

Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior
Colossians 1:11-20
First Presbyterian Church
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Who is Jesus?

Is he the sweet baby, cooing in the manger, with surrounding shepherds and a star over the stable? Is he the young son of the carpenter, working beside his father and sometimes getting into mischief?

Is he the one grown up too soon, the boy become man, sitting with the rabbis in the temple? Is he the surprising teacher at the start of his vocation, who reads Isaiah's prophecy and proclaims he is its fulfillment?

Is he the wonder worker, who casts out demons and heals the sick, using signs and miracles to point beyond himself to the Holy One? Is he the community organizer, who calls followers, and then more followers, whose witness echoes down through the centuries?

Is he the defeated prophet, betrayed, arrested and beaten, condemned, mocked and derided, crucified, dead and buried? Is he the risen savior, who delivers and rescues all who cry out in need and in faith? Is he the One, the culmination of human history?

Yes. Yes.

Barbara Blodgett, a United Church of Christ minister, writes, "The same Christ who is hailed as a king also suffers a cruel death at the hands of the state. The same Christ who rules over all creation also enters the world as a vulnerable baby. How can the same God be so many things? Why are different meanings of divinity presented in such rapid succession?"

You and I are familiar with the rhythm of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." But the first creed of the church, the very first faith statement, was much shorter. Romans and Philippians reference it directly. "Jesus is Lord!" We believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is Lord of heaven and earth.

Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the firstborn of all creation, and all things were made through him. He was, even before time began, and he fashioned and formed the universe.

Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the head of the church; the church's only ruler and director. He is the beginning of New Life, the One resurrected for our sakes. He will be revealed as first in everything.

Jesus Christ is Lord. In him, the living God revealed God's own self fully and completely. In Jesus we don't see a sliver of God or certain aspects of God. We see God, in all God's depth and richness.

Which takes us back to the very beginning. Baby, son, teacher, wonder worker, organizer, prophet, savior – in all these ways, Jesus our Lord demonstrates the personality of God. We know God, because we know Jesus.

Jesus Christ is not only Lord. He is also Savior. He is above every other, first and foremost, all-powerful and complete, before all things. And he rescues us from darkness and forgives our failings.

There is a Bible verse to put on your refrigerator door: "God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son, through whom we are redeemed and forgiven." I love the way Eugene Peterson renders this verse in *The Message*. "God rescued us

from the dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. God's set us up in the kingdom of the Son . . . the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating."

Jesus is our Savior. He rescues, delivers, redeems, forgives us.

The confessions of our Presbyterian Church speak of this with passion and clarity. Jesus is God's eternal wisdom, the substance of God's own glory, says the Scots Confession. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, he is our chief prophet and teacher, our only high priest, our eternal king. At the cost of his life, he redeemed us body and soul from sin and evil.

What about us? How do we answer the question? Who is Jesus? How do we respond, after listening to scripture and hearing statements of faith?

Jesus is our Lord and Savior. He is the one we follow.

Following Jesus is exhausting. Following Jesus is all-consuming.

Polycarp was the leader of the church in Smyrna, about one hundred or one hundred and twenty-five years after the resurrection of Jesus. He was arrested and condemned during a persecution of the church. He was offered the chance to save his life. The magistrate pressed him, "What harm is there in saying Caesar is Lord and offering incense? Swear the oath, and I will release you." Polycarp responded, "All my life I have been Christ's servant. He has done me no wrong. How can I deny my King?"

Polycarp was burned alive.

Following Jesus is exhausting. Following Jesus makes us vulnerable. Dennis Lehane, the great American writer, describes the quest of Patrick Kenzie and Angie Gennaro, his partner, to find a missing four-year old girl in his novel, *Gone Baby Gone*. "When I was young," Kenzie says, "I asked my priest how to get to heaven and still protect myself from all the evil in the world. He told me what God told his children, 'You are sheep among wolves; be wise as the serpent, yet innocent as doves.'"

Lehane then describes the banality of evil. "Those who did remember [the girl's disappearance] probably shrugged off the chill of her memory, turned their heads down to the sports page or up toward the approaching bus. The world is a terrible place, they thought. Bad things happen every day. My bus is late."

That's how you and I turn away from following Jesus. We don't deny him when we are tied at the stake, in front of a large stadium crowd, persecuted for following Jesus. No, we deny him in the everyday, when we decide evil is common, ordinary, humdrum, trivial. We stop following when we make ourselves at home with threats and evil against people of color and women and gays and lesbians and Jews and Muslims. We stop following when we make ourselves at home with hunger and homelessness and the lack of affordable housing for struggling families. We stop following as we protect ourselves and decide evil is nothing to get excited about.

Following Jesus is exhausting.

Following Jesus is exhilarating.

One day over twenty-three years ago, I went to the hospital to visit Suzanne and Robin. Suzanne had just given birth to their daughter, their first and only daughter. I got to hold Christina on her first day of life. It makes me laugh: I still remember how much Suzanne wanted some French fries from Wendy's.

Last Sunday, just last Sunday, Christina was commissioned as the youth director of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, Missouri. A few months ago I found on Facebook a photo she had posted of her baptism twenty-three years ago. There we are: her mom, her dad, her older brother, Eric, and me. What a great memory! What a great reminder that all our acts of faithfulness and obedience make a difference.

Following Jesus is exhilarating. It is everything.

You see, following Jesus leads us to the hospital early in the morning and late at night, after the baby has been born, when the loved one has fallen and broken her hip, when the brain surgery has been wildly successful, and when the loved one is only a day or two away from the end of earthly life.

Following Jesus is exhilarating. We participate in the deepest meaning and purpose of human life, to love one another in Christ's name, to lift high the cross, to proclaim the great good news of Jesus, to work for justice and peace, to speak and act in love and love and love and love, tireless, indefatigable love.

Will we follow Jesus? Will we truly be the church?

Today, God gives us the strength to follow. God is our refuge and strength; the Lord of hosts is with us. This is the prayer that Christ is praying for each of us this day. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power. May you be prepared to endure everything with patience. May you find the determination to be the church – giving, forgiving, sharing, proclaiming, pledging, contributing, working every day with every ounce of energy.

Let us follow Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Let us follow Jesus.