

God Seeks to Save

Hosea 11:1-4, 8-9; John 3:16-17; Luke 19:8-10

What do you believe about salvation? How does God come to save? And what does it have to do with me and my world?

The topic makes some of us nervous because of the ways the meaning of salvation has been presented in the past, often with some fear attached. “Are you saved? Do you know you’re saved? What if you are in a wreck on the way home from church and die; are you sure of your salvation?” Yikes. We may need some rehabilitation of words like salvation and sin.

The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith says of God, to God: “You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.”

I

Let’s begin with the verb: “seek.” God seeks to save. In his masterful book, *God In Search of Man*, Rabbi Abraham Heschel writes:

The Bible speaks not only of man’s search for God but also of God’s search for man....All of human history as described in the Bible may be summarized by the phrase: God is in search of man.¹

A Jewish poet wrote:

With all my heart have I called Thee,
And going out to meet thee
I found thee coming toward me.

God has forever been in search of us, in creation, in history, in scripture, in prophets, in Jesus Christ.

God's love for us, God's *hesed*, steadfast love will never let us go. In Hosea such love is pictured as a mother's love for her child.

I taught you how to walk
I nursed you in my arms,
I dandled you on my knees
and then I watched you wander from my love.

Then these heart-wrenching words God says to us:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How surrender you, O Israel?....
My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender....
I will not act on my anger....
for I am God, not a mortal,

The Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come to destroy.

Here is the heart of the heart of God, who seeks in holy love to save us from aimlessness and sin.

II

Now we tackle the word “salvation.” How many ways does God come to save? Many ways. The Bible shows us these ways. Salvation for the Hebrews was *deliverance*, from slavery, from exile in Babylon, from every oppression. Big dramatic acts of rescue. But there was also “salvation as blessing.” The daily ways God comes to provide and heal, such as the gift of fruitful land and flocks, the blessing of children, the times we get well. In both ways salvation was *joy*.

As for the New Testament, some Christians tend to focus on the form of salvation as “eternal life”:

For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Eternal life meant *life forever* with God. And it could begin now, not just in the hereafter. Eternal life, full and abundant life could begin here and now and then be completed in the world to come. Eternal life is when we join our lives with God’s life. Believing is our entryway, and Jesus showed the way.

Unfortunately the fear of hell was sometimes joined with this good news, salvation as escaping hell. So we got this mixed emotional message: “God loves you so much God sent his son to die for your sins. And if you don’t believe it, you’re going straight to hell!”

In the deepest meaning of the word salvation means healing and wholeness, for us as persons and for the world itself. The healing of bodies, souls, the land, social structures, the whole world.

III

Now to the word *sin*. We sometimes run for cover when hear the word. The word has been used to shame our very personhood. But there are times we need, for our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others to say: *I was wrong*.

But sin is more than particular sins. It is a *condition* we can find ourselves in. It is a gone-wrongness about our lives and the life of the world. It can be expressed in such words as disorder, estrangement, alienation, far from home with God and our true selves, a lostness. God comes to save us from conditions such as these.

And more, sin in the New Testament is a *power*, a power that can take over people and groups of power. Sin “crouches at the door”, like a lion. It can devour us. Paul wrote often of our being delivered from the power of sin. We see it at

work in the hatred we see on people's faces and the hatred we see on signs and slogans.

We also see sins built into social structures and customs, laws and political policies. God comes to save us from these forms of sin too.

IV

Now what about "aimlessness"? I was struck that this word was joined with the word sin as something from which we need saving. Meaninglessness is part of this malaise. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* Victor Frankle drew upon his experiences in a concentration camp to study how crucial a sense of meaning was to survival there—and crucial for us today. The French word *ennui* refers to a kind of world-weariness when we have lost a sense of meaning, purpose and pleasure in life. Despair can grip in such a way that we need to be delivered from it.

In his novel and spiritual classic, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, George Bernanos has his old French priest look over his world and say:

The world is eaten up by boredom....You can't see it all at once. It is like a dust. You go about and never notice, but you breathe it in, you eat and drink it. It is sifted so fine, it doesn't even grit on your teeth. But stand still for an instant and there it is, coating your face and hands. To shake off this

drizzle of ashes you must be forever on the go. And so people are always “on the go”. Perhaps the answer that the world has long been familiar with boredom, that such is the condition of man....but I wonder if man has ever before experienced this contagion, this leprosy of boredom: an aborted despair, a shameful form of despair in some ways like the fermentation of a Christianity in decay.²

Such may be the case with Christianity in America today. And God comes in holy love to save us from this too, as God calls us into partnership in the redeeming of the world.

V

Our last text is a familiar one: Zacchaeus, he a chief tax-collector and rich, a cheat, a traitor, one overtaken by the lust for money and power over people. But perhaps he sensed something not right about himself, so when he heard Jesus was riding to town, he scampered up a tree to get a front row seat. But Jesus saw *him* too, looked right up and invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. Zacchaeus may have gotten down from the tree by falling out of the tree!

The townspeople gathered around grumbled as they saw Jesus and Zacchaeus walk arm in arm down the street toward Zacchaeus' house. That's *another* form of sin!

In the middle of the meal Zacchaeus suddenly stood up and said, “Lord, half of all my goods I will give to the poor; and if I’ve defrauded anyone of anything, I will repay four-fold!” And what did Jesus say? He used the “salvation” word. *“Today, salvation has come to this house.”*

How many ways was Zacchaeus saved? From greed, from the need to dominate, from alienation and loneliness, from self-hatred, and now restored as a “son of Abraham”, and now he a saving help to the poor. Here and now salvation was coming from heaven to earth.

Then Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” He was God, in search of us. Sometimes even when we are not looking, God is on the way to us. It is called grace.

The old Presbyterian hymn goes:

I sought the Lord,

and afterward I knew

He moved my soul to seek him

seeking me.

It was not I that found

O Savior true.

No, I was found of Thee.

Perhaps this is the most joyous sense of being saved: Being found.

Like a lost lamb, a lost woman, a lost man, a lost child, a lost *me*.

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of man: A Philosophy of Judaism*

(N.Y.: Farrar, Strause and Giroux, 1983).

2. George Benarnos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (N.Y.: Carrol & Graf

Publishers, 1965), pp.2-3.