

September 27, 2015  
The National Presbyterian Church  
**Basic Christianity: "Help Is On The Way"**  
Luke 19:1-9, 1 Peter 1:3-9; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 3:16-21

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During this month we've been looking at three words which are basic to our Christian faith.

We've been looking at the word "Jesus" and thinking about the humanity and the divinity of Jesus, and his own understanding of himself, and the calling which comes from the earliest days of the church to believe in Jesus Christ not only as a great teacher but as the divine son of God, our Lord and our Savior.

We spent some time as well looking at "God": the existence of God in a world and in a nation in which more people freely acknowledge their doubts that there is a God than in recent years. The number of people who claim to be atheists (and who are willing to say so), the number of people who may be agnostic (and are willing to say so) seems to be rising in all the polls. So we looked at the existence of God and reasons for believing in God.

Then we looked at the "Bible" – and I said that even though every ordained officer and pastor in the Presbyterian Church affirms that book "by the Holy Spirit is the authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and the Church Universal and God's words to us," the Bible is, nevertheless, not always an easy book to understand. It's a complex book. We might wish that God had just given us a one page fact sheet and that that would be easier to understand – but God chose to give us this rather hefty book, filled with rules and regulations, with stories, with poems, all kinds of different literature, that God asks us to read carefully, with our minds as well as our hearts, so that we would hear a word from God. And what I said was this: that though there are problems that remain unresolved as we read the book (and there's a time to think about these problems seriously), nevertheless this book is God's chosen channel to speak to us, and our call is to read it -- Read It! Read it, seeking God's voice as we do so. That's the way to demonstrate or discover that "it works" for God's intended purpose

We come today to a fourth word that I want us to think about. The word is salvation. This is not a word that we use very often in every day secular speech; though once in a while we may use the word or we may speak of our need for somebody to "come and save us." So, for example, if we're driving our car and it's a dark night and we're in a lonely place and we have a flat tire and we're absolutely stuck, and we feel it may be dangerous, and our cell phone battery has died so that we can't contact anybody else – we may think "I'm in need of a savior, I'm in need of salvation!" And then somebody comes along. We see their headlights, they come our way. And we may think "I don't know whether they're going to do me good or do me harm." They come out of the car and they want to help us: they're going to call for somebody, or they

can fix our flat tire; we may just, at that moment, find that our anxiety is relieved by blurting out our thanks with words like these: *“Thank God you arrived! You are my salvation! You’ve saved me. I was in a real mess and you have come my way and I’m so grateful that you saved me from this predicament that I find myself in.”*

So from time to time we may find ourselves in a bad place like that, and we may spontaneously erupt by speaking about salvation and being saved. But, to be sure, this is not a frequent occurrence! Or we may use the words in another context . . . we might find ourselves looking back on life and reflecting on the influence of somebody in our lives who in some way “saved us.” Maybe not literally. Maybe we were heading down a certain path in life and changed direction; and many years later we realized that if we’d stayed on the original path it would have been disastrous. Perhaps along the way we met somebody who changed the course of our life, and we look back and we say ‘Oh my! They were like a savior to me.’

Some of you may remember the movie Titanic (from 1997). Some of you have seen it once. I know there are a lot of people who’ve seen it dozens of times! It’s about the discovery of the wreck of the Titanic (truly discovered in 1985) and the story (not history) of two people who were supposed to be on the ship at the time, Rose Bukater, and Jack Dawson. Jack is a stowaway starving artist, and on the ship he meets Rose who is from a wealthy family and is engaged to be married to a man she does not want to marry; and her mother is pushing her into this relationship. Rose is very uncertain and then she meets Jack, and becomes even more uncertain about this relationship. In fact she believes it’s going to be absolutely disastrous. Many years after she survived the wreck, Rose tells this story to the explorers who discovered the Titanic lying at the bottom of the ocean, saying that she was there. They doubt that she’s telling the truth because her name doesn’t seem to be on any roll of passengers who were there: her last name is now Dawson, not Bukater; she changed her name as soon as she reached shore safely. And they doubt that the Jack Dawson she speaks of was there either. She says of course there’s no record: he was a stowaway. The exchange between Rose and the doubting explorer goes like this:

He says: “We never found anything on Jack Dawson. There’s no record of him at all.”

