

August 20

Salvation

Philippians 2:12-13

¹² Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Please pray with me:

God be in my head and in my understanding. God be in my eyes and in my looking. God be in my mouth and in my speaking. God be in my heart and in my thinking. Amen.

“Bunion” He only said the word once, but once was all it took. My husband looked down at my size 10 bare feet and asked innocently, “Are you getting a bunion?” The next day, my Facebook feed was littered with ads for all kinds of devices to correct bunions and videos about bunions.

Such things seem to go in phases. Now, I keep getting stories and videos about animal rescue stories. The wild horse stuck in a mud pit. The buck with his leg stuck in a barb-wired fence. The cow who fell in a drainpipe. The polar bear with a tin can stuck in his jaws. The dog with his head stuck in a plastic container. They just keep coming, and I have to confess I click on more than a few to watch the heroic efforts of passers by trying to liberate suffering animals. The one thing I can’t figure out is why I am getting all these stories. What did I say? What did I search?

It remains a mystery to me. The fact that I take the bait and click on these videos, unlike the bunion videos, keep them flowing in a continual stream. Just the other day I watched a couple cut a suffocating band of metal off the neck of a puppy struggling to breathe. They had to use bolt cutters with the precision of surgical instruments to keep from hurting the puppy. And I could feel the relief as the metal snapped and the dog was set free. Then my thoughts turned to the cruel human who did this.

I once saved a tiny kitten dumped in a parking lot on a rainy winter’s day. Little did I know that I’d be cleaning out a litter box for the next seventeen years. In most of the videos, the animals make a clean getaway into the wild, they don’t stick around for the rest of their lives. One of my favorite videos is a man who sees a kitten by the side of the road and feels compelled to stop. He turns on his camera and narrates as he focuses on this tiny kitten seemingly begging for help. The kitten runs to him and he stoops to pick it up. Suddenly another kitten appears from the bushes, then another, then another, and pretty soon he is swarmed by thirteen kittens, which, after some deliberation with himself and a bunch of expletives, he corrals into the back seat of his car. I don’t know how many litter boxes that turned out to be.

I wonder if I get all these salvific videos because I am constantly typing the words salvation, save, saved, and savior into my computer. Afterall, these are the words of our faith, and the Bible is littered with them. Salvation occurs 127 times in old Revised Standard Version that

most of us grew up with. Save, saved, saves and saving, is found 300 times and savior 40 times. Roughly 2/3 of the time these words are found in the Old Testament.¹

It might come as a surprise to some people that God was in the salvation business long before Jesus arrived on the scene. In common usage salvation is often narrowly defined as Jesus dying on the cross to save us. If you open the Gideon Bible in your hotel room, you will find God's plan of salvation, and according to that plan, there is no salvation without Jesus. You are told that all you have to do is believe this one thing and you are saved. Just invite the Savior into your heart and you are heaven bound. And this way of thinking leads to all kinds of other questions like, "Now what?" Or, "Can I lose my salvation or once I'm saved am I always saved regardless of how I live or what I might do?" Or you might wonder if that person you love ever accepted Jesus in their heart before they died. Salvation, in this understanding, is a transaction. If you do this, you get that.

It's simplistic, and maybe that is why it is so attractive. It also asks very little of you. Just believe. Now, for some folks this is the beginning of a rich spiritual life that seeks to become more Christlike. For some it is much more than lip service. And I want to honor that. For some, accepting Jesus means placing Christ at the center of their lives and is a clear turning point in their lives. The problem is that this all tends to be very personal. It too often makes my sin, my salvation the focus and it doesn't reflect the breadth of meaning that salvation carries.

So, what is salvation? In the Old Testament, the Israelites sing about their salvation from slavery and from Pharaoh's army. Salvation in this story is liberation from economic, political, and religious bondage. This understanding of salvation shaped the lives of the ancient Israelites where they were forbidden to charge interest and land was returned to original owners after seven years. Salvation meant the opposite of slavery and exploitation and was a correction of gross economic imbalances. So, one meaning of salvation is liberation and deliverance from bondage, personally and collectively.

The second part of Isaiah was written when the Israelites were returning from exile where they were oppressed, impoverished, and powerless. God is their savior who accompanies them on the journey, offering assurance and love. The words savior, salvation, and save refer to God's presence and love on the journey home.

