

## The Plane of Salvation

Malachi 3:1-4, Luke 3:1-6

This is the second week of Advent. We are moving along on a journey, a pilgrimage, toward Christmas. Perhaps we are seeking, in the throes of the cultural Christmas shopping season, to get our minds and hearts ready to greet the Christmas child in the manger. Perhaps we are trying to make room in our lives for Christ to be born this year, in this season. But it is a season so filled with distractions and deceptive promises that, in seeking the joy and peace that is promised, a person can easily become disenchanted or numb in pursuit of the meaning of the season.

So, what can we do to find that meaning? As people of faith, we can begin with the Bible. We can learn from the faith experience of people who, long ago, sought to follow God and learn from some of the earliest followers of Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that it was in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius Caesar, who succeeded Augustus. Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea and Herod the ruler in Galilee. It was during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. In other words, it was roughly 28-29CE and the Word of God, signifying the return of prophecy, came to John the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. And John the Baptist starting speaking out using words from the book of Isaiah.

Prepare the way of the Lord.  
Make God's paths straight.  
Every valley filled and mountains made low  
The crooked paths straight and rough ways made smooth  
All flesh shall see the salvation of God." (based on Luke 3: 1-6)

So, what is this leveling thing all about? As we move through the four weeks of Advent, many of us are trying to get our hearts and minds ready to celebrate Christmas, trying to embrace the deep meaning of Christmas for us today. We find ourselves in a place to hear the voice of John the Baptist, preparing for the coming of the one who would show his people – all of us – the salvation of God. Using the image of level ground -- valleys filled, mountains made low, crooked paths straight, rough places made smooth, and all flesh, all life, will be able to see the salvation of God. All people will be able to perceive God's dream as God is acting to make that dream come true.

Luke's Gospel quotes John the Baptist quoting 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah, so at least all three were on same page. The dream of God is realized when all life is able to access and embrace salvation, oneness with God and each other. It is realized when the reality that all are in God and all are *in*, in Jesus becomes clear and evident for all to see. It is realized when those who, in this life, are mighty like mountains are brought low: not as punishment or humiliation, but as being brought to a state of being grounded. It is the process of getting free from the wealth, power, and sense of entitlement that can insulate us. It is a laying down of what keeps us from seeing the plight of the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering around us and in front of us. It is a turning away of all that causes us to place trust in that wealth and perceived power, that seeks to maintain a status quo that perpetuates the suffering of many in places like Colombia and even Kansas City. This leveling process can free us from all that blocks our sight so that we can see the salvation of God, participate in the dream of God, and not miss it.

The dream of God is fulfilled when those who are depressed or empty like deep valleys, whose lives mirror depressions in the earth, are filled in, raised up, and brought to level -- able to see. jWh are lifted up not to replace those who have been cast down, not lifted up to assume roles of power and dominance, but to embrace the fullness of our own humanity, our shared community, and to see God. And when we are lifted to level, we will be free of the barriers of fear, bitterness, and resentment that cause us to question our own innate worth and beauty. We will experience a restored a sense of hope, compassion, and a shared life and so be able to see the salvation of God, the oneness we share with God.

Hear another, more ancient, voice: the prophet Malachi who spoke to ring down the curtain on the Old Testament with an astounding promise.

The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap,

Purifying, refining like gold and silver" (Malachi 3)

Many Christians talk about God's plan of salvation, essentially what biblical voices are doing by using images such as refiner's fire, fuller's soap, mountains leveled, and rough ways made smooth. A plane is flat, level land. A plane is also a tool for leveling rough places. The coming of Christ is a plane event, a flat world scenario, so that God's salvation can be seen. What is this salvation? What is God's plan of salvation? Father Richard Rohr has written:

Religion is about union. Somehow to live in conscious union with God is what it means to be "saved." When world religions become mature, we will have a new history, no longer based on competition, rivalry, cultures, or warfare, but on people who are actually transformed. These people will change the world. They do not need to change other people, just themselves. God takes it from there. (adapted from Richard Rohr's *Preparing for Christmas*, 60-61)

God's plan of salvation is not formula so that those who believe the right way get into God's heaven while others get shut out. Salvation is a cry for all people to wake up to the reality that we are one: one with God, one with each other, and one in God. Salvation is a vision of all people choosing to share in an equitable world where true security is based on being invested in each other. Salvation is being aware that to see God is to see the needs of the poor, the hurting, and the lonely. It is embracing all that levels us: our own poverty, need, loneliness, and pain. It is our own growth, compassion, and ability to love. These can help us see God and see God's salvation.

The Bible teaches what may be God's plan of salvation: how to participate in God's dream for our lives. What do you think about this idea of salvation especially as we look to celebrate Christmas and God's presence being so clear in Jesus. At Christmas we celebrate the Christ presence that is already in all of us. Seeing that presence in each other and in ourselves is to see God's salvation in this world.

This week, I saw a car at a neighbor's house with a bumper sticker promoting the faith-based school the child of the family attended. It read, "Lutheran schools share Christ." When I read that, I had an insight about this whole idea of a plan of salvation-. Instead of sharing Christ with others -- like a possession we have to give them or a way we have of saving them. Instead of helping someone else receive Christ into their lives, it is better to awaken them to the Christ presence already living within them. Christ is born in them as well. Emmanuel means God is with them just as much as God with us.

Seeing God's salvation is all about living our lives on a journey in partnership with God. This idea of faith as partnership reminds us of the responsibility we each have within the communal life of God.

To see God clearly, it's important to do justice in our lives, to long for justice in our prayers, and to advocate justice using our influence. To experience the Christ presence fully means we need to feel compassion and act with compassion. It is not an easy or short road. Mountains and valleys in our world still challenge us, still obstruct our view of what really matters. Mountains and valleys within us still get in our way.

So, what will we do in order to see the salvation of God this Christmas season and in the new year? First, we need to remember that this is not something we have to create or make happen. Oneness with God is a reality that already exists, but we do have to open ourselves to it through prayer and meditation. Oneness is the truth of our lives: waiting for us to embrace the invitation and let go working so hard to be good. You are already good. Let go working so hard to be acceptable. You are already accepted.

We are called to live heroically: to climb mountains, fight injustice, and bring people together. But this is not in order to please God. God is well pleased with us already. It's just that many of our sisters and brothers are hurting or wandering blind or feeling cut off. Their pain is our pain -- is God's pain. God wants us to see them and reach out to them, to love them and be loved by them. It is a long, long, long, long way to level for our world, but we can move in that direction. We can begin today in Jesus' name.