

“Jesus: Savior”

December 6, 2020

Incarnation series

2nd Sunday of Advent, Livestream

Maybe you’ve seen the signs or the buttons or the banners or the memes with the simple and powerful message: *Jesus Saves*

SHOW SLIDE: neon sign

Maybe you’ve said it or heard someone say it. Maybe you have a moment when you received Christ as your Savior – or maybe you’ve lived into that relationship – or maybe you’re still figuring it out! When we talk about Jesus as Savior, what do we mean? Two important questions to explore are: what are we saved from? What are we saved for?

Perhaps you’ve had one of those conversations where someone asked, “Are you saved?” Maybe you’ve struggled to answer because the question is uncomfortable. Maybe you feel defensive or unsure about how to respond.

Maybe it’s not language you’re used to. I didn’t grow up using the language of “I’m saved,” though I know many faithful people who find comfort in that language. I wonder if the meaning behind it has more to do with a relationship with Jesus.

Whether we use that language or not, we need a Savior. We cannot save ourselves. We’re created in God’s image, but we’re also “prone to wander” from God, as the song says. We’re too easily tempted to go our own way, and we see the results every day: hatred, division, and brokenness that aren’t only personal struggles, but also broader struggles and injustices like racism and abuse that demand our response. Salvation isn’t only personal; it’s communal. It’s not simply being saved to go to heaven when we die; it’s about living with purpose in the here and now.

Today we re-read a part of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth from Joseph’s perspective, including instructions on what name to give the child Mary will bear. And the name is *Jesus*, which is significant. Mary receives the same instructions – to call this baby *Jesus* – in the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus was a common name at the time – like Bob or John or Mike. It comes from the Hebrew *Jeshua* – Joshua – which means “God saves.” And it may help to expand on what God does – God saves, delivers, rescues, and helps us. God’s saving work is broad and deep, and it’s ongoing in us.

Remember Joshua? He follows Moses as leader of the Hebrew people as they enter the Promised Land. Certainly, that history touches Joseph as he receives news that this child – *Jesus* - is the long-awaited Messiah (Anointed One) who will save the people

from their sins. So, every time the name *Jesus* is used in Scripture – more than 1,000 times - it's a reminder of who he is and what he does.

And in Luke's Gospel, the shepherds receive this "good news of great joy" for all the people – a Savior has been born to you. The angel also uses the title *Messiah* and the title *Lord* to describe this newborn baby. The shepherds receive an incredible message – that the wait is over! And it's for everyone – a promise of salvation for the world and a word about communal well-being.

Salvation usually comes in unexpected ways – and even in unexpected people. Sometimes salvation comes in unexpected places – even in the wilderness or the remote. I was reminded this week that "Moses, Elijah, and David all had to flee to the wilderness" and it was there they experienced God's salvation. Jesus went into the wilderness and came from it to begin his ministry – but returned to remote places to pray. Salvation isn't the product of ease or comfort. Salvation is a reality because we stand in need of it, and God is passionate about saving us and mighty to save.

And for these shepherds – salvation comes to them as they're watching their sheep in the announcement of a baby born in an unexpected situation. God's offer of hope is always through ways of love and grace – unearned, undeserved, unmerited – freely given for all of us because we need it.

We stand in need of salvation because we sin. Sin is what we do or don't do that separates us from God, from others, and from all of God's creation. The Greek word for sin has to do with missing the mark – think of an archer who is aiming at a target. When he or she pulls back on the bow to shoot the arrow, their goal is to hit the mark. We want to live with righteousness – with right aim before God, keeping God's commandments to love God and love others – and when we miss the mark, we sin.

So, what are we saved from? The quick answer is that we're saved from sin and death. It sounds right, but it needs to be unpacked a bit. We have a tendency to stray from what God intends for us, and we also have times when we've actually strayed for what God intends for us. And we know the results and consequences – personal pain, guilt, shame and knowing that we've hurt others and even broken relationships.