Then there is that beautiful Psalm, Psalm 27, that opens with the words, "The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear." The word salvation appears in the Psalms more than any other book and it mostly refers to rescue from peril. It is sometimes the individual declaring God's salvation and sometimes it is collective, as in "God has delivered us!"

In all three of these understandings, God is celebrated for people finding hope, wholeness, and a future.

¹ This sermon reflects the chapter on Salvation found in the book "Speaking Christian" by Marcus Borg.

In the New Testament these themes continue. There is liberation from bondage, return from exile, and rescue from peril. To be saved is to be rescued from all that ails us and more. Jesus didn't have to die before he could say to the woman who anointed his feet, "Your faith has saved you." He healed and called individuals, which allowed them to be restored to their community. He started a movement to liberate people from the vicious cycles of violence and poverty that were so much a part of their lives in the Roman Empire.

The other thing we witness in the ministry of Jesus is the transformation of those who follow him. It didn't happen overnight. Their desire to follow Jesus saved them – as they grew to be more like Jesus. To be saved is not a one and done thing. It is the relationship we have with God which transforms us. We see with new eyes. We hear with new ears. We are born again. We are made whole. We fear not. We trust that God is with us and at work in us and through us.

According to the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, "The fundamental meaning of salvation in scripture is God's deliverance of those in a situation of need which impedes their well-being, resulting in their restoration or wholeness. Wholeness or well-being is God's original intent for creation." That definition is reflected in the identity statement of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which says, "*We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.*"

Salvation is the movement toward wholeness; wholeness, and healing, and restoration, and peace, and well-being, for all of creation. It is the lion laying with the lamb and swords being beaten into plowshares. It is enough water and shelter and food for all. Salvation is a healed planet and healed people. It is what Jesus called eternal life and the kingdom of God.

We know the things that fragment us. Some are deeply personal...like illness, addiction, anxiety, depression, being in a difficult relationship, loneliness, trauma, and grief...these things leave us longing for relief and searching for healing.

We know the things that fragment us...one from another...like selfishness, greed, bitterness, vengefulness, pride, and the inability to resolve conflict and communicate clearly.

We know the things that fragment us as a nation and as part of the global family – economic disparity, exploitation of labor and slavery, all the "isms" of prejudice, lust for power and control, and violence.

We also see more clearly the scars and wounds of a fragmented creation. Temperatures rising, ocean animals filled with microplastics, littered beaches, native lands and species lost, destruction of habitat, over-consumption, and rampant consumerism, a "just throw it away" attitude – but we all know there is no "away."

We live in a fragmented world in need of salvation.

Salvation is the movement toward wholeness. Salvation is a world of justice and peace. Salvation is when tears are no more. Salvation is when the captives are liberated, and the sick are healed, and the wayward child finds his way home. Salvation is personal transformation, and it is also the transformation of this world. Salvation is what God has done in the past. Salvation is what can happen in the present. Salvation is the not yet completed work of wholeness that guides our way forward. We call Jesus, savior, because Jesus taught and modeled a life that leads to wholeness.

In our scripture reading for today, Paul tells the church in Philippi to work on their own salvation. He was speaking to them as a church. He was concerned about conflict and disunity in the community, and he is admonishing them to work on their wholeness.

“Work on your own salvation,” says Paul. Salvation is the work we are called to do, it is who we are, and it is God’s dream for **this** world and **this** life. And we do this life-giving and life-saving work in partnership with God and each other.

In a piece he wrote about salvation, Brian McLaren tells the story of some people who found a snapping turtle crossing the road in New Jersey. Snapping turtles are hardly beautiful, and this was especially unattractive because it was grossly deformed by a ring of plastic that had been around its body since it was small enough to crawl into it. It fit on the turtle like a corset and its shell looked like a figure 8. It was obvious that this turtle would not survive to full maturity if this plastic remained on its body, so they snipped it off. McLaren writes, “And nothing happened. Nothing.

Except for one thing: at that moment, the turtle had a future. It was rescued. It was saved. It would take years for the animal to grow into more normal proportions, maybe decades. Perhaps even in old age, it would still be somewhat guitar shaped. But it would survive.”²

One plastic ring at a time, we work on own salvation...working for wholeness in a fragmented world...wherever we are, with whatever we have, whenever we can...

This is God’s passion, God’s purpose, and God’s promise. This is God’s plan of salvation and the saving work to which we are called.

²<https://brianmclaren.net/q-r-turtles-and-salvation/>