

December 15, 2024
“Wells of Salvation”
Isaiah 12:2-6 / Philippians 4:4-7
Pastor Tim

“Salvation,” writes Frederick Buechner, “is a process, not an event.”

This morning, friends, we’re talking about salvation. And we’re talking about joy.

“Salvation is a process, not an event.” But in the long and often twisted, often territorial, often cruel, tradition of the Christian church, it has been and continues to be understood as an event. And in particular, an event tied not to the present but to the future. A ticket to heaven, to eternal life.

On his deathbed, my uncle John was encouraged by a friend to accept Jesus into his heart as Lord and Savior, to pray the right prayer, to say the right words, that would presumably SAVE him—just in time—from eternal damnation and punishment.

I KNOW that because his friend shared it at my uncle’s funeral, with great pride and apparently relief. No disrespect to him or my uncle John, my dad’s step-brother, whom I loved and who was a beloved member of our extended family, but what kind of God are you praying to if that’s how it works?! God help us.

At one of the first churches I attended when I moved to Philly, I’d meet people who would routinely ask if I’d been saved. Perhaps you’ve been asked the same question? Perhaps you’ve asked the same question?

You know, like right after the service when everyone was milling around, making the kind of often awkward small talk that often overwhelms my introverted self, we’d exchange names and then they’d open with that doozy. Cut right to the chase.

I wish I could remember how I responded. I don’t. What I do remember is that it made me incredibly uncomfortable. And it turned me off. I’m sure they were just trying to connect, to find some common ground or something, but that question comes loaded in Christian circles. And I do mean loaded like a gun.

Because it functions as a weapon. A weapon meant to draw a line in the sand. Meant to divide. Meant to quickly test whether you are a member of the club. Or not. Whether you are in or out.

And again, it's a question founded on an underlying understanding of salvation as an event. Being saved is a membership card. A get-out-of-hell card.

Now we might look at the gospel reading this morning from Luke, which we did not read but picks up where we left off last week, if you're wondering what I'm talking about.

It begins with John the Baptizer, the one pointing to Jesus, telling the crowds who had come to be baptized: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ... "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And it ends with him proclaiming that the One coming after him, none other than Jesus, will come with "winnowing fork ... in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

And this, the author of Luke asserts, is all to be understood as "good news." GOOD news! Gospel.

On the surface it would appear that John subscribes to the same understanding of salvation. A weapon meant to draw a line in the sand, to divide. To determine who's in and who's out.

But that, too, is a MISunderstanding. A winnowing fork is not a weapon, it's a tool. In the company of plowshares, not swords.

For the non-farmers among us, which I assume is most—if not all—of us, every grain of wheat has a husk. And farmers, to this day, use the gift of wind to separate the husks (known collectively as chaff) from the grain. Tossing the grain in the air, the wind blows away the lighter chaff, while the heavier grain falls back to the ground.

The process is meant to "save" the grain, not separate good from bad grain. The metaphor is not about dividing and punishing, it's about cleansing and preserving.

Or transformation, as Marcus Borg argues is the best single English synonym for salvation. Transformation in the here and now, not in some afterlife. And not just transformation of ourselves, but of the world as a whole.

The Hebrew word for salvation literally means “to make wide” or “to make sufficient.” And in Greek, it means healing.

As Kathleen Norris suggests, “... in the gospels it is often physical healing that people seek from Jesus, relief from blindness, paralysis, leprosy. When he says to them that their faith has saved them, it is the Greek word for ‘made you well’ that is employed. It seems right to me that in so many instances in both the Hebrew scriptures and the gospels, salvation is described in physical terms, in terms of the here and now, because I believe that this is how most of first experience it.”

“What is saving my life now,” writes Barbara Brown Taylor, “is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth. My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul.”

To be saved is to be transformed, to be made well, to made whole—in mind, body and spirit. To move through and beyond, to be freed from, the obstacles, the SIN ... the husks, the chaff ... the grief, the despair, the greed, the fear, the hatred, the self-absorption, the anxiety, the apathy, that keep you—that keep us collectively—from love and so life.

That is at least in part what Jesus means when he teaches that we must lose our lives in order to save them. In order to find them.

To access life full and abundant, which is what is meant by “eternal” life. Not immortality, but more fully claiming and embracing the lives we’ve been gifted in this life—lives lived within the Divine thread of ALL life, of Creation, that has pulsed long before our births and will continue long after deaths.

To be saved is to be opened, to be liberated, to find what we've been looking for. As Barbara Brown Taylor further asserts, "Salvation happens every time someone with a key uses it to open a door (they) could lock instead."

To be saved is to be found, to be included, welcomed home, as Jesus asserts through any number of parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin, the return of the prodigal (meaning wastefully extravagant) son to the full embrace of the prodigal (meaning lovingly extravagant) father.

To be saved is to become more fully human. Barbara Brown Taylor one more time: "What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world."

Far better than the question, "Are you saved?" is the question, "Are you human?" As St. Irenaeus once said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." That is salvation.

And again, that is not a one-off event. It's a process. Salvation is an ongoing process of learning to let go of that which gets in the way of love FROM and FOR God, and for each other as for ourselves, and to lean into the life that comes with the experience and practice of such love.

To be saved is to come home to yourself, as John O'Donohue puts it in a blessing so titled:

*May all that is unforgiven in you
Be released.*

*May your fears yield
Their deepest tranquillities.*

*May all that is unlived in you
Blossom into a future
Graced with love.*

Salvation is a gift from God, not something we earn. Not something we pray our way into. Not something we do, though going back to Luke's gospel, love—love received and love given, love in action—is both the means to and end of salvation.

