Some of us hear the word *salvation* and we come into the conversation carrying a lot of baggage.

I wasn't raised in a church setting that used the language of being "saved," or emphasized needing to "accept Jesus as one's savior." But I do remember that awkward feeling when I first started to be asked by others, *"Are you saved?"* or *"When were you saved?"*

I think it was probably on an activity bus—bouncing along the road on the way to a soccer game. Someone asked it casually, like it was a normal question with a normal answer.

"When were you saved?"

And I hesitated.

I didn't know how to respond. I felt that familiar middle-school insecurity—the kind that lives in bodies and brains that are changing faster than we can make sense of them.

In that pause, the questions kept coming.

Don't you go to church?

Do you believe in Jesus?

"Well, yes… of course."

Okay, but when did you start believing?

When did it happen?

Some people had dates. Actual dates. As if salvation were something you could circle on a calendar.

So sometimes—just to make the questions stop—I'd give an arbitrary answer. Pick a moment. Pick a year. Maybe people wouldn't ask follow-up questions.

And even then—before I had the language for it, before I had the theology—I knew something about that framing felt… off.
Just… yucky.

I couldn't articulate why. I didn't yet know what I believed instead.
But I knew that reducing faith to the right answer, the right moment, the right formula didn't feel like good news.

It felt more like a test I didn't know how to pass.

Have any of you ever been asked that—*Are you saved?* Or *When were you saved?*

In high school, as I tagged along with friends to FCA or youth group activities, the crowd was often invited to pray for salvation—to invite Jesus into your heart—only to realize later that what was really being offered was a kind of transaction.

Believe the right thing now so you can receive a ticket to heaven later.

Salvation framed as insurance against eternal punishment—something meant to save you from the sinful person you're told you are.

Y'all have these experiences?

I could probably spend a lot of time dissecting what I find problematic about that kind of transactional and fear-based theology—and I'm happy to have those conversations with anyone who wants to.

But what I want to focus on today is how we might *reframe* salvation.

Because it's one thing to say, *"I don't think salvation is simply about getting to heaven."*
But then the real question becomes: **what do we mean when we say Jesus came to save the world?**

What *is* salvation?
What does it mean to be saved?

Before we talk about salvation theologically, I want to zoom out and think about what it means to *save* something more generally.

When we use the word "save" in everyday life, we usually picture moments of danger.

Firefighters save people from fires.
Lifeguards save people from drowning.
First responders save lives.

And yes—saving often happens when something is at risk. But here's what's important:

We don't save something because it's bad.

We save something because it's valuable.

A firefighter doesn't run into a burning building because the person inside made good choices.

A lifeguard doesn't stop to ask how someone ended up in the water.

They don't pause to assign blame or evaluate worth.

They act because a life matters.

Pause.

Sometimes, though, saving isn't even about dramatic rescue from danger.

Sometimes saving looks like careful preservation.

I think about the things we save.

A shoebox of old letters we can't throw away.

A child's artwork taped to the fridge long after it's wrinkled.

Seeds saved from one season to the next because we believe something will grow again.

We save money for the future.

We save letters, photographs, heirlooms.

We save stories, traditions, relationships.

These aren't things that are broken.

They're things that matter.

Sometimes we save things not because they're already lost—but because we refuse to let them be.

So when Christians say that Jesus came to save the world, it's worth asking:

What if saving doesn't begin with blame—but with value?

In other words, maybe salvation doesn't start with the assumption that humanity is sinful or depraved, but with the conviction that life is too precious to abandon.

You don't save what you plan to throw away.

You save what you love.

And I think God's work of saving begins not with condemnation, but with love that refuses to let life be destroyed.

As John 3:17 says:

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

So when we ask, *"What is Jesus saving us from?"* the answers many of us inherited sound something like this:

Jesus saves us from sin.

We are sinful and in need of saving.

And because the punishment for sin was understood to be death, Jesus saves us for eternal life.

Over time—especially in American evangelical spaces—salvation came to mean primarily *escape from punishment*.

However…

The root word for salvation in Greek is *sozo*, which means *wholeness*.

Not perfection.

Not flawlessness.

Wholeness.

A life that is integrated rather than fragmented.

A person no longer split apart by fear, shame, or isolation.

Relationships restored—to God, to others, to ourselves, and to the world we belong to.

