The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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September 16, 2018

**How Does the Creature Cry, ‘Save!’?**

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. – Matthew 5

God decided to have a contest in heaven one day. Apparently they have eternity on their hands up in heaven and they have to have these contests from time to time to keep people from feeling like they’ve been there for an eternity. This particular contest was to design a really amazing computer program, in only twenty-four hours. Everybody knew that the two best computer programmers in heaven were Jesus and Moses, and no one else was even close, so they were the only two that entered, and as the contest got under way, there was a fierce rivalry between them. Both Jesus and Moses had chosen very ambitious and complicated projects that no one else would even attempt in 24 hours. They tapped away at their computers for more than twenty-three hours, furiously working to finish their chosen projects. Then, with only a few minutes to go, there was a sudden power failure, and both their screens went blank. “Ahhg!,” they both scream. A few seconds later, the power went back on. Jesus quickly rebooted his computer, put a few finishing touches on his program and announced that he is finished, just seconds before God calls time. Moses throws up his hands in disgust. “That’s not fair,” he protests. “I would have been done too if that power failure hadn’t wiped out hours of work.” God just shrugs his shoulders and says, “Well, Moses. Jesus saves.” [expect audible groans]

When we baptize or confirm someone, we often ask if they accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord. The World Council of Churches, of which the United Church is an active participant, asks its member churches only to subscribe to the theological conviction that Jesus is Saviour and Lord. But what does that mean? The word “Lord” seems pretty clear; a “Lord” is someone to whom we have pledged obedience. To say Jesus is Lord is to say that he is ultimate authority in our lives.

But what does it mean to speak of Jesus as “saviour”? What does Jesus save us from, or save us for? That is not nearly as clear, partly because some Christians teach a distorted and simplistic understanding of salvation. I remember as a teenager going to hear Billy Graham speak when he visited Edmonton. His understanding of salvation was very clear. There are two certainties in life, he said, “death and judgement. All of us will die, and then all of us will be judged. And because we have all sinned, and God, in his holiness demands retribution for sin, we cannot escape God’s penalty on our own merit. We need a sinless person to pay the penalty for us. Jesus, who lived without sin, is able by his sacrificial death to substitute for us, and every person who dies under the penalty of sin. pays the price for our sin. Later, I learned that that understanding of salvation is known as the substitutionary theory, which was given its classic articulation by St. Anselm of Canterbury in a book called Cur Deus Homo (or *Why God Became Man)* which was published more than a thousand years after Jesus died*.* In essence Anselm wrote, God took on human flesh so that he could die for our sins.

Even as a teenager, that made no sense to me, no sense at all. For one thing, it drove a wedge between Jesus and God. If the problem we are trying to avoid is God’s holy wrath against our sinfulness, then Jesus is saving us from God, but doing absolutely nothing to save us from sin. And if Jesus is saving us from God, he didn’t need to go through the messy business of being born and dying in order to do that. He could have stayed in heaven and worked it out with God through some heavenly contest, a computer programming contest for example, or arm wrestling. And if God really wanted not to punish us for sin, why not just forgive us.

This understanding of Jesus as substituting for us to take on God’s punishment for our sins is widely held and constantly taught in conservative evangelical circles. Many of you probably recognize it. But as I mentioned, it didn’t become popular until the middle ages. It is the one hold-over from all the weird things they taught in medieval theology that many conservative Protestants still swallow, hook, line and sinker. And because it is all about individual forgiveness after we die, it doesn’t do anything to make our world a better place.

But if you ask what the church understood salvation to be about for the first thousand years of Christian history, you get a very different answer: Not saving us from God after we die, but saving us from the violence, greed, inequality and troubles that we collectively label as sin. If you actually read the gospels, Jesus is constantly saving people before they die: he saves the sick from their illness, the blind from their blindness, the deaf from their deafness, the lame from their lameness, and the possessed from their demons. Though his teaching, he saves the tax-collectors and sinners from their selfish ways. He saves the rich from the captivity to their wealth and the poor from their captivity to poverty. He invites them into a new kind of community, not the kingdom of Caesar, but God’s kin-dom of love, peace and justice.

The Bible, in spite of its amazing diversity, is held together by a single plot. That plot can be very simply stated: “God creates the world; the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which God created it.” [Frederick Buechner] It is the condition of being *lost* that describes our human predicament, what we need to be saved from. God’s effort to restore the world is what we describe as salvation.

The Bible uses many images and metaphors to speak of this lostness and salvation:

Light in our darkness

Sight to the blind

Liberation for captives

Returning home from exile

Healing from our infirmities

Food and drink for the hungry and thirsty

Resurrection from the land of the dead

Blessing for the poor

…and many others.

