

Salvation

1Chronicles 16:23-25 NRS²³ Sing to the LORD, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day.

²⁴ Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.²⁵ For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.

NRS Luke 19:1-10 He entered Jericho and was passing through it.² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Philippians 2:12-13 NRS Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out 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.

Salvation

A couple of weeks ago, someone asked me if sometime I would preach on salvation. I said I would be glad to do so. Many years ago, a very wise minister told me that "God will draw the circle around the saved – and he'll probably draw it bigger than you or I would."¹ I figured I'd mention that bit of wisdom and talk about we would do well to have the humility not to presume to do God's judging. It'd be a short sermon with a valuable lesson for us all, and I'd sit down. Of course, this past week I did do a bit of studying and I learned so much that this will be a two part series on salvation. A better title for today's message might be *Overlooked or Unwanted Salvation*.

When the topic of salvation comes up, we almost automatically think about going to heaven – or worry that we might be going to hell. Often, there's a certain amount of uncertainty and anxiety. Those who are very certain that they're going to heaven can seem a bit smug to others around them. And so, we tend to avoid the topic of salvation.

Let's begin by looking at salvation in the Old Testament and let's try to do that with fresh eyes – without assumptions. "The Hebrew word that is translated salvation means rescue - especially rescue from sickness, trouble, distress, fear, or from enemies and violence. When the Hebrews were in Egypt, salvation meant rescue from slavery, freedom from bondage. When the Jews were in Babylon, salvation meant rescue from exile.² For example, after passing through the Red Sea and escaping from slavery in Egypt, Moses and the Israelites sang, "The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him." (Exodus 15:2) In Psalm 118, the psalmist sings about being in danger and about being rescued by God. "Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place. ¹³ I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. ¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. (Psalm 118:5, 13-14) In these examples, and all through the Old Testament, salvation is something that happens in this life, not after the person dies. The Jews were saved from bondage in Egypt. They were saved from exile in Babylon. The next major crisis for them was occupation by foreign armies, first the Greeks and then the Romans. The Pharisees decided that the reason the Jews weren't being saved from the oppression of Roman occupation was because of the sins of the people. There are two

striking aspects of all of this. First, salvation is always in terms of the here and now, not some destination after death. Second, salvation is usually communal, not individual.

What about salvation in the New Testament? A few moments ago we heard the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Remember, a tax collector was seen as a traitor to his people. He worked for the Romans, collecting their very high taxes. Whatever he collected over and above the Roman demands became the tax collector's income. And Zacchaeus was a rich man. It's no wonder that he was especially hated by his fellow Jews. He was an outsider among his own people. Now, Zack did something strange. He climbed a tree. Generally speaking, grown men don't climb trees. People dressed in loose robes don't climb trees. And rich government officials with considerable power don't climb trees.

Jesus spotted Zack up in the tree and called him down. Jesus did something strange. Here is a good example of how God pursues us. Jesus invited himself to dinner – with a traitor who worked for the occupying forces. In those days, to sit at the dinner table with someone strongly implied your approval of them. Jesus invited himself into the tax collector's home and into his life. The crowd was upset about this. Zacchaeus was not a righteous man. You aren't righteous when you're actively participating in a system that oppresses and crushes people.

But look at what happened. Zacchaeus pledged to give half of his wealth to the poor. Fifty percent is a whale of a lot more than a ten percent tithe! He went on to say that if he had defrauded anyone, he would return four times the amount. The requirement under the law of Moses was much less. According to rules in Leviticus and Numbers, if the restitution was voluntary, the guilty party was to pay back the amount taken plus twenty percent.³ Zacchaeus went far beyond any legal requirement and plunged into the territory of enormous generosity. Repentance isn't just a change of heart – it bears fruit! Lots of fruit!⁴

At this point, Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house." "[Zack's] 'being saved' refers to a conversion, to be sure, but not in any private sense. Not only is his household involved but also the poor who will be beneficiaries of his conversion -as well as all those people whom he may have defrauded. His salvation, therefore, has personal, domestic, social, and economic dimensions."⁵ Writing about this story, John Calvin said that Zacchaeus is "changed from a wolf, not only into a sheep, but even into a shepherd."