Wholeness doesn't mean nothing is wrong.

It means healing is possible.

In this framing, salvation is God offering a path toward wholeness—

not because humanity is disposable,

but because the good of humanity is worth saving.

And Jesus is that path.

Not simply belief in his existence.

Not checking the right theological boxes.

But an embodied way of life—

a way of loving God, loving one another, and loving creation

that slowly reorders what has been distorted in us.

Loving God and loving neighbor isn't a requirement we meet *in order* to be saved.

It's what wholeness looks like when it takes shape in real life.

And if that's true, then salvation isn't something we secure once and move on from—

as if it were a transaction we complete and file away.

Salvation is something that unfolds.

Again and again.

As healing takes root.

As relationships are repaired.

As lives are restored where they've been diminished.

And once we begin to see salvation this way—

as God's ongoing work of making us whole—

it reshapes what it means to follow Jesus.

Not as passing a test,

but as learning a way of life.

Now, talking about salvation as wholeness does *not* mean that the future doesn't matter.

It means the future is held within the same love that is healing us now.

Christian faith has always trusted that death does not get the final word—that what God begins in love, God does not abandon at the grave.

But eternal life is not a reward for getting the answers right.

It is the promise that the God who is committed to our wholeness now will remain committed to us forever.

Salvation doesn't end with this life—but neither does it bypass it.

The God who is making us whole now is the God we trust to hold us forever.

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So what gets in the way of wholeness?

If salvation is the journey toward wholeness, then what do we do with the parts of our lives—and our world—that are clearly not whole?

A world where people can be shot while trying to protect their neighbors.

A world marked by violence, fear, and harm.

Scripture has a word for that distortion.

And over the next few weeks, we'll talk more about how Scripture names those realities as *sin* and *evil*—not to shame us, but to tell the truth about what fractures life.

I'll admit: the idea of a one-time prayer that fixes everything in an instant—something you can circle on a calendar—can sound pretty appealing. There's comfort in imagining salvation as quick, complete, and settled.

But Scripture gives us a more honest picture.

Salvation isn't a moment you can circle on a calendar.

It's the slow, holy work of love restoring what has been fractured—

and protecting what is still tender and becoming.

This is where the words of **Barbara Brown Taylor** help me.

She writes that in the Bible, people experience God's salvation when peace ends war, when food follows famine, when health supplants sickness, and when freedom trumps oppression. She calls salvation *"the divine spaciousness that comes to human beings in all the tight places where their lives are at risk—regardless of how they got there, or whether they know God's name."*

And she says this:

"Salvation is not something that happens only at the end of a person's life. Salvation happens every time someone with a key chooses to open a door they could have locked instead."

For many adults, salvation feels like healing—because something has already been broken.
For children, salvation often looks like being surrounded by love and care early enough to grow into wholeness.

That, too, is God's saving work.

So am I saved?

Yes—I am being saved, day by day.
Yes—I trust that something decisive happened over two thousand years ago, when Jesus absorbed state-sanctioned violence into his own body and broke the cycle of domination—not with force, but with love, grace, and forgiveness.

And that saving work didn't end on the cross.

It continues wherever violence is interrupted,

where love refuses retaliation,

and where life is chosen over domination.

Salvation is always personal—but it's never private.

God is making whole not just individual lives, but communities, relationships, and the world itself.

If the language of being "saved" still holds deep meaning for you, I'm not asking you to discard it—only to let it grow.

Barbara Brown Taylor once said she was asked a question that stopped her in her tracks.

Not "What do you believe?"

Not "Are you saved?"

But: *"What is saving your life right now?"*

She writes that it was such a good question she began asking it of others—and of herself. And when she answers it, she doesn't name abstract beliefs, but concrete practices: teaching, living in relationship with creation, observing Sabbath, encountering God in other people, and committing herself to the work of being fully human.

So instead of asking, *"When were you saved?"*

I wonder if a better question might be this:

What is saving your life right now?

I want to invite you—if you're willing—to share a word or phrase in response.

Not something polished.

Not something you've figured out.

Just what comes to mind.

Because salvation isn't about passing a test.

It's about noticing where life is opening up—

and trusting that God is at work there.

As I continually say, the sermon is simply an invitation into conversation so I want to have a little time now for some talk back…

What is saving your life right now?

What questions do you have? What is salvation to you?