

JESUS SAVES

Sermon by Byron C. Bangert, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Indiana

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Jeremiah 8:18-22; John 3:1-17

This past Tuesday at Rotary we had a speaker from the city's Parks and Recreation Department who told us that for every mile we walk we would add 21 minutes to our lives. Since turning 50 last year, I have become ever more keenly aware of my own mortality. Perhaps that is why, when hearing this statistic, it quickly occurred to me that if I could just manage to walk one mile every 21 minutes, then I could live forever! Of course, I really don't want to spend all that time walking.

When I was growing up in the church, I heard lots of teaching and preaching that encouraged me to think about the future--not just the immediate future, but the long-term future. Sometimes it seemed like the goal of the Christian life was to live forever. "Forever," in this case, meant the life hereafter, but the idea seemed to be a continuation of this life--that is, a continuation of this life of mine--only in a better place. I was certainly taught to understand that the Christian life has to do with a lot of other things as well, in particular, with how we live. But there was this kind of underlying, or overarching, sense that the goal of the Christian life had basically to do with the future, and this future required something called "salvation."

One of the familiar songs of my upbringing was the Gospel hymn called "Jesus Saves!" It is an upbeat and invigorating song that I must have sung dozens of times. I went back to look at the words to this song, thinking that they probably say something about the content of salvation, only to discover that they do not. The whole song is simply a celebration of the message that Jesus saves. Nothing is said about what this means, or about how it might be accomplished, except for one brief mention of "sinners" and a concluding reference to "victory." Nothing more needed to be said, of course, because most of the people who sang this song already had a pretty clear idea what it meant to say that Jesus saves.

The situation is different today. There are still plenty of churches where people know what they mean when they say that Jesus saves, but there are lots of other churches where that is not the case. A minister friend of mine, who used to serve a church in Terre Haute and has since moved to San Francisco, sent me a postcard last year. On one side was his message, reporting briefly on how he was finding his new situation. On the other side were the words "Jesus Saves"--along with a picture of Jesus standing by the window of a bank teller, making a deposit. The humor is possible because the conventional religious meaning is no longer obvious, clear, or compelling.

"Jesus saves!" Here is a message from the heart of the Christian Gospel. As John says, in a passage that is taken to be one of the most eloquent statements of that Gospel, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" [3:17]. These words suggest that the world is yet to be saved. When we study the Gospel of John we discover that, in his view, the salvation of God is accomplished when Jesus dies on the cross. According to John, Jesus dies with a triumphant cry: "It is finished!" This is John's way of saying that what God set out to do in Jesus Christ has thus been fulfilled.

Salvation is now a present possibility for us all.

My thinking for this sermon actually got started, however, by reflecting upon a statement that is common to all three of the other crucifixion accounts. According to Mark, along with Matthew and Luke, while Jesus was being crucified, the religious authorities who had urged his death spoke scornfully of him. They mocked him among themselves, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself" [Mk. 15:31]--or, "let him save himself . . ." [Luke] or, "is he unable to save himself?" [Matthew]. "He saved others." Think about that. Are we to suppose that even his enemies granted him that? Did even his opponents recognize that he had made a positive difference in the lives of those he had touched? Or are these mockers simply commenting on his reputation? The people say he saved others, but where is the proof if he cannot save himself? Either way, the Gospel writers are telling us something about Jesus the man. They are telling us about something he did, not about something he was going to do. "He saved others." They are also telling us that being "saved" means something more than physical survival. The fact that Jesus dies on the cross does not in any way disprove his power to save.

The preaching of salvation lies at the heart of the Christian faith. But what does it mean? In the Adult Theology Class that I have been teaching, we have been discussing the biblical understanding of salvation. It has many facets or dimensions. In the Old Testament salvation is understood most clearly in terms of God's liberation of the Hebrew slaves from captivity in Egypt. Salvation means deliverance. In particular, it means deliverance from one's enemies. To be saved is to be rescued from oppression and bondage. Or it is to be granted victory over a hostile power. There are frequent references to salvation in the psalms. Often these have to do with being rescued from the threats and assaults of evil-doers. Sometimes they have to do with being preserved in the midst of other troubles. Other times they have to do with overcoming illness and affliction. Salvation has to do with preservation and continuation of life. Salvation is more than survival, but there is no salvation when life remains under continual threat of being taken away.