Faith in Jesus Christ doesn't mean that we don't have to face consequences for what we've done or not done, but we receive forgiveness when we repent and return to God. We can let go of guilt and shame and the alienation from God. We have an opportunity to grow in love for God and love for others.

In our Methodist tradition, we talk about the way of salvation, and I love that phrase. It's a powerful reminder that every day God is saving us, and every day we're choosing to follow God. And all of it is rooted in God's grace and God's love. **SHOW SLIDE:** *By grace God prepares us, justifies us, and then continues to grow us as followers*

of Jesus Christ...Prevenient grace prepares us... Justifying grace restores us... Sanctifying grace grows us.

We are being saved every day. We still struggle and sometimes say, do, or think things we shouldn't. But Jesus' presence with us is a help.

What are saved for? We're saved for love and new life. We're saved so that we can be transformed by the Holy Spirit to be more like Jesus every day. Jesus saves us for himself – to be witnesses of his amazing grace and love – not just our own story – but a part of God's story to be shared. Thanksgiving for the gift of God's grace and salvation can't be complacent, but spurs us to act.

I heard a witness from my friend's dad who is going through difficult health problems and grieving the recent loss of close loved ones. After I sent a short text telling him that I was praying for him, he wrote back, I "feel very blessed to have my Savior Jesus Christ to be at my side every day." And he offered prayers for me, my family, and even our church family. Whatever you've been through or whatever you're dealing with, you're important to God. His sense of Savior Jesus by his side was a powerful word for me.

I recently found a sitcom called *The Good Place*. From the title, you can guess that it deals with ideas about heaven and hell. It tackles big existential questions that philosophy and religion have been asking forever.

Michael, a demon turned good, says that they've always been asking "Are people good or bad?" He says that it's the wrong question.

What matters, he says, "isn't if people are good or bad, but what matters is if they're trying to be better today than they were yesterday." It's really about sanctification. Are we growing in grace? Does my life show the love of God? And when I sin, do I trust that God still loves me and wants to forgive me? Am I growing in my relationship with Jesus?

God is in the business of seeking and saving by way of the One who came to be **with us** in the mess and in the beauty of who we are. Jesus' life and death show us the depth of selfless love – and call us to share it with others. God knows us deeply and loves us no matter what. We can't earn God's love. It's not our reward for something we do; it's all about what God does. We are saved by God's grace through faith.

And love is our response to God's gift of salvation – more love for God and others. We have strength to resist temptation. We have joy – a sense of joy because we're not alone. We have hope for how God is at work. Our lives have meaning and purpose because we are loved and accepted by God.

Pastor Adam Hamilton shares a story about a marketing campaign for Helzberg's Jewelers that made an impact. In 1967, Barnett Helzberg had just become engaged, and

because of the love he felt from his fiancé, he ordered 50,000 buttons with a simple message: "I AM LOVED"

SHOW SLIDE: button image

The buttons sold out, and you can still find them today.

For Helzberg, jewelry was meant to convey love for others. Certainly, it came with a cost and hopefully with a sentiment of love. Perhaps in this season, even as so much may feel differently, we can focus on the profound truth that Jesus is Savior and a living expression of God's love for the world. You'll receive a "I AM LOVED" sticker when you come for Communion today. Put it somewhere to see it daily in this season, remember "you are loved," and love others with that foundation.

When we pray at Holy Communion, we look back and remember God's faithfulness - not just when things have gone well for us, but even more when we've known God's forgiveness and peace in our struggles. We give thanks for the blessings in our lives right now knowing that we can't live without God's help. And we look forward to what God will do in the future. We anticipate when Christ will come again. This is a simple meal, with a mighty message: God loves us and saves us.

As the song says, *Jesus Christ was born to save*. We come to the table because we need a Savior. The Good News isn't that we're sinners, but that we have a Savior. Jesus comes! A Savior is born to you - for you!

He's born because you need him. I need him. We need him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray...PRAYER of CONFESSION