Again, as we noted last week, when people are asking John the Baptizer what they must do, in essence, "to be saved," he gets practical and specific.

“Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” He goes on to respond with specific instruction for tax collectors and Roman soldiers, both stand-ins for the prototypical sinner, the enemy, within the Jewish context of Roman occupation.

It is not enough, he asserts for example, to claim Abraham as an ancestor: “Bear fruits worthy of repentance,” he says. You have to participate in your own salvation. We have to participate in our own and in each other’s—our collective—salvation.

It is a gift from God that keeps on giving, no doubt, but a gift that must not only be opened but shared. In this way, John here is preaching universal salvation.

As one commentary explains it, “John’s message is radically inclusive in at least two ways. First, he opens up the category of ‘children of Abraham’—which is to say, heirs to the covenantal promise God gives to Abraham—to include anyone who leads a life of generosity, honesty, and respect. John’s disarmingly simple requirements (*Got two coats? Give one away!*) are by no means easy to follow, but they are strikingly accessible to all. And second, John underscores this openness by including members of professions that were understandably suspect: tax collectors and soldiers both worked for the empire, keeping order for the Roman occupiers, and so were viewed by many as enemies or traitors to the Jewish community. The fact that John includes them here is a powerful, even startling statement—and one of the first indications that Luke’s vision of salvation is universal in scope. For Luke, all means all.”

All means all. Where have I heard that before?!

The same message comes through in Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus, found later in Luke’s gospel. Zacchaeus a CHIEF tax collector, a CHIEF sinner.

Because he’s short, he climbs up a tree in hopes of at least seeing Jesus pass by. Jesus spots him and ends up inviting himself to Zacchaeus’ house, where Zacchaeus, unprompted in the moment, offers to give half of his possessions to the poor, and if he has defrauded “anyone of anything,” further offers to pay them back four times as much.

In response, Jesus confirms: "Today SALVATION has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." Individual and collective, and inclusive, salvation.

You may know another encounter Jesus has, this one with the so-called "rich young man" found in Matthew, or the "rich man" in Mark's gospels, or the "rich ruler" in Luke's account.

In Matthew, the man approaches Jesus with the question, "What good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus first instructs him to keep the commandments if he wishes "to enter life," but ultimately advises him that if he wants to be "perfect" he has to go further, to sell everything he owns and give the money to the poor, and then come follow him.

Salvation is both an individual and collective process.

In Mark and Luke, the man goes away grieving. And in Matthew, the disciples come away asking, "Then who can be saved?"

"For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

I read that to mean that all can be saved, because salvation is indeed a gift from God. An ongoing gift—again, a process, not an event—through which we are called to keep trying—in spite of our universally human limitations—to love each other and ourselves more fully and widely and consistently.

Perfection is not possible, but salvation is not about perfection. It's not about trying to live up to some impossibly high moral standard for living.

This week's Words to Live and Love By, in Calvary Connections, is a quote from Richard Rohr: "One great idea of the biblical revelation is that God is manifest in the ordinary, in the actual, in the daily, in the now, in the concrete incarnations of life, and not through purity codes and moral achievement contexts, which are seldom achieved anyway."

Salvation is not about purity or morality codes. It's not about drawing a line in the sand to distinguish between who's in and who's out.

It's about love. Learning to love, opening ourselves up to receive and share love more fully, more widely, more consistently.

And learning to love is a process, a grace-filled, faith-filled, hope-filled, love-filled process of transformation and healing, of liberation, of making wide.

That is where joy comes in. I said at the start that we'd be talking today about salvation AND joy. You thought I forgot?

Joy enters the picture precisely because salvation is a gift that keeps on giving, that keeps pulling us like a magnet to love and life. "We are born and born again," as Paul Simon suggests in song, "like waves on the sea."

Salvation is a gift FROM GOD that keeps on giving, NOT a weapon that keeps on punishing; inviting us over and over again to extravagant love and abundant life. Beginning here and now.

Says Isaiah the prophet, from our ACTUAL reading this morning: "'Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the HOLY ONE is my strength and my might; God has become my salvation.'" With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day: 'Give thanks to the HOLY ONE; call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations; proclaim that God's name is exalted. Sing praises to the HOLY ONE, for God has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the HOLY ONE of Israel.'

With JOY you will draw water, again and again and again and again and again and again, from the WELLS of salvation. Living water is what Jesus calls it.

"Rejoice in the HOLY ONE always; again, I will say, Rejoice." That's the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippian church. "Let your gentleness (THAT IS, your love) be known to everyone. The HOLY ONE is near."

The HOLY ONE is near, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven that we anticipate during Advent, comes near, salvation comes near, whenever love wins the day.

Whenever love rules our hearts in the way we treat ourselves and each other. Whenever love puts its pants on in the form of justice.

As Cornel West has famously asserted, "Justice is what love looks like in public." Justice is what collective salvation looks like.

Friends, nourished by the endlessly deep wells of salvation, may we remain faithful to the ongoing process of being saved, finding our way, opening ourselves up—individually and collectively, again and again—to God, who is our salvation. To God, who is Love itself.

And may we rejoice as those ever coming home to our God-given selves, ever becoming more fully human, knowing that there is no way to the God of our salvation apart from real life in the real world.

May it be so.