Marcus Borg suggests that in addition to those metaphors there are three major understandings of salvation in the Bible that speak to general human experiences of salvation. Each of these understandings is rooted in one of the major stories of the Bible. [in *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, pp. 175-177] The first of those stories is the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. You remember that the ancient Hebrews were forced to work on the building projects of the Pharoah, treated cruelly and prevented from escaping their unhappy lot. In this story, the human problem is bondage and oppression, the experience of not being free. This story connects to the experience of millions upon millions of people, not just in ancient Egypt but today as well, for whom lack of freedom is a huge problem. They are trapped in poverty, in political oppression, in unsafe working conditions and dead-end jobs, in abusive relationships, mental illnesses, in addictions or patterns of behaviour that they don’t seem to be able to escape. These are all kinds of slavery from which God wants to save us. The Exodus story speaks of the Hebrews fleeing into the wilderness to escape their slavery, but it is easier to take people out of slavery than it is to take slavery out of people. And so the Exodus story also speaks of a long and agonizing journey through the wilderness, in which the old habits of slavery must be unlearned before people can live in freedom in the promised land. There is wisdom in that story for all people who are not free. Salvation is often not easy. It is not a matter of God snapping his fingers and saving us. It requires agonizing transformations, in which we unlearn the things that hold us in slavery and relearn the patterns of free people.

A second major biblical story of salvation is the story of exile and return. In the creation story, Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden and live the rest of their lives “east of Eden.” That story was probably written while the Jews were in exile in Babylon during the sixth century before Christ. After being defeated in a series of wars, the Babylonian empire took thousands of Jews into captivity, and relocated them hundreds of miles away from their homeland. It was a wrenching experience, physically, emotionally and spiritually. The story of exile speaks to the common human problem of alienation, being separated from our spiritual and emotional home, being separated from the sources of meaning and energy that give our lives purpose and joy. This too is the experience of millions and millions of people, of all times and places. From African slaves who were captured and transported to the plantations of the new world to First Nations adults confined to reserves and First Nations children forced to attend residential schools, from refugees forced to flee their homeland, to people from the Maritimes who move to Alberta in search of jobs, the separation from home is a wrenching experience. There are also forms of spiritual and emotional exile, as people experience during the breakdown of a marriage, the death of a loved one, a serious illness or a crisis in faith that shakes our security. Such experiences make our homes seem strange even if we have lived there for decades. These are all forms of exile from which God wants to save us. Decades after their exile began, some of the Jews eventually made the long and difficult journey back home to Israel. Others, perhaps the majority, made their home in their new location, but not before an agonizing time (a “wilderness time”) of searching for emotional and spiritual community in their new situation. There is wisdom in that story for all people in exile.

The third major understanding of salvation in the Bible was centred, not in a story, in the institution of the temple, where people went to offer sacrifices for their sins and impurities. These impurities and sins, they believed, separated them from God, and sacrifice was the means of overcoming that separation. This understanding of salvation speaks to the human experience of being stained and soiled, of being sinful and unworthy. This is the experience of many, many people, who carry a sense of shame or guilt. Sometimes this shame is because of something they have done, some crime or immoral act they have committed. Sometimes it is because of something done to them, like an assault or childhood abuse. These are all forms of being separated from who we really are as children of God. And God wants to save us from that separation. The rituals of the temple offered cleansing, forgiveness and acceptance.

The New Testament understanding of Jesus correlates with each of these understandings of salvation from the Hebrew Bible:

* Jesus the Messiah addresses the experience of slavery. He is the liberating King come to establish God’s Kingdom of peace, freedom and justice. In his speech in his home synagogue in Nazareth he announced that had come to set the captives free, to restore sight to those trapped in blindness, to rescue those enslaved in their own sins, or trapped by the sins of others. The gospel, salvation is liberation, and Jesus accompanies us on the agonizing path to a promised land.
* Jesus the “Way” addresses the experience of exile. He is the one who has come to search out the lost sheep, and to lead the wayward home. The gospel, salvation is homecoming, and Jesus leads us on the agonizing journey to our true home.
* Jesus, the sacrifice, addresses the experience of shame and guilt. He is the assurance of our forgiveness and acceptance by God, and in him the need for constant sacrifices has been abolished. The gospel, salvation is forgiveness and acceptance and the saviour Jesus accompanies through the agony of healing our shame and guilt.

So what is salvation? In both English and the languages of the Bible, salvation is related to the words for healing and wholeness. Our word *salve,* which we use to describe a healing ointment, comes from the same root. Salvation, then, is God’s work of healing: bringing freedom to an enslaved world, leading an exiled people home, and reconciling the world to himself. Salvation is God’s work of healing a world afflicted by violence, greed and alienation. It is a work begun in Abraham, brought to fulfillment in Jesus, but not yet finished. It is a work in which we are invited to participate. Thanks be to God. Amen.