came. Virtually all modern presidents, Republicans included, have made those kinds of statements. The world we live in doesn't much care about Jesus dying to pay for our sins. It wants to make him an example of how we should live. And it believes that's the higher wisdom. People who put aside the narrow focus of their religion so that they can work together with others, even other non-Christians and make this a better place – according to our society those are the people who God will welcome into heaven. Don't believe it for a moment. Christmas was about the birth of Christ, the one who came to set us free from the darkness of sin. He rescued us from hell. That makes him the greatest person who ever lived.

II.

What he did gives him that honor. He has that honor because only he could do what he did. Only Jesus could have rescued us because of who he really is. **Jesus is the greatest because he is God.**

Paul says, **“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”** An image is something that we can see. The Greek word Paul uses here means more than just a representation. The image shows us the real thing. Jesus shows something we can't see. He makes the invisible God visible. God can be seen in Jesus – and only in Jesus – because in Jesus God put all that he is. Jesus was and is a real human being. But he was and is also God because God the Son entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born among us.

Because he is God the Son, he is the firstborn over all creation. He rules all that exists. Paul tells us that Jesus created all things, even the things we can't see. He calls those invisible things, “thrones” and “powers” and “rulers” and “authorities.” Now, what's Paul talking about? The angels. Jesus made the angels. One of the false teachings that never seems to go away is that Jesus is something that God made – a glorified angel, if you will. But Jesus was not created. He is the Creator. Not alone, of course. The Father and the Holy Spirit

worked with him. But Paul says that he was before all things. In other words, before anything existed, Jesus did, because he is the Son of God.

Paul says, **“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”** What keeps this universe together? What makes the rules work? Just before Christmas vacation, the seventh and eighth graders dissected frogs. Each day, my son would come home and give us a report on the progress of this endeavor. One day, I happened to walk into the classroom while Mr. Wilson was showing a couple of the kids how the tendons on one of the frogs made his fingers work. I assume that the point of the entire exercise was not just to gross out the girls in the class. It was to teach the children a little bit about how God’s universe works. God designed the universe with physical laws and scientists spend their whole lives studying those laws trying just to get a glimpse of how it all works. But none of it would work without Jesus. Not only did he design and make it but to this day, he keeps it working. His power holds all things together.

That is who we worship. But you know what? Every religion worships its own idea of the creator. What makes us different or special? What makes our version true? In many religions, the creator is capricious. He pays little attention to the people down here on earth. In modern philosophy, many thinkers hold that God is a watchmaker who built the universe and wound it up, but then he closed it and keeps his fingers out of it. That’s not the picture God gives. Paul says that this Creator who keeps all things running has entered his creation for us.

Paul says, **“And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”** Jesus is the Lord of the Church. We are his body. He does have a physical body which ascended into heaven and at the same time is still present with us always. But God uses the picture of a physical body to describe our relationship with Jesus. He is the head. He gives us life and he controls the body. Why is that true? Because he’s the firstborn from among the dead. He died to rescue us. And he rose. That means that we will rise. Our rescue is not just for this life. It’s not just so that we can make the best of what we have to face here. Our rescue means that this life will end and we will be with him. And when he returns, we will rise and live with him. And he will rule over the earth and remake this planet into a place without sin or unbelief, a place where all things are in harmony with him and with us.

God did all that for us. We live in a society that does not understand what greatness is. We’re so focused on the here and now, so focused on getting along with other people and keeping our faith to ourselves, so focused on success and what the media tells us we should want, that we’ve lost God’s definition of greatness. To God, the greatest thing that anyone ever did was to die and rise to rescue the world. Jesus did that. This truth is the most important thing that you will ever learn: Jesus is the greatest because he is God most high and he rescued you from darkness so that you will live with him in light forever. Amen.