

Once and For All

Hebrews 10:11-18

There are some words you just don't say in church. Around here, I've notice we say some of those words sometimes, if not in the sanctuary, then maybe in the parking lot! But there are some words we don't even say at Crossroads. I'm going to say one of them today, now. It's the "s" word: *salvation*. What do you think?

What do you hear when I say *salvation*? What do you think about? Its definition in general usage is to *protect* or *rescue from harm*. It's definition as a theological term is to *protect* or *rescue from the dangers of sin – to redeem*.

In some sense, salvation is the ultimate concern of most religion. It has been the ultimate concern of people throughout the ages who wrestle with those large questions of our existence. What is hope in relation to the vast universe, the powers of darkness, and the reality of death? How can we stand in the face of the great abyss of existence?

Christianity is not a religion in the strictest sense. Like Judaism and also Islam, Christianity is a Christianity. The Bible never actually defines salvation nor how it will be accomplished. It only proclaims that salvation is what God has accomplished in history. Our option is to respond by faith to God's action.

The Hebrew Bible, rather insensitively called the Old Testament by Christians, proclaims by faith that God acted in history to save the Hebrew people. The definitive act of salvation was the Exodus from Egypt, to act of shaping Israel into a people and of leading them to the Promised Land.

During the inter-Testament period, those 300 or so years not covered by either the Hebrew or Christian Bible, belief in life after death began to be established. Along with that, came a developing belief in salvation as personal and individual, with implications of eternal reward and punishment that were not really present before. Jesus was born into a world whose understanding of salvation as involving life after death was a fairly new concept.

It now seems natural to think of salvation, from a religious perspective, almost exclusively in terms of life after death – heaven and hell. It's easy to forget that was not necessarily Jesus' perspective. We have to work hard to remember to focus on this world, here and now.

You and I can't be sure that the Bible includes any of the original words Jesus actually said. Since he spoke Aramaic, we can be pretty sure we don't have those original words. Through the filter of the early Church, it seems pretty clear that Jesus' focus was on the transformation of this world of time space by the coming Kingdom of God. What the gospels in particular tell us about his healing, his teaching, and the miracles all point to the reality of God's presence in the world.

The first believers struggled to find images through which they could share and explain Jesus and the meaning of his life, his ministry, and especially his death. True messiahs were not supposed to die. The various writers shared a common belief that Jesus was God's instrument to save the world.

"Save the world from what?" you may ask. The answer is "from sin". What is "sin"? It is the state of being cut off from intimate relationship with the Holy, with God. There are many ways of understanding and interpreting this state of being "cut-off". I like the understanding of the theologian Paul Tillich which I paraphrase.

By virtue of being in this temporal world, a world of time and space, we are cut off, out of touch with Eternity, from which we come and to which we go. We find some clues that help us connect to that memory of Eternity embedded deep within creation. Principally, we can find God's presence in each other, in intimate human community.

For many of us, community is the medium of God. This reconnection, salvation, is the process of restoring an awareness of the Holy in us and among us.

Many early believers in Jesus were Jewish. They sought images from within their own tradition to explain how Jesus brought about reconnection, salvation. The writer of Hebrews, who was not Paul – we're not sure who it was – found an image within the Jewish Temple system of ritual sacrifices to explain the restored connection.

The Temple owned the power to reconnect people: to restore people to God and God to people. In the Gospels, Jesus de-legitimizes temple and its sacrificial system. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus supplants the Temple system. This is not a description of human-type sacrifice of the Son by God. Jesus chose to lay down his life. That act revealed the inability of the Temple, and the sacrificial system, to mediate God. Ironically, within a generation, the Christian Church began claiming the same monopoly on the power to reconnect people to God as the Jewish Temple had – the exclusive source of forgiveness and of salvation.

Jesus has spoken through the voices of many people, in many generations, in outrage to this claim by the Church. Jesus' death was an act of courageous love, showing us how to live. He revealed to us that God's active presence surround us all and integrates life. Jesus made clear and visible the mystical truth beneath and around life, that God is a tangible presence in the lives of all people.

Jesus' teachings, his example, and his death help us taste and touch the Holy that is in this world and in our lives. We find the Holy not in abandoning the world in favor of a heavenly reward, but in transforming our lives and the world by living in the light of God's presence here.

The season of Advent begins in two weeks, then Christmas. The meaning of this season is God taking flesh, entering our lives, to reconnect all creation to God. Christmas is all about salvation. It is a matter of faith that God (however you conceive of God) is proactive in our history (in whatever way we might understand that activity to take place) for the salvation of people and creation itself.

It is a matter of faith that the Eternal becomes clearly present in our human lives to redeem us, to shape and form us, to call, to gift and to cherish us. Our salvation takes the form of ransom from bondage into freedom, of darkness transforming into light, and of from brokenness becoming intimate relationship. The familiar Christmas carol states this truth: "Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free. From our fears and sins release us. Let us find our rest in thee"

The Christmas season, like the observance of Thanksgiving, cannot be a matter of looking back and remembering, or even celebrating, primarily. To keep these observances, they must be born within you. You become Thanksgiving in your heart by being a deeply thankful people, by letting thanks transform your life. A deeply thankful person will no longer be pushed by fear – whether fear of change or fear of loss. She will be transformed by her thanks for the presence of God. He will give thanks for the gift of meaningful life. We will step forward boldly into the future.

We become Christmas by embracing God's freedom deeply in our lives. Salvation is freedom from fear and freedom from a poverty of spirit. Salvation is to be filled with hope and becoming light. It is to be the possibility of salvation for others.

Salvation is far more than just individual relationship with God and the matter of heaven or hell after death. To embrace salvation is to embrace the deeper truth that all of us are held in the loving arms of God the Creator, or maybe the Evolver. The arms will never let us fall. No fear.

Our role as individuals and as community is to participate in the rebirth of creation into the realm of God, the reign of justice, peace, and love right here, right now.