

## SALVATION IS A KIND OF SEEING

Texts on Sunday, September 29, 2013

Psalm 91; Luke 16: 19-31

Are you saved? (—*Psst! Did I hear the preacher right? Did he just ask if we are 'saved'? We don't talk like that here.*) In a church of the liberal Protestant stripe, if a preacher never spoke of salvation, few would notice, for it has become ecclesiastically incorrect to talk about salvation. Long ago, a parishioner asked me whether we could just not use the word "sin" anymore in Sunday worship. He was a gay man into whose skull churchmen had planted the word "sin" like a billy club so many times, it hurt him just to hear it. I got that, and I hurt for him. Still, I said we would not delete the word "sin" from our service because our people would always be hearing the word in the world out there, and if we left its meaning to mean people, our people would not be strengthened in the Word. "Salvation" is similar. So many talk of it glibly and it is certainly in the Bible. We can't just leave the meaning of salvation to be annexed as their domain by religious ideologues. Are you saved?

The word "salvation" has become toxic for lots of reasons. One is that the question, *Are you saved?* implies that someone might not be. We liberals devote such heart to resisting the *mal*distribution of earthly goods, we cannot countenance the possibility of *mal*distribution of heavenly goods. If someone isn't saved—someone who needs it and wants it but won't get it—then, we reason, the goods of God are not good. And, we reason, God would not make the evil mistake that we make, withholding what people need—medical care, education, food, jobs. Therefore, in the compassion of God, we reason, it must be that everyone is saved. And if that is so, then there is no need to talk about it, for the deal is done.

There are other reasons we avoid the word. Perhaps we don't believe in that heaven so easily ridiculed where earnest angels with halos provide the sole entertainments through all eternity. *Hell would be more interesting*, silly people say. More seriously, the thoughtful modern mind recognizes that, like drink to the drunk are fantasies to the anxious. You can't know what is true just because it satisfies you, never mind how many millions hold to it. The modern mind sees this. It is part of what theologian Philip Clayton calls "the predicament of belief." Are you saved? How would you know?



When I was in seminary, Eberhard Bethge came visiting one day. Bethge was a close friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and, after surviving the murderous designs of the Nazis, as his friend did not, Bethge bent his life's attentions to

bringing Bonhoeffer's thought alive for the world. I remember only this from Bethge's talk with us that day. He said, "When they ask me, 'When were you saved—on what day and at what hour? I always tell them I was saved on Calvary's hill in that day when my Lord said, 'It is finished.'"

In telling that story, it is not my intention to try to imprint Eberhard Bethge's answer on you, to make his yours. Rather, I offer it to open something up and to calm anxious minds. Here, for Bethge, salvation is something seen. For Bethge, his own future is not in question, neither its existence nor its qualities; neither is his past in view, not his sin, not his good works, not his doubts. For Bethge, salvation is indeed once for all, and it is a divine gift, and it is available to all without distinction. For Bethge, the heavenly goods may be given to all without distinction, never mind whether they know it. Still, its quality is real for one who sees it, and only for one who sees it.

Suppose that a promise came from high up that tomorrow, everyone would have good work and food enough—real deliverance in the simplest, clearest sense of the psalms; and suppose that some saw that it would be so, and some did not. These who did not see it would remain in their misery for one more evil day, separated from their deliverance. Only those who saw it would be delivered today. Only they would be saved now. For them who saw it, salvation would not be a theory, but an experience, for salvation is a kind of seeing. Now this is the day the Lord has made. Are you saved?

Now, when the psalmist sings of God's promised salvation, their sound is absolute. *God will deliver you. God will cover you. You will not fear the terror of the night; not fear the arrow of the day; not fear death stalking the darkness; not fear the destruction to be wrought beneath the hot sun. I will protect, says the Lord. I will answer. I will rescue.*

What can this mean? In every season of our ministry, we have closely studied affirmations like these, so absolute, so enigmatic, like seeing through a glass darkly. We have walked with Jesus in the desert; we have struggled with the patri- and matriarchs of Genesis as they thirsted and raged for life; we have waited in jail with the apostle, assured that God's power is made perfect in weakness; we have sat with Job. Again and again, we have seen God come to nothing, we have pondered who we might become if we should live into the possibility that what we fear does not exist. And then we go back to our lives—and are we saved from the snare of the Fowler?

All around us, we watch children fall. Gun massacres turn our heads to the left, to the right, down in grief, anger, and dismay, up in prayer. And these dead whom we notice are a fraction of all whom we lay in the dust of violence, year on year. How are they saved? Or the hundreds now crushed

in Pakistan, or the uncountable thousands of lives smeared to blood in our needless wars? And the ravages of racism, and the war on the poor waged without end from Washington and from every pinnacle of power on earth? What, O God, do you mean with this “I will rescue and honor”?

No cry from the throat of humanity is more ancient than this one. Do not abuse us with songs that salvation’s for later and suffering’s for now. Do not insult us with warnings that we have not prayed enough or behaved enough to warrant your attentions. What do you mean, that you are like a shield all ‘round? What do you mean, saying “I will answer?”

...

A person whom I love is suddenly gravely ill. Is this the sickness to walk him unto death? Who knows? He is not young. But as I pray each day Psalm 91 with this one now in mind, who lives in gratefulness and courage in Christ, it is as if I myself enter in with him to that small room of this existence, whose walls are on all sides near, and from which there is no rising to take up the pallet and walk. And I ask—not him, but myself, and my God—*What can it mean, at the moment when the enemy’s victory is sure, to say “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust”?*

Do you feel it? It is not a theory. It is not a belief that might be so, or might not. God’s answer is not like an answer at the back of the book. God’s answer is not a solution. It is not a repair to put you back on the road you thought you should be on. Oh, you might find a ramp back to the highway you were on, but *that* was not God’s gift. That was not salvation. Salvation is a kind of seeing. Salvation is new eyes growing accustomed in darkness, and only in darkness, to see that there is that within which cannot be extinguished—a light, a little light of thine, which “neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from—the love of God in Christ.” This is salvation. Things change by this light. The eternal shines through them all, the enemy as well as the beloved, and the battle is done.

We call this light the light of Christ. Many others do not, but that matters not, for our experience of the light is not a theory or a name. It waits not for beliefs to fill in or catch up or make us right or wrong. It is our very own experience of God. ♪ “Morning by morning, new mercies I see. All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided. Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.” This is salvation. Every hope you have for the world, every yearning for justice, every movement of compassion and courage you need, hangs on this, that you start where you are, and ask to see that it is safe to live and safe to die, and you are saved, and now, therefore, is the time to love.

The poet David Whyte set it down this way.

It doesn't interest me if there is one God  
or many gods.  
I want to know if you belong or feel  
abandoned.  
If you know despair or can see it in others.  
I want to know  
if you are prepared to live in the world  
with its harsh need  
to change you. If you can look back  
with firm eyes  
saying this is where I stand. I want to know  
if you know  
how to melt into that fierce heat of living  
falling toward  
the center of your longing. I want to know  
if you are willing  
to live, day by day, with the consequence of love  
and the bitter  
unwanted passion of your sure defeat.  
I have been told, in that fierce embrace, even  
the gods speak of God.

—David Whyte, from *Fire In the Earth*

“With length of days will I satisfy them and show to them my salvation.”

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