

Saved

Are you saved? Brother, are you saved? Sister, are you saved? Church, are you saved? Are you saved? Are you saved? It's a question we encounter from time to time, even here in the irreligious Northwest. Are you saved? I used to hear it a lot more in the Midwest and South, usually from perfect strangers. Are you saved? From the time I was nine years old, I've been able to answer with perfect conviction, "yes, yes, I am". But as the years have gone by, sometimes I wonder if what I mean by that answer is the same thing as the person who is asking me the question would mean by that answer. We've already had a pretty good sermon from our youth this morning, even before we officially started our Worship Service with the prelude, so I want to take just a few minutes this morning to share with you what I believe about being saved, how that ties into our Scriptures for the morning, and what I think it all means about how we go about living our lives on an everyday basis.

By and large, I think, those people who come up to me and to you out of the clear blue to ask "are you saved?" essentially are inquiring if we have been saved from the fate of everlasting punishment in Hell after our deaths by virtue of our belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. To that question, I would still answer, "yes, I am saved." I do believe that Jesus is the Son of God and in that belief I find the key to what the Gospel according to John calls "not perish(ing) but hav(ing) eternal life." I will confess to you that I am not as convinced in the existence of Hell as a place of eternal punishment, with fire and brimstone and the like, as I once was. I've begun to suspect that Jesus was speaking more metaphorically about such a place in his parables. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me that God, who so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, would prepare such a place for any of God's beloved children. I'm more likely to believe in the kind of Hell that C.S. Lewis describes in his novella, The Great Divorce: a sad and lonely place, where God honors our free will even to the point that God will allow us to continue to exist in a realm outside of the touch of God's love. Frankly, I find that description of Hell more disturbing in some ways than the fantasies of a Dante-like Inferno. But, I really don't know what God has prepared for the just or the unjust after this life is over and I am perfectly content to leave that to God. Either way, I am convinced that God's love through Christ Jesus will continue to envelop me when my time here on Earth is through. I have been saved.

But I also believe that to be saved, to "not perish but have eternal life," has an import here and now as well. I believe that when we are saved by the love of God through Christ Jesus, we are not just saved from some future judgment and punishment but that we are saved from living lives of fear. Allow me, if you will, to deviate from Scripture for a moment to the work of perhaps the second most influential writer in my life, William Shakespeare, whose preeminence in the English canon comes from his ability both to grasp the truth and to frame it in unforgettable ways. If we are saved from perishing, then we must be saved from fear, for fear is like a little death. In Act II, Scene ii of "Julius Caesar," Caesar says to his wife, "Cowards die many times before their deaths,/ The valiant never taste of death but once." When we live in fear, fear of Hell, fear of God's judgment, fear of poverty, fear of job loss, fear of loss of love, whatever it is that haunts our nightmares, then we die again and again, little bit by little bit, unable to fully live and love and laugh the way that God means for us to do. When I say, "I am saved," part of what I mean is that I am being saved; that because of Jesus, I am learning more and more every day not to let my heart be troubled and not to be afraid. My life is not tied to slow death by fear.

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John 3:16, that famous verse, says that through belief in Jesus, we shall not perish but have eternal life. ζωὴν αἰώνιον is the Greek, “the life of the ages.” Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, a Greek-to-English dictionary used by generations of seminarians, gives as part of its primary definition of αἰώνιος, “that which always has been and always will be.” Again, this suggests to me something more than just a life that goes on forever after we die in the presence of God, wonderful though that will be. It reminds me that God has always had a plan for humankind, a life that we have always supposed to have been living, life without the brokenness and rebellion of sin. That life which God had in mind for us included living as God’s beloved children, tending to creation not as God’s servants but as those for whom creation was our inheritance, sharing equally with one another in the riches of God’s world. Having eternal life means for me that my life as a joint-heir to creation with Christ Jesus began at the moment I said “Yes” to God and that my primary task in this part of my life, the earthly part, is to discover what living life fully means to me and to those around me. Gail O’Day, writing for The New Interpreter’s Bible about this passage, refers back to the prologue of John’s Gospel when she says, “To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will, but by God.” Paul Nuechterlein connects John 3:16 with a later saying of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel when he writes that having eternal life means “being connected (as branches to the vine) to the unending source of life.” In our belief in and connection to Jesus, we are plugged into the main line of God’s creative, life-giving power. As we open ourselves to that life, that power, anything becomes possible for us.

If contemplating the reality of such positive power in your life is not enough cause for joy on this Laetare Sunday morning, then hear this Good News. In return for being set free from death and fear, in return for God’s love and life everlasting, in return for the power of creation in our lives to let us be our best possible selves, God wants from us exactly nothing. Not a thing. Not a God-Blessed thing. As Brother Paul reminded the Christians in Ephesus, “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...” Not only is our salvation God’s free gift to us but even the faith we need to accept that gift comes to us as another gift. This isn’t about what we have or haven’t done for God or for our brothers and sisters or for creation. There is no score-keeping by God in our lives. This is only about how God loves the world, the Creation of God and every last human in it, no matter how far from God’s love we have allowed ourselves to become.

So, what does this mean about how we live? Knowing that salvation, that life itself is a gift, freely given, how do we conduct ourselves? Not in fear, certainly. Not in fear that God will revoke the gift if we do not toe the line, not in fear that we were never really good enough to begin with, not in fear that it is all some sort of cosmic joke and that God is waiting at the end of our lives to jump out at us and yell “Gotcha!” When we do wrong, we will find punishment enough in the natural consequences of our actions and in the knowledge that we have scorned the God who loves us so deeply. But we need not be afraid of God, for God is faithful to forgive. Nor should we live in fear of what this world can do to us, knowing as we do that God will prevail in the end, that our troubles will be washed away as we cross to the far-side banks of Jordan, that the healing balm of Gilead awaits our every hurt. And when we are free from fear, it is amazing what we are capable of doing in acting as the means by which Christ would change the world and bring the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, to full flower. God has made us for good deeds, great works “which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” It is

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only our fear that has kept us from doing what we were meant to do. It is fear of our own poverty that prevents us from giving with sacrificial generosity to those who have less than we do. It is fear for our reputations in this twisted society that keep us from reaching out in love to those who most need a friend. It is fear of sneering rejection that keeps us from going to our neighbors with the Good News that God loves them and that there is a better life available to them. To return to my beloved Shakespeare, this time to Hamlet, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,/ And thus the native hue of resolution/ Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,/ And enterprise of great pitch and moment/ With this regard their currents turn awry/ And lose the name of action.”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,” Jesus said. Do not be afraid. “Believe in God, believe also in me.” We are called this morning to believe that in the Father’s house there are many mansions and that there is a place for each of us, prepared since the world began. We are called this morning to believe that Jesus is the Christ, our Lord and our God. We are called to believe that he inaugurated the in-breaking Kingdom of God when he said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” We are called this morning to be Christians, not just in our hearts, but in our words and in our actions and in all of our lives. When we do, then we will truly know the joy that this Laetare Sunday whispers and the wondrous love of Jesus, which binds us to the heart of God, will flow through us so that the Church, the Body of Christ, will be seen as a fount of blessings worthy of the name of the Lamb. Are you saved? Brother, are you saved? Sister, are you saved? Church, are you saved? By the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the sustaining presence of the Holy Spirit, yes, we are. Thanks be to God!