

**Salvation Has Come To My House,
But What About My Neighbor's?**

Luke 19:1-10 / Jonah 4:1-11

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Our second scripture reading for today is from the book of Jonah. I will be reading from the last chapter of the book. Already, God has called Jonah to prophesy against the people of Ninevah and Jonah has run away. After his initial protest, Jonah went to Ninevah and declared (if not half-heartedly) that they needed to repent or God would overthrow the city. Then, lo and behold, the King of Ninevah and all the people (and even animals) repented in sack-cloth and ashes – so that God changed God's mind about the calamity he said he would bring upon the city.

Now listen with me for a word from God...

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But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?'

And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.'

Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

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Today we continue our sermon series on what it means to say that Jesus Christ is the savior. Last week we focused on the right question to ask when it comes to salvation – which is not, “are you saved” (as if we can save ourselves by what we do, or think, or believe), but the better question to ask is “for what are you saved?” because when God saves us in Jesus Christ it is not only for our sake, but also for the sake of the world.

This morning we are focused on another aspect of what it means to say that Jesus is the savior – one that is quite natural for us to think about, and worry about, and fight about. That is: when God sent Jesus to save us, who gets included?

There are two things that are important to clarify right out of the gate, because, in my experience, they are the two most common questions that arise when we think about whom Jesus came to save.

First, it is important to ask if everyone is saved? That might sound like an innocuous question, but in answering it, congregations have been divided, new denominations have been formed, and many a pastor has been ridden out town on a rail.

To believe that everyone is saved is to subscribe to something called Universalism. Near the end of his life, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth said that he would be a Universalist if he were confident that he could comprehend the mind of God. But since we cannot claim to know the mind of God all that is left for us to do is trust that God will be gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...which is how the Bible describes God over and over again. So – at least according to our faith tradition – we cannot be Universalists, but we can, as one of our confessions of faith says, “have good hope for all¹” when it comes to wondering who is and isn’t included when God acts to save.

The second important thing to clarify is – using language from the gospel of John – whether Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life....and whether anyone can be saved except through Jesus. And the simple and direct answer to these questions is yes – Jesus is the way. And, no, no one can be saved except through Jesus Christ.

But the more nuanced answer to that question is one that a lot of Christians tend to ignore. For while we do believe that salvation is only possible because of and through Jesus Christ – it is also true that we cannot claim to know how Jesus saves people...maybe even people who don’t claim to follow Jesus or believe in his name. In the same way that Karl Barth could not claim to believe in Universalism because he could not claim to know the mind of God, we cannot claim that we know **how** God will save people through Jesus Christ – by proscribing what people must do, or say, or believe. All we know is that God **does** save people through Jesus Christ – and you would think that this would be enough.

¹ Second Helvetic Confession

Except it's not.

Because when it comes to who receives salvation – the question isn't really about whether Universalism is in-line with our faith tradition and supported by Scripture. And the question isn't really whether Jesus is the only way. When it comes to who receives God's gift of salvation, the question has always been: can we trust God to make those choices, or do we begrudge God because we deem God's choices unfair?

In our first Scripture reading the crowd that had gathered around Jesus was dismayed that Jesus would deign to dine with Zacchaeus – someone perceived to be a blatant sinner. While the crowd grumbled, Jesus stated very plainly what was going on: “today salvation has come this house because he, too, is a son of Abraham.”

It's one thing for salvation to come to our house – but for some reason, what has always rankled God's people is when salvation comes to the house of our neighbor.

Jonah did more than grumble. Jonah was so upset about the profligate way that God threw around salvation with those Ninevites that he told God he was angry enough to die. Angry enough to *die*! That's passion!

Of course, for Jonah, that passion comes not only from being offended by the radical nature of God's grace; what really burns Jonah up is the fact that these people who God saved were Jonah's enemies. This is important to understand. About 700 years before Christ, the Assyrian Empire began to invade the northern region of Israel. Over time, and after many defeats, the tribes who were Israel were scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire...effectively lost to history. Ninevah was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

And God asked Jonah – an Israelite – to go prophesy there.

And after they had repented, God chose to save Ninevah.

And God asked if it was right for Jonah to be angry.

And Jonah said, “yeah!”

What is so hard for us to understand is that the perspective by which God sees the world is categorically different from the perspective by which we see the world. We are conditioned to make judgments – quick judgments – powerful judgments – about who is worthy and who is not. About who is right and who is wrong. About who is safe and who is dangerous. About who is our neighbor and who is our enemy. And a lot of times, we imagine the space between these things to be a chasm.

But for God, it doesn't seem to be as clear. And that is what feels so offensive to us, right? How could God choose to save our enemies? How could God choose to save those who are known to be sinners?

Maybe it is because God has the perspective to see in each of us a mix of righteousness and unrighteousness – a mix of blessedness and

brokenness...and from the perspective, the choices God makes might not make sense to those of us with a different set of eyes.

One of my friends and colleagues illustrates this different perspective by thinking about the way 5-year olds play soccer. My career as a coach started and ended on a soccer field with a bunch five-year olds. I am eminently qualified to encourage a pack of children to “get the ball!” – but when things get more complicated than that, I defer to the experts.

There is a joy in watching an amoeba of little arms and legs and oversized shin-guards glide across the field. Every once in a while you see the ball – and every couple of minutes it makes it into the goal. Everybody cheers. Rarely are there many 1-0 games in 5-year old soccer. And sometimes that makes it harder for the parents on the sideline to keep up.

Parents get worried about whether the score is 7-6 or 8-7. They worry if their child is developing their corner kick. They worry about the really tall kid that they are sure is in the third grade. Then they worry again about the score.

My friend told me that after one game in his hometown, a particularly lopsided contest where the score was about 21-2, a mother of a 5-year old named Joey was trying to console her son. She said all the right things that mother should say: “Joey I’m so proud of you. You played your best, and gave it a good effort. Sometimes you just come up short. I’m sorry your team lost.”

To which Joey replied: “We lost?!?”

Here’s the point. My friend said, “Every Saturday morning there are two games happening on the field: there’s the game the parent’s are watching, and there’s the game the kids are playing – and the kids have the far better game.”²

It’s natural to stand by and watch the ways God chooses to dole out salvation and grace and wonder whether things are fair. But there are much better ways to spend our time.

And one of the great gifts of our salvation is being freed from the responsibility to determine who God saves.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we give you thanks – for the life we have through Jesus Christ, and for the fact that you call us respond to this incredible gift of our salvation by enjoying our life in ways that lead to joy and purpose. And so we thank you that your grace might extend – even to us. We make this prayer through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

² Are, Tom, “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” (January, 2013)

