

THE VOCABULARY OF FAITH

1) Salvation

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June 21, 2015

Salvation is a word that, traditionally, has held an important place in the vocabulary of some. In fact, in some cases, it has been THE CENTRAL PLACE. For salvation, as they have used the word, has been the ultimate goal, the ultimate reward, the ultimate destination for the Christian life.

Bluntly understood, salvation was something that you earned for living a good and faithful life as a Christian. It was often equated with the idea of heaven--the place that you go when you die. Thus, heaven became the tangible reward for the salvation that you earned by believing the correct doctrine and living the life that reflected that doctrine.

This was the world that I grew up in. As a young man, I was taught that in order to experience salvation, I needed to accept Jesus Christ as my Savior and believe all the correct theological creeds and doctrines about God and Jesus. My church then proceeded to define for me what those creeds and doctrines were. The message was clear: If you stay within the parameters of belief and witness as we have defined them, you will have eternal life--another term for salvation.

It wasn't until I became a bit older and was taught to think for myself that I began to see some problems with this approach...problems that had to do with the differences between what I believed and what other churches and faith traditions believed about doctrine and theology. Was I to assume that with every difference of thought and opinion, my church tradition and belief was always right and they were always wrong?

The older I got, the less I believed that this was true and the less I was inclined to define salvation in such limited and self-serving terms. So it is this morning that I would like to challenge the fundamental notion that salvation is primarily concerned with the life to come and that we can earn it merely by believing all the correct doctrines and doing all the right things. Salvation, I believe, is about so much more than this.

In his book--Speaking Christian--Marcus Borg suggests that salvation, as used in scripture, is so much bigger than that. He points out that salvation and its siblings--words like saved, saving, and savior--appear approximately 500 times in scripture and rarely are they used to refer to an afterlife or the life to come.

Instead, he suggests that salvation is used in a number of different contexts. It is used, he suggests to describe "liberation from bondage," with the story of the people of Israel being liberated from their Egyptian slavery as the fundamental metaphor. He also suggests that salvation is a fundamental part of the story of the return from exile in Babylon. The people of Israel experienced salvation in their return home from their foreign captivity.

In addition, Borg suggests that the Bible speaks of salvation in other, less notable ways, including, salvation as rescue from peril, salvation as moving from blindness to sight, from death to life, from sickness to health, from fear to trust.

The point that is significant here is that salvation is defined and identified by scripture in ways that are far more diverse and interesting than in merely the limited, "life to come" definition. Indeed, the overwhelming witness of scripture would suggest that salvation cannot be limited in its focus to a reward received after this life comes to an end.

As Paul reminds the Corinthians in his letter to them, "Now is the acceptable time; today is the day of salvation. Note that this isn't about "pie in the sky, by and by." It is about today. It is about now.

And, we of course, can begin to understand this message when we realize that the story of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt is a story that can be used not only to describe their experience, but our own as well. Given the fact that we too can live in bondage to forces that limited us and deny us the freedom that we long for, their experience of liberation and salvation can become a metaphor for our own experience of liberation and salvation. This, you see, is not just their story, but our own story as well. We can experience God's liberating salvation today, as in here and now.

The same, of course, could be said for many of the other biblical references. Some of us, this morning, can identify with the story of Israel's return from exile as the story that speaks to our own experience of salvation. By grace of God, we have been able to return home and start over in living the life that we had feared was lost. And that is, without question, an experience of salvation--of wholeness and hope that is holy.

Still others of us may experience a sense of our own salvation as we read the biblical stories of the blind who receive their sight, the sick who are made well and the broken that are made whole. The Hebrew word for salvation literally means "to make wide" or "to make sufficient." The biblical witness to the salvation of God is one that provides a hundred different examples of the ways in which God has "made wide" the path that leads to life, the ways in which God's grace and love has been sufficient for those enduring sickness and suffering and the brokenness of sin.

It is, therefore, rather limiting to think and speak of salvation only in terms of an eternal reward in the life to come. Salvation, the wholeness that God desires for every one of us, is not just about what will be, but it is about what takes place in the present tense of our lives. Today is the day of salvation.

In our lesson from the Gospel of Luke this morning, we read the familiar story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, the hated and ostracized tax collector who goes "out on a limb" to cross paths with Jesus--literally! And his plan works. Jesus invites himself over for dinner and the two of them have a chance to talk together. It must have been a remarkable conversation because, when it was over, Zacchaeus proceeds to make a stunning announcement.

To anyone whom he has wronged--and rest assured that his list was not small--he will repay four times what he has taken. Then, with the money left over, Zacchaeus will give half of it away to the poor! This coming from a tax collector who had cheated and thieved his way through life in pursuit of the goal of becoming a very wealthy man!

O to have been a fly on the wall, listening in to the conversation between Jesus and this hated tax collector! While we don't have a transcript of what was said, we can offer an educated guess that Zacchaeus experienced a profound transformation--a transformation that could, perhaps, be described as liberation from the bondage of his wealth and his dishonest life. Or, perhaps, it could be best described as a "return home" from the exile he had been living in.

And some might want to suggest that what Zacchaeus experienced was nothing less than being able to see, for the first time, what really mattered in life after walking for so long in the darkness and the blindness of greed and self-centeredness.

Anyone of these biblical metaphors could be used appropriately to describe the experience Zacchaeus had with Jesus. But it was Jesus himself who chose to describe it this way: "Today," he said, "salvation has come to this house...for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost."

Today, salvation has come to this house. I'm wondering this morning about your story or stories of salvation. What metaphor would you selected to illustrate or articulate your own experience of God's love and grace?

Would it be a story of liberation from slavery?

A story of a return home from exile?

A story of being blind but suddenly being able to see?

Or, perhaps there is another metaphor that is more appropriate.

The metaphor itself, of course, doesn't really matter. What matters is that we experience the grace and the love of God in ways that enable us to live differently...ways that allow us to live more hopefully...more purposefully...more peacefully...and yes, more powerfully.

What matters is that we experience the personal transformation that the Spirit of God makes possible, here and now, in the context of our daily lives. This is not something that we have to postpone until the next life, but something we can experience today, in this very moment. For I happen to believe that there is nothing that God wants more than for the broken to be made whole, the lame to walk, the conflicted to find peace and the blind to see.

But this desire of God's, of course, isn't limited to just us. It is a desire that is extended to our world--to all of creation itself. There is nothing that God desires more than the wholeness of our planet.

As Marcus Borg suggests, salvation is, therefore, not only about our personal transformation, but it is ultimately about the transformation of our world. Too often, I'm afraid, salvation has been defined too narrowly in very personal and even self-centered terms. We have sometimes heard people speak about "me and Jesus" and "my salvation." And while there certainly is a personal dimension to the meaning of salvation, there is also a social dimension that we dare not ignore.

Ultimately, you see, it is God's intention to bring healing and hope, life and light, sight and wholeness not just to you or me, but the human family that we are a part of. Once we have experienced this sense of salvation for ourselves...once we have seen the light, experienced the return, been delivered from slavery...once we have tasted in tangible ways the love and grace of God, it will become obvious that it is our task, our responsibility to "pay it forward," to extend this grace to others even as we ourselves have experienced it.

Salvation, you see, is about the transformation that the grace of God makes possible. It is about the transformation that happens to us...and also about the transformation that happens through us in the witness of our love and compassion for the world around us.

And it is not something that we need to postpone or wait for any longer. Now is the acceptable time. Today is the day of our salvation!

May it be so in your life and in mine. Amen!