

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Salvation”  
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Lent 4--March 11, 2018

Lessons: Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Salvation is not often talked about in polite company. It might cause offence. I met someone this past week who told me about a long-time friendship that is now strained because her friend became a “born again” Christian and now she spends much of her time correcting others who are not nearly as good Christians as she is. She’s absolutely convinced that those who are not “born again” are headed to damnation. It is sometimes difficult to talk about salvation because when we talk about whether we’ve been saved or not, too often it sounds as if salvation has to do with *our* activity, *our* hard work, rather than recognizing that salvation has to do with the action of God. Salvation is sometimes presented in a fashion that basically scares people into believing in order that they might avoid the terrible wrath of a vengeful God. Too often our talk of salvation has assumed an impossible contradiction in the nature of God. *God loves us, but if you don’t believe, God will get you.*

Shirley Guthrie told a story that deals with this contradiction: “Once upon a time a boy went to a revival meeting. He had grown up in a Christian home and in the church, but he heard something that night he had never heard before.

“The preacher held up a dirty glass. ‘See this glass? That’s you. Filthy, stained with sin, inside and outside.’

“He picked up a hammer. ‘This hammer is the righteousness of God. It is the instrument of God’s wrath against sinners. God’s justice can be satisfied only by punishing and destroying people whose lives are filled with vileness and corruption.’

“The preacher put the glass on the pulpit and slowly, deliberately drew back the hammer, took deadly aim, and with all his might let the blow fall.

“But a miracle happened! At the last moment he covered the glass with a pan. The hammer struck with a crash that echoed through the hushed church. He held up the untouched glass with one hand and the mangled pan with the other.

“‘Jesus Christ died for your sins. He took the punishment that ought to have fallen on you. He satisfied the righteousness of God so that you might go free and believe in him.’

“When the boy went to bed that night, he could not sleep. Meditating on what he had seen and heard, he decided that he was terribly *afraid* of God. But could he *love* such a God? He could love Jesus, who had sacrificed himself for him. But how could he love a God who wanted to ‘get’ everyone and was only kept from doing it because Jesus got in the way? The thought crossed the boy’s mind that he could only hate such a hammer-swinging God who had to be bought off at such a terrible price. But he quickly dismissed the thought. That very God might read his mind and punish him.”<sup>1</sup>

Today our lessons proclaim something else. God is not out to get us. Rather God is about making us alive. God is about saving us by grace. God is equipping us to live in a whole new way.

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<sup>1</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine*. Westminster John Knox Press © 1994.

God has created us in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. That is God's desire. God, who is rich in mercy, wants us to be fully alive.

John's gospel today tells the story of salvation in concise form. We've been talking about encouraging our kids to memorize some verses of Scripture and this would surely be a good place to start. "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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." The most important thing to remember, the proclamation that is at the center of the gospel, is not that God is full of wrath just waiting to punish miserable offenders like us. Our proclamation is not that we can somehow save ourselves. The gospel message is not that we have to trust God in order that God might love us, rather it is that God already loves us, so we can trust God. Our gospel proclamation is that God loves the world.

Frederick Buechner suggests that the experience of salvation is very much like the experience of love: "When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really *are* yourself."<sup>2</sup>

Salvation is not nearly so much about some future hellfire as it is about our discovering right now the joy that comes in recognizing and celebrating God's call for our lives, God's desire that we might really be ourselves. So salvation is not just about some future time. It is about right now.

Kathleen Norris points out that the Hebrew word for salvation means literally "to make wide" or "to make sufficient."<sup>3</sup> The way we are going right now is not sufficient. It is not wide enough. Too many people are getting hurt. The message of salvation is that God has come to us in Jesus to show us a new way of living, to show us a new way of treating each other, to help us live into our new reality where we are created for good works.

God's salvation is needed in our world today, not because people are headed for hellfire, but rather because our world is hurting. There is a lot of poison in our society today, and unlike the snakes in the story from Numbers, I don't think this poison has been sent by God. Yet the poison is hurting people: the poison of intolerance; the poison of hatred; the poison that suggests that a human life from this country is more valuable than a human life from another country; the poison that distrusts anyone who is different; the poison that suggests that we are good and our enemies are evil, the poison that idolizes guns rather than finding our safety in God. There is poison in our society. Yet, just as the ancient Israelites could look upon the serpent on the staff of Moses and be saved, so too we can look to Jesus and discover salvation. We can look at his life, the way he treated people, the non-violence he practiced, the time he spent with forgotten, hurting, ostracized people, the way he healed the sick and welcomed sinners and challenged the establishment, the way he brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly. Look to Jesus and learn about salvation.

God loved the world so much that God came to us in Jesus. The Divine became human so that humanity might become divine.

In our hurting, fractured world today, we can go along, continuing on a road that is not

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*. Harper & Row Publishers. © 1973

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*. Riverhead Books © 1998.

sufficient, or we can live the salvation we have received from God. We can show the world how God would have us live, celebrating the worth of every single human being. “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 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.” That is salvation.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we give you thanks for your amazing grace that continues to save the likes of us. Help us to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, that we might show the world how you would have us live. Amen.