To which Rose replies: “No there wouldn’t be, would there? And I’ve never spoken of him until now. Not to anyone. Not even to my husband. But now you know there was a man named Jack Dawson . . . [and then she says this] . . . *“and that he saved me in every way that a person can be saved.”*

“He saved me in every way that a person can be saved.” So, what does she mean when she says this? It’s clearly highly significant. Well what she means is that she had felt trapped, heading down a path in life which was leading nowhere good, engaged to a man who had assured her that he would provide for her in terms of wealth, but whose personality and character would crush her spirit and soul. She was under the rule and the thumb both of this man and of her mother; and then along comes this Jack Dawson out of the blue, and opens up a whole new way of thinking of life for; who was so important to her that when she arrives safely on land, even

though he does not survive, she actually changes her name to his – the old Rose dies (her family believe her to be dead) and “rose again” with his last name; a new person, all because of this interaction with this man, Jack Dawson. If you were to ask her she would have said “Oh yes, no doubt about it! He saved me! He was my savior! Through him I found salvation.

So we don’t use the word salvation (or the idea of being saved) that often, but once in a while we may find ourselves using this word when we’re in some kind of trouble, or when we look at some change in our life which moved us from a dead end to a place where our souls actually began to be filled with life again.

When we turn to the pages of Holy Scripture and look at the word salvation and the verb “to save” (being saved and saves), which appear hundreds of times in the pages of scripture, one of the things we find pretty quickly is that the God of the scripture is a God who is passionately interested in your salvation and mine – passionately interested in saving us, and powerful enough to fulfil that passion. This passion and activity is linked to the very nature of God. In fact one of the great names for God in the pages of Holy Scripture includes the word salvation: the Psalmist calls God “the Rock of my/our Salvation.” What a wonderful name for God, which speaks about the strength of God and the passion of God to be in the business of saving people. But God’s passion to be a savior, is not just a word about God – it’s also a word about us, about the fact that you and I need a Savior! We need saving! We get into all kinds of trouble, all kinds of predicaments, whether it’s a flat tire or whether it’s heading in the wrong direction in life or something else. And even when things are going well, the truth is that trouble is never far away, so that time and time again we need somebody in our lives who will save us, who will be our savior. And in the scripture God is revealed as the savior we need – in all kinds of different circumstances and ways.

When people in the Bible call out to God for salvation,

- sometimes it’s because they are facing violence or danger danger.
- Sometimes they need salvation from enemies and from exile.
- Sometimes it’s from slavery and from injustice.
- Sometimes it’s from hunger and from human weakness – weakness in the body and weakness in the soul.
- Sometimes it’s from illness and sickness which besets us, and over which we have no control and the cry out goes to God, “Please save me Lord in this time of bodily weakness.”
- Sometimes it’s in the face of death.
- Sometimes it’s in the face of evil: when we are powerless against evil – knowing what is right to do but nevertheless not having the power within us to do it. We cry out to God to save us from the sin at work within our lives.
- And sometimes it’s a cry to save us from God’s judgment. Knowing our sin and weakness, we know there’s a reckoning, a judgment. And we know that we can do nothing about it unless we find a savior.

There is, as we look at the length and the breadth of the usage of the word salvation and saving and the pages of Holy Scripture, a broad range of activities in which God is interested in coming into human lives in order to save us.

And this is critical to remember in an age which too easily polarizes opinions and pits one side of something against another. The church has often taken this polarizing approach with the whole idea of salvation. So that one wing of the church says “You know, when it comes to salvation in the scripture, what God is really interested in is the nitty-gritty of life, the right-here-and-now, saving us in the predicaments we face in life right here and now. God is passionate about a “this worldly” salvation.

And this wing stands in contrast to others who say “You know, this world is of no great importance. This world exists for a mere speck of time. God’s concern is with eternity not time. God is not really interested in saving us in any sense in this world at all. What God really wants to do is to save us for all eternity, and when salvation that is eternal is at stake, all the issues of this world shrink into insignificance. Eternity is what matters. The temporal world we live in doesn’t matter at all.”

So the image might come to mind of the Titanic, once again. This time it’s sinking. And some of you may remember a (true) scene of the orchestra playing while the ship is going down. The band tried to keep people calm. But some would say, “What’s the point of doing that? There’s only one thing that really matters and that’s to find a lifeboat; if you don’t find a lifeboat it’s all over very, very quickly indeed.”

