

## Jesus Saves and God the Savior

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Sue and I recently traveled to the South Carolina coast on rural two-lane highways. The closer we got to the coast the more we saw along the road religious signs, like *Jesus Saves* or, more ominously, *Repent Before It's Too Late*.

What does *Jesus Saves* mean? What does it mean to us? What does “salvation” mean? Does it mean more than we were taught? I think it important to try to recover the meaning of such words for our lives today.

### I

As I was growing up in Southern Baptist Land salvation meant one thing: Getting into Heaven. And the way to get there was through personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Since then the meaning of salvation for me has changed and grown—as has the meaning of relationship to Christ.

I read somewhere the quip: “the gospel is not getting into heaven, but getting heaven into us—” which is partly true, but is, as the saying goes, “too clever by half”. When Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, or Kingdom of heaven, which was the *main* theme of his preaching, the kingdom was both

something we enter and something that enters us. Just as Christ enters us and we enter into Christ, that is, into his encompassing reality and realm.

## II

The shape of salvation takes many forms. Recently I spoke, following Claus Westermann, of two ways God comes to save. Salvation as Deliverance and Salvation as Blessing.

Salvation as Deliverance describes the mighty acts of God to deliver us from oppression, sin, evil and death. The two great salvation events in the Hebrew scriptures were the *Exodus*, the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt, and the *Return* from Babylonian Exile, In the New Testament the one great universal act of deliverance was the *Cross* and *Resurrection*.

Salvation as Blessing speaks to the daily, ordinary but not really ordinary, ways God sustains and nourishes our lives. In Biblical times this included an abundance of crops, flocks and babies! More broadly it speaks of the daily blessings of bread, love and simple abundance. Marriage, family, children and the body's health are manifestations of Salvation as Blessing.

A number of years ago I saw a movie starring James Earl Jones. At one point he said that God had saved him three times. The first time came when after both parents died his grandparents took him in and raised him. The second time

was when the Army took him in and gave him an education and career. The third time was when he met his wife. God comes to save in many ways.

### III

As I reflected this week, I remembered all the ways salvation is pictured in the gospel of Luke, which we him journeyed through this year.

Let's start with the visit of the angel to the teenaged girl Mary. She was given the astounding call to bring a child into the world, who was to be the salvation of God. His name Jesus means "God comes to save.

Then came her consent: "Let it be to me according to your word." She offered her body, mind and spirit to bring Jesus into the world.

Then she broke into song. We call it the Magnificat after the first line:

My soul magnifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior

God the Savior was one of the favorite ways to name God in the Hebrew scriptures. Mary's song echoed Hannah's song from long before. Had she learned it at her own mother's knee?

How she described God as Savior is quite startling, even revolutionary. It's safer to sing it in the Latin! Untranslated!

God has shown strength with his arm  
scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts  
brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;  
filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.

Did Mary sing her song to young Jesus? I imagine so. It is little surprise,  
the, that Jesus began his inaugural sermon in his hometown Nazareth describing  
the salvation God was now bringing:

Good news to the poor,  
release to captives,  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
and liberty to the oppressed.

We've been given half a gospel. Jesus preached social salvation and personal  
salvation. Here is salvation as *justice*, as this world transformed. Thy kingdom  
come on *earth* as in heaven.”

#### IV

Mark's gospel records that the message Jesus first preached:

The time is ripe  
the kingdom of God is near  
repent and believe in the good news. (The evangelion, the gospel).

That word “repent” also needs rehabilitation. In the Hebrew it was *Shuv*, which means *turn*, or *return* to God. In the Greek it was *metanoia*, which means being given “new mind”, a new mind and heart, a new way of seeing, thinking, feeling, living. A brand-new mind! Who doesn’t need that, want that? Buddhism calls it a “beginner’s mind”, a new mind opened to the truth and light of God. Which leads me to one of the major images for salvation in the early years of Christianity: *Illumination*. The mind and heart flooded by new light. Paul prayed that “the eyes of our hearts be opened.”

The many miracles of the healing of the blind in the gospels point to salvation as illumination. “I once was blind but now I see.”