Salvation also has to do with health, and with healing. When is life most threatened? For the individual, it is when the body is afflicted and assaulted by disease. For the people as a whole, it is when the body politic has become sick and corrupted. It is when there is injustice and oppression within, when dishonesty and greed are commonplace, the needy are neglected, and the commandments of God are ignored. It is when the fruits of a society are not distributed for the good of all. So judges the prophet Jeremiah, when he surveys the corruption of Israel: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved" [8:20]. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" [8:22].

Salvation has also to do with restoration and reconciliation. In the season of Advent we recall those Old Testament passages from Isaiah in which God promises to the captives in exile in Babylon that they are soon to be released, in order to return home, where they can re-build their devastated land. The destruction that came upon them, and the captivity they have endured, have been punishment enough. Their prayers have been answered; "on a day of salvation" God has helped them [49:8]. The mountains that must be traversed on their return shall be turned "into a

road," and the "highways shall be raised up" [49:11] to hasten their passage. Jerusalem will be rebuilt and re-populated, such that the descendants of those in exile will say, "The place is too crowded for me" [49:20]. Henceforth they shall know the favor of God.

There are many other facets to the biblical idea of salvation. Salvation is forgiveness of sin and deliverance from its burdens--the spiritual and psychological oppressions of estrangement and guilt. Salvation is deliverance from ignorance and the darkness of not understanding, of being foolish and lacking sound judgment and being captive of false ideas and values and idols. Salvation means the establishment of God's ways upon the earth, the transformation of history and peoples and nations toward righteousness and peace. When God delivers the exiles and re-establishes them in Jerusalem, says the prophet, "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" [Isaiah 52:10]. Salvation means the final setting right of all things, the consummation of God's purposes for the world, and--for the individual--eternal peace and life with God.

Most if not all of these themes of salvation can also be seen in Jesus. Those of you who saw the recent PBS "Frontline" program, "From Jesus to Christ," may have been surprised to learn the extent to which Jesus' own ministry must have taken shape in response to the domination and oppression of Rome over first-century Palestine. There had to have been a political as well as a spiritual dimension to his preaching. In fact, for a first-century Jew there simply would not have been this separation that we tend to make between the political and the religious. Jesus' message of salvation included the proclaiming of good news to the poor, and of release of the captives, of recovery of sight to the blind, and of letting the oppressed go free. His preaching of the "kingdom of God" was both an implicit challenge to the authority of the kingdom of this world--the empire of Rome--and an invitation to live a life fully conformed to the purposes of God. It is a terrible distortion of Jesus' message and ministry to turn it into a gospel of individual salvation for individual souls. It is also a mistake, however, not to see how it was that he transformed and rescued the lives of the persons whom he encountered along his way.

"He saved others." Jesus was a healer. Think of the woman with the hemorrhage of blood. Think of the blind man beside the road, the ten lepers who sought his aid, the paralytic whose friends lowered him through the roof, the demon-possessed man, the epileptic boy. Jesus taught as one who had authority. Think of the way he cut through hypocrisy and convention to get to the heart of the matter. Think of the memorable lines, the vivid images, the compelling insights born of experience and faith, that illuminated the spirit--not just the letter--of the law. Jesus counseled and demonstrated forgiveness and reconciliation. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the parable of the so-called Prodigal Son, or the story of the Unforgiving Servant. Jesus embodied the magnanimous love of God. Think of the woman with the questionable past, whom Jesus allows to wash his feet and anoint his head. Think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector despised by his neighbors, a pitiable fellow to whom Jesus reaches out in friendship, including him in the family of God. "Today," he says, "salvation has come to this house" [Luke 19:9].