This argument may seem to be compelling: eternal concerns surely overwhelm the temporal. The need for eternal salvation, when so much is at stake, surely overwhelms any other concern; our only real interest should be in getting as many people to heaven as we possibly can. This is the ultimate issue. There’s no question – this argument makes sense. Except for the Biblical facts! As I’ve already said, when you look at the way the word “salvation” is used in the pages of Holy Scripture it’s apparent that God is interested in so many different ways to save people: big salvation and small salvation! And indeed when we look at the life of Jesus our Savior, what we discover is that he doesn’t spend his time merely speaking about how to get people to heaven. Jesus’ own sense of salvation is broader than that.

Let me put it like this: when we read the story of Jesus in the gospels, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, there is no question that the Jesus we meet in those stories believes that this life is not all there is; that beyond death there is “more to come”; that we will all face death and we will all be raised from the dead, and we will all meet God face-to-face, coming before God in judgment. If you cut this teaching out of the story of Jesus there’s not much left! It’s there in Jesus’ parables especially: in the stories that he tells of judgment, of an eternal banqueting feast, of a great chasm or divide between the righteous and the unrighteous. There is no question that Jesus believed that there was some kind of eternal dividing of the ways after this life was over.

Indeed, you may remember the simple word of Jesus to the thief who was dying on a cross beside him: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43). This is an assurance that all of us need: what our eternal destination is going to be! It certainly appears to be important to Jesus that we know this as we read the gospels.

BUT . . . still, when we read the length and the breadth of the gospels what we do not see is a Jesus who is going around from place to place pinning people down asking only the question about knowing whether you know you are going to heaven when you die. Jesus’ interest, rather, as with God’s interest, is in all kinds of areas of life, saving people for eternity as well as for the present moment.

The one summary of Jesus’ teaching that we have (Matthew 4:17) tells us that Jesus preached, saying “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand (or near).” This is not a message about going to heaven when you die, but about the God of heaven entering earth right here and now. In fact, it’s a statement about Jesus and our need to respond to him! He is the king whose kingdom is referred to! He is the king of Heaven (and Earth) who has come to Earth and is close to you. And the call to repentance primarily involves believing this, and becoming intimately related to the king and his community (the kingdom) both now and for all eternity.

If the king has entered our realm, earth, then it is because he believes that our earthly life matters, right here and now. Eternity too; but right here and now as well. So that if we are rightly related to him he will share his power to lead us through the troubles of this world, through the gate of death, and on to eternity forever. He makes the first move. He approaches us. He draws near to us. We don’t earn this favor, it’s by grace. Unable to save ourselves, he freely offers us a relationship with him, the one who is the ultimate savior; a relationship and a saving power and presence from which nothing can separate us in life and in death.

That’s the way Jesus approaches his whole ministry: from a relational point of view. It’s not just about going to Heaven when you die. It’s about entering into a relationship with the person who can help us most, both in life and in death; a relationship without which ultimately, yes, we will be lost; without which we are lost, too, right here and now.

And we see this approach of Jesus portrayed so clearly in the story that we read a few moments ago of Jesus and his encounter with Zacchaeus (in Luke 19). It may seem to be just a simple story but it is a story filled with profound theological truths about salvation.

So you have this man by the name of Zacchaeus who lives in the city of Jericho, and he’s rich. He’s become a collaborator with the Romans who are controlling the land at the time, and he has become their chief tax collector. The Romans would tell the tax collectors the amount of money that they wanted to be collected, and turn a blind eye to any extra that the collectors kept for themselves. So Zacchaeus, no doubt added a hefty collection fee onto what he collected, and he becomes rich indeed.

I would suspect that for much of his life the injustice of the situation didn’t worry him that much. But we know that by the time that we come to our story he’s worried. Uneasy. Unsettled.

His life is causing him some anxiety. And we know this because he is willing to do something which is highly embarrassing. He hears that Jesus is coming to town and he climbs a tree to see Jesus. We might well say to ourselves “Well in those days people did that sort of thing.” No! Not Zacchaeus. He would not have done that. This would have been as embarrassing back then as it would have been today – to be caught, the chief tax collector, up a tree, looking for this wandering preacher to come by!

But he’s willing to do it because he thinks that Jesus has something that he needs. He is needy and he’s now baring his neediness, as it were, openly before others. He is needy and he believes that Jesus is the one who can fill that need. And what he wants is just to see him, and maybe something will happen that will fill his emptiness. The salvation he needs is relational right from the beginning, tied in with Jesus.

