

“Coming to the Rescue”  
Colossians 1:1-14  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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In January of 1982, on a cold and snowy day in Washington, DC, a terrible tragedy took place.

Air Florida Flight 90 crashed shortly after takeoff into the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge and landed in the ice-cold Potomac River. Of the 79 passengers and crew aboard, only 5 survived.

But it probably would not have been that many had it not been for an individual who, at first, was unidentified. This person was commemorated shortly after the tragedy, by the award-winning writer, Roger Rosenblatt, in an essay entitled “The Man in the Water”.

“He was seen clinging with five other survivors to the tail section of the airplane,” writes Rosenblatt.

“Every time [the helicopter] lowered a lifeline...right to him, he passed it on to another of the passengers...When the helicopter came back for him the man had gone under.”

“He was the best we can do.....[if he] gave a lifeline to the people gasping for survival, he has likewise giv[en] a lifeline to those who observed him...hand[ing] life over to a stranger...”

“The man in the water. For its part, nature cared nothing about the five passengers. Our man, on the other hand, cared totally...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Rosenblatt, *The Man In the Water: Essays and Stories*, New York: Random House, 1994.

In due course, this selfless hero was identified—his name was Arland D. Williams, Jr., a graduate of the Citadel, 46 years old at the time of his death.

His bravery was later honored by President Reagan at the White House.

The bridge that the plane hit—it was rebuilt and renamed “The Arland D. Williams Memorial Bridge”.

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What was it that captured the nation’s attention about Mr. Williams?

His willingness to sacrifice his own life so others might live—yes, most definitely that’s it.

But it’s also the nature of the story itself.  
 What was the story that Rosenblatt wrote about?  
 A rescue story.

Have you ever noticed how fundamental rescue stories are?  
 To our understanding of the world?  
 To our understanding of ourselves?  
 To our understanding of God?

In our text for today, Paul writes to the Colossians:

*He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

But it’s not only Paul who talks about rescue in the Bible.

The first story you heard is one of the best-known stories that Jesus ever told. The parable of the Good Samaritan. And what does the Good Samaritan do?

He stops by the wounded man, he cares for the wounded man...  
he rescues him.

And it's not just in the New Testament.

Perhaps you recall the central story of the Jewish faith.  
 The first 15 chapters of Exodus, God calling Moses and God bringing God's people out of slavery, out of Pharaoh's grasp.

What is that story?  
 It's a rescue story!

Do you know the power of a rescue story?

Netflix knows the power of a rescue story. Anyone who is a fan of the series "Stranger Things" can see the formula. Inevitably, the show's main characters—a group of adolescents growing up in the 1980s in small town Indiana, at least in the first 3 seasons—they find themselves face to face with the Upside Down, with the Mind Flayer, with evil, mysterious forces that are going to overtake them.

But one of the kids—a girl named El—has incredible powers.  
 And during the first three seasons, time and time again, she uses those powers to save her friends.

She comes to their rescue.

(By the way, I haven't watched all of Season 4 yet, so please—no spoilers for me after this worship service is over!)

- Now it's easy to see what rescue means in "Stranger Things"—it means the Mind Flayer does not win.
- And it's easy to see what rescue means when Moses parts the Red Sea: it means that Pharaoh doesn't win.

But have you ever asked what rescue means for you and me today?  
**In other words, does God still rescue people?**

Long ago, Paul wrote to the Colossians that God had rescued them from "the powers of darkness..."

If you and I were writing in Paul's place—  
 what would you say we need to be rescued from today?

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Years ago at Kenyon College, the late writer, David Foster Wallace, gave a commencement speech that ended up going viral.

He began his address with a little story, a parable if you will.

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. This older fish nods at the two youngsters, and says:

"Morning, boys. How's the water?"

And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the heck is water?"

Remember that story...

Because David Foster Wallace then goes on to describe a typical day that those soon-to-be graduates might find themselves in.

A day in which they “work hard for eight or ten hours, and at the end of the day you’re tired and somewhat stressed and all you want is to go home and have a good supper and maybe unwind for an hour...

“But then you remember there’s no food at home...so now after work you have to get in your car and drive to the supermarket.”

And you fight through traffic,  
and you get to the grocery store,  
and you really don’t want to be there.

And “the store is hideously lit and infused with soul-killing musak or corporate pop and it’s pretty much the last place you want to be...”

Then “the checkout line is incredibly long, which is stupid and infuriating. But you can’t take your frustration out on the frantic lady working the register, who is overworked at a job whose daily tedium...surpasses the imagination of any of us here at a prestigious college...

“...you finally get to the checkout line’s front, and you pay for your food, and you get told to ‘Have a nice day’ in a voice that is the absolute voice of death...”

David Foster Wallace then asked the graduating class how they’re going to approach that moment.

“Because,” as he points out, “my natural default setting is...that situations like this are really all about me. About MY hunger and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home...”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A transcript of the speech is available at [Microsoft Word - DFWKenyonAddress2005.docx \(purdue.edu\)](#).

What do we need to be rescued from?  
The first thing is...OURSELVES.

It's what David Foster Wallace described in that speech:

The default setting that every situation I find myself in revolves around me. That I am the center of my universe, and if I can just make my world ok, then the world itself will be ok.

In our society today, I think it shows up as a lack of HUMILITY.

We see it in the ways that politicians talk to and about one another.  
We listen to it from talking heads whose ratings go up the more they divide us, one from another.

We hear it on Tick Tock, social media—the shaming, the sharp and biting self-righteousness that permeates our world...there is no humility, no recognition that the problems we face are ambiguous and complex, no admission that my firmly held opinion just might be, in some ways, wrong.

