

SUPERLATIVES FAIL

If you've watched any of the NCAA basketball tournament, you've seen the same commercials over and over again (particularly if you watched the games via the internet). One of the commercials shown repeatedly advertises Old Spice deodorant and introduces their four new scents. The first new scent is described as fresh; the next one is fresher; the third is freshest; and the fourth? Freshershist.

Without meaning to "psychoanalyze" it, that commercial actually pokes a little fun at our culture and its way of describing those items that we like. We live in a culture that absolutely lives for superlatives. Everything is the best and the greatest. If there is no superlative that fits, you're free to make one up ("freshershist") – whatever it takes to move something you like to the top of its class. So the restaurant whose food delights you receives the appellation "greatest restaurant ever;" the movie that has you crying from laughter you label "the most hilarious, hysterical movie ever made;" the enjoyable vacation forever after is known as "like the raddest, awesomest trip ever, dude." (Teenagers, it seems, have a particular flair for superlatives.)

The problem with using superlatives so regularly is that we end up describing six different restaurants as "the greatest ever" and three different movies as "the most hilarious ever." Superlatives lose their value when we fail to use them judiciously. If you describe each of your friends as "the nicest, friendliest, smartest, hardest-working person in the world," your superlatives become meaningless.

On a day like today, though, it only seems right to use superlatives. What do you say about the Lord who reached out to undeserving sinners and rescued them from everlasting punishment? Or what do you say about the Lord who laughed at death as if it were a 98-pound weakling? "Decent"? "Fair"? It hardly seems right. This day – Easter – absolutely demands superlatives.

Moses had some experience with a day that demanded superlatives. It was the day that led to the song we heard in the First Lesson. The Lord had miraculously delivered his people from oppressive slavery in Egypt by sending ten plagues on the land. The final plague, by far the most severe, caused the death of the firstborn in every house in Egypt that did not have the blood of a lamb spread on its doorposts.

The mighty ruler of Egypt summoned Moses in the middle of the night and begged him to take the Israelites and leave, fearing that he and all his people would die if they didn't.

Late, suffering from a bad case of seller's remorse, Pharaoh changed his mind about letting the Israelites go. He took six hundred of his best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. Since they were chasing after a nation of more than two million people, who were traveling by "foot chariots," it didn't take long for the Egyptians to catch up. When the people of Israel saw the Egyptian armies, they had a fairly good idea of what would happen. They weren't stupid. They knew that they would have to go back to Egypt and be even more harshly oppressed. To make matters worse, the people had reached the Red Sea. Water in front of them, the Egyptian army behind them. It was a "pick your poison" kind of situation: Drown trying to cross the Red Sea or be destroyed by the Egyptians, whether with the sword or even more oppressive slavery.

Or so it appeared. The truth of the matter is that everything was going according to the Lord's plan. He had it all under control. He directed Moses to hold his staff over the Red Sea while he caused the waters to wall up and provided dry ground for his people. After all the people had crossed the Red Sea, the Lord moved on to Operation Egyptian Massacre. When the Egyptian chariots followed the people of Israel onto the dry ground of the Red Sea, the Lord caused the wheels of the chariots to come off and then had the waters rush down upon them. Operation Egyptian Massacre was a smashing success – every last one of the people of Israel came through unscathed and not a single one of the Egyptian soldiers survived.

That's a day for superlatives, is it not? When you have been delivered from certain destruction and your enemy has been destroyed, superlatives are required. Thankfulness for the Lord's deliverance moved Moses to teach the Israelites the song we heard before in Exodus 15. It's the final verse of the section we heard before that we want to look at more closely. Moses sings, *"Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"*

Moses was not, with that opening question, granting the existence of other gods. He knew and personally confessed that the Lord alone was God. He taught the people, "Do not worship any God but the Lord, for he alone is God." Moses asked the question, not because he was granting the existence of other gods, but because he realized that, while there is only one God who actually exists, human beings have always made their own gods. Some they actually fashion with their own hands, worshipping statues they craft out of stone and wood. Others they form with their minds, worshipping the sun, the moon, the stars, the rain, the earth, and the list could go on. As Moses considered what those so-called gods had done (*nothing at all!*), and compared it to what the Lord had done (*miraculous, gracious interventions!*), he found that there was no one like the Lord. The gods of the Egyptians could do nothing to stop the people of Israel from leaving; they could do nothing to stop the massacre of the Egyptian armies. Why couldn't the Egyptian gods do anything? One simple reason: they didn't exist, except in the imaginations of the people.