If, and when, we say that "Jesus saves," it is all this and more that should come to mind. Christians everywhere proclaim him "Lord and Savior," often with only the slightest apprehension

of what this means. I was not quite nine years old when I first made this profession of faith. The place and role that Jesus has had in my life has been ever so much more than I could then have understood. And I am still learning and trying to understand how this person from almost 2000 years ago continues to speak to me, continues to show me how to live, continues to reveal to me the riches of God's grace and the depths of God's love.

What it means to me that "Jesus saves" is not always easy to say. I am convinced, however, that the salvation that God intends for the world, and that was embodied in Jesus, has to do first of all with how my life is ordered and how this world is ordered. I really think that God wants us all to have a good time. I don't mean a fun time, though I don't think God is opposed to fun. I mean a time that is good, a life that is good, in a world that is good. When we think about all those biblical images of salvation, and when we consider all the ways that Jesus "saved others," it seems that salvation is about people who regain possession of their lives, people who are delivered of their afflictions and their demons and restored to full humanity and responsibility and confidence in the goodness of life. And it seems that salvation is about people who are brought together in communities of compassion and mutual regard, where they learn the power of forgiveness and love of neighbor as self. And it seems that salvation is about communities that have learned to measure their lives by the demands of justice and the benefits of kindness, who care for the weak and lift up the oppressed and include the forsaken, and have found that walking humbly together is better than proudly exalting themselves before the world. And it seems that salvation is about peoples and nations who understand that the greatest good is not to be had in dominance and subjection and exploitation of others but only in harmony and peace. If salvation is also about the future, it is about the future in which this vision of people and world redeemed, re-ordered, transformed and made new, may finally come to pass.

Jesus saves, not by providing us a one-way ticket to heaven, but by holding us to this vision of a world made new, and by giving us the mind, the heart, the courage, the faith, to live into that vision. For many of us in this place and time, it is not the reality of oppression or the threat of survival that marks our lives. The greatest injustices of our world hardly impinge upon us, nor do we see how we are to blame. We are probably healthy, we are not in poverty, we do not live on the margins of our society. There may be some need for reconciliation in our lives, but we are fairly tolerant and accommodating toward others and try not to let any of our relationships turn to permanent estrangement or enmity. If there are demons that possess us, we hardly know what they are. There is not even that much that makes us feel guilty and needing to be forgiven. Life, in short, is already pretty good. How is it that we need to be delivered? From what, or for what, can Jesus save us?

It may be that what Jesus has to offer us is more in the way of challenge than comfort, more in the way of disturbance than consolation, more in the way of demand than release. To be delivered of trivialities and distractions is also salvation. To be divested of an excess of possessions can be a liberating experience. To be given important tasks to do can save you from aimless non-commitment. To be convicted of the need to render some sacrificial service can cure the vague disease of an uneasy conscience. The good life that God intends for us, that Jesus lays out before us in word and deed, is not just a gift, though it is surely that. It is also a challenge, a call to a more courageous existence, and an invitation to pursue the highest and best

that we know.

In his book, *The Responsible Self*, theologian H. Richard Niebuhr concluded with a moving reflection upon the Christian way of life. For Niebuhr, the fundamental human problem and condition is distrust and estrangement toward God and the world. This shows itself in defensiveness and self-protectiveness, from which we are delivered by Jesus Christ. His words, in part:

By Jesus Christ [people] have been and are empowered to become [children] of God--not as those who are saved out of a perishing world but as those who know that the world is being saved. . .

They cannot boast that they have an excellent way of life for they have little to point to when they boast. They only confess--we were blind in our distrust of being, now we begin to see; we were aliens and alienated in a strange, empty world, now we begin sometimes to feel at home; we were in love with ourselves and all our little cities, now we are falling in love, we think, with being itself, with the city of God, the universal community of which God is the source and governor. And for all this we are indebted to Jesus Christ, in our history and in that depth of the spirit in which we grope . . . [T]his one is our physician . . . [H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 177-78]

For every mile that we walk, we can add 21 minutes to our lives. At that rate, we can live forever. But of course, the point is not to add years to our life, but to add life – and health ---to our years. So it is with Jesus, who came "that the world might be saved." "He saved others." For those who continue to receive him, he continues to save. AMEN.