Later in Luke Jesus was traveling through Jericho and saw a blind beggar. The man cried out, “Son of David, have mercy on me”. Jesus asked the most elemental of questions: “What do you want me to do for you?” Bartimaeus went for broke. “My eyes, Lord, my eyes.” Jesus said: “Receive your sight, your faith has saved you.” Healed you. The word is the same. Jesus saves. Salvation as illumination. Do any of you remember Hank Williams’ old hit “I Saw the Light”?

I saw the light, I saw the light  
No more darkness, no more night  
Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight  
Praise the Lord, I saw the light.

Salvation as illumination.

## V

Now let's go to the healing of the woman with the flow of blood. She had been suffering for 12 years. The text says she had "spent all her money of physicians." Bankrupted by sickness. She had gone from doctor to doctor for help, but no help was found. Chronic illness can ravage us, body mind and spirit.

But she had heard of Jesus the healer and she said, "If I but touch the hem of his garment I will be healed." So she slipped her way through the crowd and touched his robe and immediately she was healed. Jesus felt the "power of God" go out of him and asked, "Who touched me?" Which shows that even with Jesus the healing is from God, he the vessel. She answered him, and told what had happened. Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you, healed you." There's that word again: saved, healed. Salvation in the Bible literally means healing and wholeness. It is the wholeness of body, mind, spirit that is deeper than any "cure".

## VI

Next story. You know it well: Zacchaeus. A man small in stature but smaller in heart. He was chief tax-collector and very rich—which meant first that he was corrupt. He used the Roman tax system to gouge the citizens and make himself rich. He was a collaborator with Rome thus also a *traitor* to his own people.

But he had heard of Jesus which touched some hunger in his soul. As Jesus rode into town he went to main street, but because of his height and the crowd he could not see. So, becoming as a child, he scampered up a sycamore tree and unwittingly readied himself for the kingdom of God.

Jesus stopped at the tree and said, “Zacchaeus, come down from that tree, I want to have dinner with you.” So off they went arm in arm to Zacchaeus’ house. The crowd watched in stunned silence. Then they began their *murmuring*: “Look, he has gone to be the guest of a sinner!” Of course, this had been a scandal of Jesus’ whole ministry: eating with tax-collectors, prostitutes and sinners. The church risks being the church when it welcomes those not so welcome anywhere else. The early church was noticed not by whom it excluded but by whom it included. It was willing to be a scandal for Jesus’ sake.

What Jesus offered was the Divine Friendship, and that friendship transformed people's lives. Never underestimate the power of friendship, especially when teamed with Divine Friendship.

This is the way it happened with Zaccheus. Right in the middle of the meal, between the fish and lamb, he stood up and said, "Lord half of all I have I give to the poor! And if I've defrauded anyone I will repay four-fold." Four-fold! Way beyond the requirements of the Jewish law.

His servants probably fainted on the spot. His wife may have said, "Buddy, that's *your* half you're giving away!" But maybe, maybe she had been praying for such a moment.

And Jesus said, "*Today salvation has come this house!*" Same word for when he healed the woman with the flow of blood. He might have said, "Healing has come to this house today", and that would have been true too, for something inside of him was being healed—a greedy heart becoming a generous heart, a corrupt heart a pure heart. Jesus saves.

## VII

I close with one more image of salvation: Home. Home with God, home with your own true self. Home now and home forever. We can live with a terrible



estrangement from God and from our own dear self. But here is the gospel. God sent his son into the far country of earth to find us and bring us home.

It can happen today and it will happen fully in the world to come. As the great hymn concludes: “No more a stranger, nor a guest, but like a child at home.”

We heard it at the cross from Jesus’ lips: Father, Abba, forgive them for they know not what they do.” That is all of us, and forgiveness has brought us home. Like the prodigal son, home at last. Like the thief on the cross who heard Jesus say: “Today, thou shalt dwell with me in Paradise.”

From my past, in hot, sweaty revival services, comes this song into my mind and heart:

We have heard the joyful sound

Jesus saves, Jesus saves

Spread the tidings all around

Jesus saves, Jesus saves....

Shout salvation full and free,

Highest hills and deepest caves.

This our song of victory,

Jesus saves, Jesus saves.

So, maybe we can smile as we see the signs along the highway. Yes, he does—and in more ways than we have ever imagined.