

SERMON TUMC - January 31, 2021

Working out Salvation

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Psalm 27

Philippians 2:12-13

*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, **work out your own salvation** with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

This morning we continue our conversation with the book of Philippians. I'd like to explore a little further the idea of salvation, specifically, what Paul was getting at when he advised that community to "work out their own salvation" ... "with fear and trembling."

Alison¹ touched on this idea of salvation as a process when she told us about the faith journey of John Newton and how what seemed like an instantaneous conversion, actually took several years to play out in full.

A while back I gave a sermon here about the word "gospel."² Salvation is another one of those words that Christians use often, but which mean very different things depending on your perspective. We don't all agree on what we mean by "Jesus Saves," it means different things depending on who is saying it.

And so, to prepare to speak on Salvation, I've been reading some theology this week. Settle in, I thought I'd begin by explaining to you a few important concepts such as justification, sanctification, discipleship, predestination, semi-Pelagianism, semi-Augustianism, Christomorphic divinization, and maybe throw in a couple of atonement theories just to complete the full theological landscape. [see below for a good downloadable resource]³

How about it? No?

Ok, I'll begin with a true story (which I have permission to tell).

¹ <https://tumc.ca/?p=7975>

² <https://tumc.ca/?p=4943>

³ Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology, Spring 2006, Vol. 7, No. 1

About 16 years ago I was on a cross-country trip with my two sons Lucas and Eric. One afternoon we found ourselves in Edmonton in the middle of a street festival (Ah, remember those?). There was a lovely feeling of celebration in the air, lots of people, buskers, booths, food, the works.

Up ahead on the sidewalk was a friendly-looking guy who was handing out a dollar to any passerby who could answer some trivia questions. Twelve-year-old Eric seemed to know a lot of the answers. So when this guy offered five dollars for a volunteer to step up on a box and answer questions, I nudged my son to go forward and have some fun and earn a little cash.

As Eric recalls it, the first question was: "Have you ever stolen anything?"

"No, of course not!"

"Well, have you ever downloaded any music from the internet?"

"Yeah, I guess..."

"So, you HAVE stolen. And now you've also just told a lie!"

And then, in front of everyone on the street, he went on to explain to my dear child (whom I had gotten into this) just how very sinful he was — sinful to his very core! How sinful everyone was, how we're all doomed to go to hell after we die, and that the only solution to this is Jesus, more specifically that Jesus' blood would save Eric from this terrible fate, if he only had enough faith and accepted it in his heart.

My memory gets a bit hazy at this point, because my own blood was boiling at this "bait and switch" in God's name, this entrapment "evangelism." We got out of there as quickly as possible without causing a scene. (If I'm honest, sometimes I wish I had caused a scene.)

When I talked to him about this yesterday, Eric remembers that he took the five dollars and gave it to a busker a few minutes later who was playing a tune by a band that Eric liked — "I didn't want anything to do with that money, Mom." Today he brushes it off: "Telling people they are depraved is just a means of control," he says.

But I can't brush it off, even all these years later. Because how we think about and talk about salvation matters — a lot. It has consequences for how we perceive God, how we live our lives as Christians and how we treat others.

What that man was preaching, was a very diminished, a very small, idea of salvation — as an individual reward in the afterlife, based on making someone feel miserable about themselves in this one. It had a formula attached to it, a simple transaction, a sinner’s prayer with a guaranteed outcome. It’s a formula that takes fear and trembling to a whole new level!

As if God’s transcendent and transforming work can be reduced to a one size fits all formula! As if salvation were only about the afterlife!

But then there’s another story, one I tell from memory since the protagonist is now deceased. Antonio de Souza was a pastor in Brazil when I was growing up. He was the calmest, most soft spoken man you could possibly imagine. When he preached a sermon he’d fold his hands together and begin with “Meus caros irmãos e amigos.” (My dear brothers and friends) —like “church lady” from the old Saturday Night Live skit. I don’t think he could hurt a fly.

He would often tell us about his conversion, about when he accepted Jesus as his saviour. He told us how he used to get drunk on a regular basis and he used to pick terrible terrible fights so that he could beat other guys up. But Jesus saved him from all that when Antonio confessed his sins “accepted him into his heart.”

Antonio had a conversion and became a new person through God’s power at work in his life. I know many other stories like this. You probably do too. For him, for them, the formula I mentioned happened to work quite well. It was transforming. So, who am I to limit the scope of God’s faithfulness?

What is Salvation, anyway?