That's why Moses used no superlatives. To do so would be to say that there are others to whom the Lord could be compared. Superlatives fail in describing the Lord, because he alone is God. He is in a class by himself. He's not the best God, the greatest God, the most powerful God, the most gracious God, because there is no other God. Moses does, however, list three things that stand out about the one true God: he is majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, and he works wonders. To be holy is to be set apart. God, in his very being, is set apart from everyone and everything. He is in a class by himself. In short, then, Moses is saying, "Lord, you're in a class by yourself because you're in a class by yourself. You have a majesty that no one else has, because everyone and everything else have others in their class, others to whom they can be compared, against whom they can be graded. Not you, Lord. There is no one like you."

He is awesome in glory, working wonders. He does what no one else can do; he does what no one else would do. Within days of being freed from slavery in Egypt, the people grumbled against him, thinking that he had brought them out into the desert to die. He had just laid bare his mighty arm, shown his power by putting to death all of the firstborn in Egypt and now they thought that he couldn't rescue them from the Egyptian army? When he might have called them "ingrates" and handed them over to the Egyptians, he instead delivered them. Though he knew that they would continue to grumble and complain about him even after that miraculous deliverance, he did it

anyway. That makes him worthy of praise, for he did what no one else would think of doing.

Superlatives fail on this Easter Sunday. No one compares with the Lord, because he is in a class by himself. He did what no one else could do – he raised himself from the dead. It appeared that the grave had been victorious when Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus' lifeless body in the tomb. But when the women who had served Jesus throughout his earthly ministry went to anoint his body early on Sunday morning, he wasn't there. It wasn't because the disciples had stolen the body (*they couldn't; it was protected by guards and the tomb had been sealed*). He wasn't there because death stood no chance against him.

Here's another item for the "he did what no one else could do" list – he destroyed the devil's work. He did so by perfectly obeying the law of God in place of sinners and then suffering the punishment those sins deserved on a cross outside Jerusalem. He experienced the very pain of hell in place of sinners. He rose from the dead as proof that every last one of those sins had been forgiven, that there is peace between God and men. That is a wonder of the first order – God rescued sinners! Who is like the Lord, who loves sinners and commits himself to them?

Not only did the Lord do what no one else could do – no one could offer a sacrifice that would cover every sinner – he did what no one else would do. The Lord knew the sin that we would commit against him even after he delivered us from eternal death. He knew how often we would think that we had deserved his love and attention. He knew how we would foolishly think that our sins are only the equivalent of a parking ticket, instead of what they truly are – an abomination in the sight of God. Yet he chose to suffer and die for us. He chose to rescue us from everlasting punishment and give us eternal life. Who is like the Lord, who forgives and forgives and forgives?

Think of this wonder, too, on this Easter Sunday. Because Jesus defeated the grave, all who trust in him will follow suit. We will die, as a consequence of the sin with which we were born and the sins we have committed, but that death will not be the end of the story. On the Last Day, those who believe in Jesus will rise from the dead and come forth from their graves. Not by their own power, but at the voice of the Savior. Those who relied on him as their Savior will receive new, glorified bodies fit for life in heaven. With body and soul together, we will serve the Lord forever, in unending joy and in perfect peace. Who is like the Lord, who promises such great blessings for our future?

On this great day of days, the highest day of the Christian Church year, the most important day for Christians, superlatives fail. We certainly can use them to describe the day, but they fail in reference to the Lord. He is in a class by himself, so hold your superlatives. Call him the Risen Lord. Call him the

Conquering King. Call him the Gracious Savior. All of those would be most appropriate. But on this day, (and every day, for that matter), what the Lord most wants you to call him is simple: Call him your Savior, your Redeemer, your Life, your Righteousness, your Peace, your Joy.