

Where Is Our Salvation?

Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

Christmas is coming! America's celebration is well underway. Stores are full of Christmas decorations. Shelves are loaded with what retailers hope will soon be Christmas presents. Local radio stations are already several weeks into playing Christmas songs 24/7. Stores have already begun slashing prices to encourage more shopping even before what they hope will be a binge of last-minute Christmas shopping. And very soon the festive, and sometimes frantic, round of holiday parties will begin. This is Christmas in America.

Of course, Christmas is also a religious holiday. The Christian Church's observance of this season is really in two parts. Advent begins today, a four week journey to help us get ready in heart and mind to receive the Christmas child once again. Then, there is Christmas Day itself and the twelve days that follow. It is often a time of recovering from the feasting, partying, shopping, and the generally overindulging in the cultural Christmas celebration. There is also the need to recover from the music, pageantry, and hard work of celebrating Christmas at church. Of course Christmas can be quieter. It can be a time of contemplating the gifts of the season: family, friendship, hope, peace, love, and joy. And there is the most amazing gift of all: realizing that God is indeed with us and that Christ has been born again in our hearts.

The Christian Church has committed itself over the centuries to preserving the story of Jesus with the implications that story has for all of us. We have memorialized the life of Jesus in institution and practice so that it continues to be alive and vital for believers even 2,000 years after Jesus was actually born. We celebrate, in this season of Advent-Christmas, that the Christ child once again comes to be in us. We are blessed and reborn by his presence.

Many challenges face the Christian Church today, many of them from within. Incredibly, there is still resistance to full equality for women in ministry leadership in many churches. There is a similar resistance toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people both in ministry and in full participation in the sacramental offerings of the church such as marriage. These are challenging questions for churches, but mostly just in the extent to which many Christians agree or disagree and the amount of comfort and acceptance they are slowly growing to have.

But the greatest internal challenge we face today as the Church is our understanding of salvation. There is a huge division between Christians on the question of salvation. Are some saved and others not? Do some people go to heaven and others to hell when we die? Many Christians say "Yes" to this idea that there is judgment, damnation, and reward and that all souls spend eternity either in hell or in heaven. And judgment for determining that eternal destiny is professed faith in Jesus as savior – that the central tenet of faith is that belief.

Many Christians believe that and many others do not. Yet even those who don't still tend to think that the central tenet of Christianity is still that belief. As a result, many people turn their backs on biblical faith, reject Christianity, and miss the deep meaning of the Christmas season. But I tell you that there is another way to talk about salvation and to think about salvation. And that is the meaning of Christmas.

The Old Testament uses different words to encompass the idea of salvation. The words carry the sense of *enlargement* and *spaciousness* with the connotation of deliverance and freedom: deliverance from adversity, oppression, captivity, or death. God was the deliverer in the Exodus

from Egyptian slavery, through Red Sea, and into the Promised Land. The prophets of ancient Israel believed God's past action and concluded a future promise of salvation and deliverance at the end of history. This would be a new creation with the ultimate redemption of God's people. Jeremiah wrote: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety." (Jeremiah 33: 14, 16a)

The New Testament claims that ultimate deliverance has already happened in Jesus. In his coming is the fulfillment of the promise that

this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21: 32, 36)

We celebrate Christmas because, in Jesus' life, human beings are able to see the face of God and are invited to participate in the oneness for which we were all created. Salvation is not simply something that happens to you. It is something in which you and I engage in each day. As the apostle Paul reminds us to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," (Phil. 2:12) It is not a matter of working hard to get it right, but giving ourselves fully to doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

It is a mistake to limit salvation to a religious transaction that only punches a ticket to heaven as our reward. It is a mistake to settle for too narrow and limited an understanding of salvation. It is disastrous for the Church to restrict salvation to just saying certain words or joining the right group, even if it is a holy group, even if it is the Church! When we reduce salvation to a transaction to get into heaven, we miss the richness and depth of salvation the way Jesus lived and taught it. We miss the breadth of salvation that is received and lived. And we miss the opportunity to encourage all Christians to embrace that rich, deep, and broad understanding of salvation that is much more than they think!

According to one early Christian voice, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not have that within you, what you do not have within you [will] destroy you." (*The Gospel of Thomas*, v. 70). Salvation comes from bringing forth what is within you: realizing your potential, developing and investing your spiritual gifts, and using them for the benefit of others, and consequently for your own spiritual growth.

In the *Lord's Prayer*, we request, "deliver us from evil." This is more than a plea to protect me and keep me from eternal meaninglessness. It is also a commitment to be an agent of transformation for the delivering of all people from oppression, from evil, from dungeons of darkness both figurative and literal, from prisons of political repression, and from prisons of despair. This is what Jesus did and what he taught. This is the way Jesus lived and what it means to follow him. It is what we who follow Jesus have to share. This is why we are here. It is why the church, after 2000 years, still exists in the world.

The salvation question, in terms of our faith, is not, "Who is in and who is out?" The question is, "Will we choose to see the world through Jesus' eyes?" Will we see our lives as scarcity or as abundance, our work as hopeless or as possible? Do we come to life with self-defeating greed or with good news? How we choose to answer is a matter of faith.

Where is our salvation, then? Here in church, the Christmas observance is really focused on Christ as Immanuel, *God with us*. Historically, we don't know for sure when and where Jesus was born. We do know that the human being Jesus of Nazareth was actually born. He had to

have been born because we know he lived. His birth was an event in history even if it was not recorded. And his life changed the world.

This year, I am finding a very powerful sense of meaning at Christmas in the idea that all people can find common ground in Jesus -- in Jesus' very human life. This common ground is our shared humanity. As the cycle of birth and death, growth and decline, continues even through these holidays, we know that God is indeed with us at the very core of whatever it is that makes us human. That presence reminds us that we are also divine. God is with each of us and, in this very good news, we can once again experience salvation.

Salvation is the theological heart of Christmas. In Jesus, God came to be with us. Another way of saying this is that Jesus came to awaken us to the presence of God that is already with us, already in us, and to invite each of us to live in that truth. Jesus spoke of two roads in life: a wide road and a narrow one. The wide road is the way of people who live unconsciously. They are invited to the banquet, but they are too busy to come. They always have reasonable excuses not attending. Author Elizabeth O'Connor write,

They have many answers. When they do ask questions, they ask them of others, but never of themselves. There is a sameness about those in the crowd. They are the same at the end of the story as at the beginning. They do not receive anything into themselves. Things happen to them, but never in them. Their lives are rich in outer events and poor in inner ones. They are the Impoverished who are not Included in any poverty program. They are the dead who do not know they sleep." (*Journey Inward, Journey Outward*)

Let us hear and heed the voice of the watchman at the gate: "Sleepers awake!" The time has come. The salvation of God is among us. The presence of God is within us. The work of God lies before us. Amen.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”