What are we being saved from?

What are we being saved for? Our lives, our planet need saving in so many ways!

Is it about having a transformed life, with the help of God’s transcendent power?

Is it a choice to have a “long obedience in the same direction” to quote Eugene Peterson quoting Nietzsche?

Is it even about us as individuals or is it about a collective?

Or is it about the principalities and powers of this world and Jesus’ power to overcome them through his death and resurrection?

Yes. Yes to all of the above.

Mennonite biblical scholar Tom Yoder-Neufeld reminds us that even the apostle Paul described salvation in many different ways in different contexts. “Salvation would have signalled a wide horizon to Paul’s hearers and readers. It would mean an end to sin, an end to oppression, and end to death.” It would be understood “against a large tapestry of hopes and promises for the world.”⁴

Let’s look at just a few more angles.

Jesus’ very name comes from the Hebrew *Yeoshua* or *Yeshua*, which means, Salvation or God (YHWH) is our salvation. When Jesus read out his own “job description” in the gospel of Luke, he quoted Isaiah and said:

*‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (Luke 4:18)*

— that would be the year of Jubilee, where economic and property rights were to be reset, and the land was to be given a rest from production.

There’s nothing about blood, or heaven or accepting anything in the heart. It’s all about what God’s Spirit is up to in the world. In Jesus’ life and teaching salvation is about health, economics, justice, liberation.

In Jesus’ death and resurrection, the whole thing takes on cosmic dimensions, which theologians have been working out, trying to make sense of, and arguing about ever since. (There are many others sermons in here.)

And what about Salvation in the Hebrew Bible? The psalm we read earlier, Psalm 27, like many many others, calls on God for salvation. God IS our salvation, it says, our light. Here it seems to mean deliverance from fear or from “enemies.” It is physical safety, psychological reassurance, a character trait of the Eternal One.

⁴ Vision, *ibid.*

So salvation in the Bible seems to be more about wholeness, health, deliverance. “[It is a Divine initiative] intended to restore us to full humanity and thus to living in keeping with the will of our creator.”

Tom Yoder-Neufeld again:

“I suspect Paul would be sorely grieved by the business of salvation in our society. He would be shocked by the way his gospel of salvation has been taken hostage by an ideology that has severed grace from transformation, mercy from the response of suffering love, forgiveness and justification from the good works they are intended to make possible (Eph. 2:10; 2 Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:8), and salvation from social transformation. He would be baffled by our success in pulling the teeth of the gospel vis-à-vis our own imperial realities. He would be puzzled by how little we settle for and how little we expect of ourselves as the beneficiaries of salvation. “

I found a blog on the internet entitled “If Jesus saves us, what exactly does he save us from?”⁵ I almost read it to you instead of this sermon, but that wouldn’t have conveyed my own wrestling with this concept. Plus, it’s plagiarism, so... [*Let me know if you’d like a link before the print version of this sermon comes out*]

I like how the author of the blog — whom I know nothing about — sums it up:

“I prefer to think of salvation as *coming home!* It’s the Prodigal son or daughter who one day wakes up, remembers (or first understands) their esteemed place in the family, and returns to walk in it.”

I’m aware here that I haven’t said anything about fear and trembling and I don’t know what to say, because again that is a whole other sermon. All I can say is that when we had our conversation this week about our families in fear over the political situation and over what they think is not a government from God, that is not the kind of fear that we need to have in relationship to God’s salvation. I put the fear and trembling that Paul is talking about more in the realm of awe. Awe that God can do so many different things and awe about God’s love for us.

Author Barbara Brown Taylor says “Salvation is so much more than many of its proponents would have us believe. In the Bible, human beings experience

⁵ <https://www.stevehackman.net/if-jesus-saves-what-exactly-does-he-save-us-from/>

God's salvation when peace ends war, when food follows famine, when health supplants sickness and freedom trumps oppression.

Salvation is a word for 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. Sometimes it comes as an extended human hand and sometimes as a bolt from the blue, but either way it opens a door in what looked for all the world like a wall. This is the way of life, and God alone knows how it works"⁶

She has a great question I'd like to leave with you to ponder this week: "What is saving your life right now?"

In the end, salvation is a shape shifting transcendent and ongoing mystery, hard to pin down to any one context. That makes sense, because it starts with and ends with God's love and God's faithfulness and God's grace getting worked out in us. "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure."

May we taste this salvation in whatever way we are most needing it right now.

⁶ Leaving Church, (pp. 225-226).