Just as in the Old Testament, there is a communal aspect to salvation in this story. Salvation came to the house. Jesus didn't say, "You'll join me in heaven someday." He said that salvation had arrived- right then.

There are other times when Jesus talks of salvation, not in the future tense, but in the present tense. Once, when a distraught father was told by friends that his daughter had died, Jesus told him, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." (Luke 8:50 NRS) Jesus didn't mean that she was going to heaven. He was saying that she would be restored to this life. On another occasion, he told a blind man that he had healed, "your faith has saved you." (Luke 18:42 NRS) Not will save you, but has saved you. Similarly, in the book of Acts, we're told that day by day the Lord added to the early church "those that were being saved." Not those who will be saved, but those who were being saved. Not only does this passage in Acts indicate salvation in the present, but it also refers to a process when it says, "were being saved."

Paul, in today's scripture from the letter to the Philippians, also speaks of salvation as an ongoing process. He told them (**Philippians 2:12-13 NRS**) ". . . work out 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." "It should be clear from this passage that Paul's understanding of

salvation is different from what many of us have learned in church. Salvation is not a matter of never sinning, or never touching those we consider unclean. Nor is it a matter of having our sins taken away and joining the ranks of a comfortable middle-class congregation. Salvation consists, rather, in the joy, freedom, and partnership we experience when God's grace sets us free from the powers of this world, not so that we can flee this earth, but so that God can use us 'to work for God's good pleasure'"⁶

What does salvation in this life, today, here and now look like? For Zacchaeus, it meant realizing that Jesus didn't condemn him but loved him. It meant that he was accepted by his God. It meant that his heart was filled with generosity and freed from greed. It meant that he had a new relationship, not only with God, but with his neighbors. Salvation means to be set free from our fear, to be saved from our compulsions and addictions and other self-destructive behavior, to be rescued from emptiness, meaninglessness, and despair. Salvation means being rescued from fruitless ways of life such as the cycle of insult and revenge, hatred and fear. Salvation in the present is a journey, a process, a continuing transformation that brings "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding." (Philippians 4:7 NRS) Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10 NRS) Salvation now is about participating in God's saving love for all creation, living in an adventure called the kingdom of God. It's a lifelong journey. It's about being rescued from a life that is disconnected from God and being part of a fellowship that supports us and travels the journey of faith with us.

I said that today's sermon would be better titled *Overlooked or Unwanted Salvation*. We often overlook the salvation that is offered to us in this life, but why would salvation be unwanted? We don't understand that when we give to others, when we spend our lives and resources for others, that we receive more than we give. And we don't want to look too strange to our families and friends by being different. It's easier and simpler to "want a loving God who forgives us - but doesn't change us. We prefer a God who comforts us - but doesn't challenge the details of our lives. We want to feel secure in the arms of Jesus - not vulnerable to the winds of the Holy Spirit."⁷ And when we have no concept of the joy, the contentment, the full heart that comes from making a difference, we don't know the salvation that we're missing.

First Timothy 4:8 says that ". . . godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." Today we've explored how godliness holds promise for life in the present. Next week we'll think about the life to come. Amen

¹ Rev. Dr. Sam Lanham, III

² Brian D McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2006). p 19

³ Voluntary restitution = principal + 20% (Leviticus 6:5, Numbers 5:7)

Compulsory restitution = principal x 2 or x 4 or 5 (Exodus 22:1, 3-4; 2 Samuel 12:6)

⁴ *The Lectionary Commentary, The Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001) p 439 Marjorie Proctor-Smith says, three possible themes suggest themselves: (one) the extravagance of divine love, which calls forth extravagance from us; (two) God's relentless desire for us; and (three) a relationship between generosity and salvation.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990) p220

⁶ Stanley P. Saunders, *Philippians and Galatians* (Louisville, Geneva Press, 2001) p21

⁷ Stephen W Plunkett, *This We Believe* (Louisville, Geneva Press, 2002)