And then something happens which is more than he could never even have begun to imagine. Jesus stops under *his* tree! And looks up at Zacchaeus in the tree and calls him by name. This man Jesus knows his name. How personal is that?

Jesus knows his name, perhaps, because people may have said ‘there’s one person in town you do not to meet and that’s Zacchaeus.’ It would be typical of Jesus to say ‘well that’s the one person I definitely want to meet!’

But for whatever reason Jesus knows Zacchaeus’ name and calls him by name. And then Jesus invites himself right into Zacchaeus’s life. He says “I want to come to your house today. I want to stay with you.” And the crowd begins to murmur, “Don’t you know? Don’t you know who he is? Don’t you know what he’s done? Don’t you know that he doesn’t deserve a bit of this?”

There is no response to this murmuring in the text of the story. But the point is made clear by their comments: Jesus’ approach to Zacchaeus is a matter of sheer grace. He doesn’t do this because Zacchaeus deserves this. He does this because he loves him. Unadulterated grace entering Zacchaeus’s life. ***This is what a savior does. A savior comes to a person who is absolutely helpless – whether they deserve it or not; and especially when they don’t deserve it! A savior steps into a life and becomes the strength that a person needs.***

So Zacchaeus comes down the tree and welcomes Jesus -- the scripture says “with joy.” And Jesus, we presume, goes to his house, and after they’ve spent time together it’s clear that Zacchaeus’s life has changed.

Luke 19:8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “*Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.*”

Instead of being a getter he becomes a giver. Instead of grabbing for what he can get he lets it go. Instead of not being concerned for justice he becomes concerned to put things right, to make things just. His life is transformed in all kinds of ways. Instead of heading down what was

becoming more and more apparent to him, a dead end road (as Rose was heading down a dead end road), he had met somebody who was now setting him on another path.

And Jesus responds to this change by saying these powerful words, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

Jesus only uses that word once and again in the gospels when he speaks to a woman at a well in Samaria (John 4); the only other time in the gospels when it’s used is when a man called Simeon looks on the baby Jesus (Luke 2:30) and prays, “My eyes have seen your salvation” speaking of seeing Jesus.

So here is this remarkable occasion in which Jesus speaks about salvation coming to Zacchaeus. We don’t know what went on in the meeting that Zacchaeus had with Jesus.

We don’t know if Zacchaeus said, “Jesus, I don’t know why you’ve come here. My sins are too many for you to forgive. Please go away, there’s no way you can forgive me.”

We don’t know if Jesus said “But Zacchaeus, I’m on my way to Jerusalem and there in Jerusalem I’m going to die, I’m going to die for your sins. And there is no sin that you *have* committed, *are* committing or *will* commit that my death will not cover.”

We know nothing of the internal details.

But what we do know is this: that in that encounter, Zacchaeus entered into a relationship with Jesus that transformed him, that “*saved him in every possible way*” both in life and in death, for all eternity.

And this is the nature of God – to be interested not just in our souls, but in all that we are, and to bring us his power, his grace and his love to meet us where we are and to walk with us, beside us, leading us as a shepherd in life now, and through all eternity.

So, sure, ultimate salvation is critical! No question. But, more important to God is your ultimate importance in the sight of God: all of you. That’s the issue, you and me: including all the nitty-gritty details of life now, as well as eternity. The same God who came to Zacchaeus is the God who comes to us; who walks into our lives so unexpectedly and sees us, whatever tree we are up, whatever flat tire we have, whatever ship we’re on that may sink along the way, he comes to us and he says I want to come into your house, into your life.

The great image in Revelation Chapter 3 is of Jesus standing at the door of our lives and knocking, trying to get through our self-sufficiency: our saying “I can do it by myself!”

“No you can’t,” says God. “You’ll always come up against something which you cannot handle by yourself. Why don’t you give up on that right now and welcome me in and I will be your savior now and forever.” Sheer grace. Never earned, not deserved, because that’s who God is and that’s who Christ is. And that’s who we are. I trust that for you today will be the same day as it was for Zacchaeus – *the day of salvation*, in which you will know that relationship with God that nothing can break: though our grip on him may be loose his grip on us is strong. He

longs to be your Savior and mine now and forever. And when we welcome him as simply as Zacchaeus did that's what will happen.

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