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John 3:1-17

## THE NATURE OF GOD

The blizzard that hit the Buffalo area on Christmas weekend this winter was a deadly and traumatic event for our region. Forty-three people lost their lives. Harrowing stories emerged of people being trapped in their cars, of people suffering medical emergencies and yet unable to access help, of people losing power and struggling to stay warm in the freezing temperatures.

*Other* stories also emerged in the days following the storm. We heard about people extending extraordinary acts of kindness to help one another—such as the story about Jay Withey, the 27 year-old Kenmore mechanic who saved the lives of as many as 24 people during the height of the storm. When Jay's truck got stuck in the snow in Cheektowaga on December 23, he offered shelter from the freezing cold and fierce wind to a young boy who was trying to navigate the street on foot and to a woman whose own car was stuck behind him. Together they made it through the night by starting and stopping the engine in an effort to stay warm while conserving precious gas.

The next morning, Jay led his companions to a nearby elementary school where he broke a window to gain entry. After getting his two companion safely inside, he went back to the road and started going car to car rescuing others who were trapped. Inside the school, Jay found the master key and unlocked the nurse's office to procure blankets and floor mats for people to sleep on. He pried open the kitchen doors and was able to find food for everyone. Over the course of the weekend, Jay kept going back out with a couple other people to rescue yet more stranded motorists as well as residents in the neighborhood who had lost power and heat. It is estimated that some 24 individuals found safe-haven in the school building due to Jay's efforts.

When the storm ended and the group finally was able to leave the building, the guests put everything back where it belonged. The broken window was boarded up. The kitchen was cleaned up. And before leaving, Jay left behind a hand written note: “To Whomever it May Concern: I’m terribly sorry about breaking the school window and for breaking into the kitchen. Got stuck at 8 p.m. Friday and slept in my truck with two strangers. Just trying not to die. There were 7 elderly people also stuck and out of fuel. I had to do it to save everyone and get them shelter and food and a bathroom. Merry Christmas. Jay.”

Jay was celebrated in our region as a hero. And surely he was. This is a rescue story. A story of someone who saved people’s lives. And that makes it a story of salvation.

Salvation occurs when people in danger are restored to life. When you rescue someone from a savage blizzard or pull someone from a burning building, you are removing them from danger and restoring them to life.

So how might we understand this idea of salvation in relationship to our faith? The Christian tradition uses the language of salvation when talking about our faith. Christians profess that “Jesus saves us.” Some Christians will recall a specific moment when they were saved by Jesus. But what exactly do we mean by this? What dangers do *we* face? *How* does Jesus save us? *Who* gets to be saved? When does salvation happen? And what implications does our *being* saved have on the rest of our lives?

During the weeks of Lent, we are going to spend some time exploring this idea of salvation and trying to unpack its meaning. But I want to be upfront about something. My focus will be on what salvation may mean for us right now. I am definitely *not* going to ignore the topic of life after death, *but* I am going to focus primarily on what salvation may mean for us right now. And that is because throughout much of Christian history, just the opposite has

occurred. Much Christian focus has been given to salvation as a reward we get after we die. The idea put forth by some Christians is that if we believe in Jesus, we get to enter heaven. This exclusive focus is problematic for a variety of reasons, one of which is that it reduces the Christian faith to some kind of magic entry ticket into heaven. If the salvation Jesus offers us is only about getting into heaven after we die, we are missing something fundamental as well as something beautiful about our faith.

When we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, we see that Jesus's attention is focused on life-giving ministries on *this* side of the grave. In the stories of Jesus' healings and teachings, his inclusion of those on the margins, his critique of the religious leaders, his forgiveness of sinners, in all these accounts Jesus seems to be trying to save us while we are still alive. So we are going to explore what salvation means for us while we live and breathe and walk upon this earth. But to do this, we must first look at the origins of our salvation. We must turn our gaze to God.

The entire Bible could rightly be considered a rescue story—for it is a series of stories about of God's commitment to, one might even say God's obsession with, saving us humans. In the stories of the Exodus we learn about God saving the Hebrew people from their enslavement in Egypt. Generations later, the Exile account tells the story of God sustaining the people in their time of captivity in Babylon and then acting to release them and bring them home. These are salvation stories. The biblical prophets also participated in the salvation theme. They sought to save their people from unjust priorities and behaviors which oppressed the weak and vulnerable, calling people to return to God's righteous ways. And in the life and ministry and resurrection of Jesus, the Bible shares the story of the gift of God's saving love and a saving way of living and being in this world. Salvation is one of the central themes of the Bible.

What all these stories reveal is something about the very nature, the very essence of God—that God *is* life-giving love. Life-giving love is the essence of God. It was this life-giving love that moved God to create this world. It is this life-giving love that moves God to sustain this world. The very nature of God is life-giving love.

Jesus speaks about this expansive love in our reading today when he tells Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” And then the very next sentence which is crucial for understanding this message, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Life-giving love is the motivating factor in saving us. God sees all the ways we are in danger and acts to restore us to life.

Notice, God’s love is not for just a select group of people. It’s love for the *world*. God’s saving love is poured out upon this world. What we are saved *from* and what we are saved *for* will be part of our exploration another day. But for now, we are shown that the essence of God’s nature is an expansive, life-giving love for the world. This is not a punitive God we worship. This is a God who loves every one of us fiercely and steadfastly and works to deliver us from the dangers of this world and to restore us to life. Because that is who God is.

When Jay Withey went car to car rescuing stranded motorists from the raging blizzard, he didn’t first ponder whether these individuals deserved to be saved. He simply saved. Because their lives mattered. He acted with life-giving love to rescue those in danger. The kind of love Jay embodied is not based on having warm emotions or feelings—because these folks were strangers to him. But it is a kind of love that is rooted in a steadfast commitment to the

wellbeing of others. Our lives matter to God. Your life matters. Your neighbor's life matters. Your enemy's life matters. The God of life-giving love pours out this love on everyone.

The Apostle Paul describes this kind of love in the letter we read today from 1 Corinthians. The ancient world had three different words to describe three different kinds of love: *eros* for romantic love, *philia* for brotherly, sisterly, friendship kind of love, and *agape* to describe God's kind of love.

The Apostle Paul uses the term *agape* in this passage to the Corinthian community. He is trying to encourage that community to model their love for one another after God's kind of love. And so, we are able to glean from this passage what God is like, what God's love is like. God's love is patient. God's love is kind. God's love bears all things. And God's love never ends. Never ends. Ever.

So, if God's love never ends, that means that no matter what we do or fail to do, no matter what *you* do or fail to do, God is always going to love you. Always. If God's love never ends, that means that God, whose very nature is life-giving love, is always trying to save us from life-depleting forces. If God's love never ends, then there is no place we could ever be or go in this life or the next where God's love is not present. If God's love never ends, then how could some people *ever* be consigned to an afterlife of torment while others are welcomed into the gates of paradise? Not possible! Because God's life-giving love never ends. It is we humans who cling to our systems of rewards and punishments, of insiders and outsiders, who cut people off from us when they displease us or wrong us. But God's nature is different than our nature.

God does not ignore the evil and cruelty and greed and selfishness, and injustice that exist in this world and which, quite honestly, exist within our own lives and hearts. Indeed, these are

the very conditions from which we *need* God's life-giving, life-saving love. And so God acts to save us. Because that is who God is.