Of course, you and I, as followers of Christ, are called to see the world differently, to live differently.

To live as rescued people.  
What does that mean?

HUMILITY, yes, recognizing that everything that happens in our lives is not about us.

But being rescued also means swimming in life's waters  
with a profound sense of HOPE..

And it is this absence of hope, the temptation to lose hope, to become jaded and make our world very small, filled with entertainment and distractions but no overarching sense that we are called to live for future generations, or even to make the world a better place for the person that we bump into unexpectedly.

It is this absence of hope that we need to be rescued from as well...  
Getting back to the supermarket for a moment.

David Foster Wallace reminded those Kenyon College graduates that “there are...different ways to think about these kind of situations...”

Maybe the lady who just screamed at her child in the checkout line is not usually like this.

“Maybe she’s been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer. Or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness.

“If you’re automatically sure that you know what reality is...then you...probably won’t consider [other] possibilities...”

HOWEVER, he goes on to say, “if you...pay attention,” you will be able to see that even apparently pointless experiences at the supermarket—

“are not only meaningful, but sacred,  
on fire with...love, fellowship...  
the same force that made the stars...  
the mystical oneness of all things deep down.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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He's talking about HOPE.

I think the second thing that we need to be rescued from: the temptation to lose that hope.

Especially at this moment, because of 3 years of pandemic, because of an evil and seemingly endless war in Ukraine, because of more news about mass shootings, because of division in our society that just feels intractable...it can be easy to shrug our shoulders.

To say, "What am I supposed to do?"

It's a natural response.

But according to Paul, it's precisely our nature—our human nature— from which we need to be rescued.

You see, the world that Paul lived in when he wrote to the Colossians was no more stable, or more certain than what you and I face each day. In fact, it was less so.

And yet Paul never gave up hope, the belief, the conviction— **that God is in the rescue business.** That God is continually entering and intervening in our lives to give us gifts that we cannot give ourselves, to shower us with love that we did not earn and cannot control...

As he writes to the Colossians:

"...the gospel...has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God."

Have you and I truly comprehended the grace of God?



Paul didn't believe that grace was distant, being parceled by God here and there. He believed that God's grace surrounds us every day. It's like a sea in which we're swimming, and we're dependent on it every day, given life by it every day, whether we see or recognize it or know it.

Ten years ago, Robert Hall—a Presbyterian elder and a self-described “recovering CEO”—wrote a book called *This Land of Strangers*. It's about the fracturing of relationships in our society today, and the opening story is about his own family.

The year was 1936, the country was deep in the Depression. In a small, dusty town in southeastern Oklahoma, Robert's grandfather was dying of cancer.

“My grandfather owned one of the largest ranches in the county,” Robert writes.

He “was known for his generosity in helping others in need. Years after his death, we found a trunk in the attic of his ranch house filled with IOUs from widows and men without work. My grandfather...had ‘loaned’ them money or [sent] a cow to provide milk for their kids.”

“But by the time he was ravaged with cancer, he had lost just about everything.”

Oklahoma was, at that time, going through the worst drought on record.

After Robert's grandfather died, Robert's father—who was 17 years old and a freshman in college at the time of his father's death—dropped out of school to return to the ranch.

“There were no livestock left, and the family owed substantial taxes on the land. Everyone said, ‘There’s no way those boys [Robert and his brothers] will be able to hold on to the ranch.’”

But Robert’s father and his two brothers tried.  
They went to every bank in town.  
And they went to every bank in the next town.  
And every time the answer was the same: we’d love to help, but we can’t make it work.

Finally, the last banker they went to said, “If you could find someone to cosign the note, I might be able to make a deal work.”

“As a last gasp, they went to a neighbor...by the name of Buzz Newton...[Buzz] was known to have money but also to be a bit miserly.

[Buzz] used a piece of bailing wire for a belt.  
[Buzz] had holes in his old shirts and pants.”  
[Buzz] wore wire-rim glasses,  
with one lens that was cracked.

“Buzz attended church about four times a year. When the offering plate was passed around, he would dig down into his pocket for what seemed like an eternity and then pull out a nickel and put it in the collection plate.

In other words, the prospect of Buzz Newton helping the boys in their predicament was slim to none. But they approached Buzz, and Robert Hall writes the following about what happened next:

“When the three brothers asked Buzz if he would cosign the note, he replied, ‘I always thought so much of your dad; he was the most generous man I have known. Yes, I’ll cosign the note.’”

Long story short, the \$228 loan that the boys received from the bank resulted in a good harvest in the fall, and the family was able to keep the ranch.

“My father worked that ranch for the rest of his life,” Robert Hall writes.

“It is where my sisters and I were born and grew up, it was the site of my younger daughter’s wedding, and it remains a family treasure today. That bank note, cosigned by Buzz Newton, is framed and hangs on the living room wall of the old stone ranch house as a reminder of the value of one single, committed relationship.”<sup>4</sup>

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It’s also a reminder **that God still rescues people.**

Not by fixing all our problems.

Not by saving Robert Hall’s grandfather from his cancer.

Not by preventing all our pain.

But by coming to us in the gift of one another—

in ways we can never plan or predict or foresee.

Now that you have “truly comprehended the grace of God...”

Have you truly comprehended that grace?

We are swimming in the waters of God’s abundant grace.

That’s what Paul wanted the Colossians to see long ago.

It’s what he wants you and me to see today.

It’s water that rescues us...every...single...day.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Hall, *This Land of Strangers: The Relationship Crisis That Imperils Home, Work, Politics, and Faith*, Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2012.

Let me ask you, you baptized children of God...how's the water?

(Amen.)