

“Saved from what?”
2 Corinthians 5:15, Titus 2:11, John 14:2
1 Timothy 2:1-7
Brentwood First Presbyterian
Mike Magee
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Scene 1 – What?

I grew up in an Episcopalian tradition, which like the Lutherans and Presbyterians, have what they call a “Reformed” theology. We believe that Jesus gave us salvation 2000 years ago and there is nothing we can add to what Jesus did. So when a stranger knocked on my door at Magnolia Dormitory my first semester at Auburn 35 years ago, I was at a loss for words when he asked me if I was saved. I was minding my own business, my first semester at Auburn University, studying in my dorm room, when there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and someone I had never met asked me if I was saved. I asked him, “Saved from what?”

All cub newspaper reporters are asked to analyze an event with the following questions: Who, what, where, when, how and why? I think analysis of salvation deserves at least the same treatment.

What is personal salvation? The first ever translation of the Greek word σωτηρ into English, was health and healer, not salvation and savior. Salvation and savior were later King James translation. But neither the words health nor salvation really capture the meaning of the Greek. The word σωτηρ is probably best translated wholeness. We can be physically well but spiritually broken, and physically broken but spiritually whole. Salvation is more than physical health. 2 Cor 5:15 tells us Jesus “died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves.” Living outside our selves for God and others gives us meaning, and that meaning gives us wholeness. So we find meaning and wholeness when we see Jesus in the face of children. We find meaning and wholeness when we hear folks in our church have visited Gladys and written to and visited Powell. We find meaning and wholeness when we see Powell, Mary, Gladys, Linda, Ruth, and Wanda peering into the face of hungry Jesus at Downtown Presbyterian’s soup kitchen. We find meaning and wholeness when we see Stella peering into the face of Jesus in the children of the Mayan Peten. We find meaning and wholeness in the faces of the residents at the weekly Bible study at 4PM Thursday at Heritage independent living. We find meaning and wholeness in the faces of the residents of the Heritage skilled nursing facility during our 3PM worship each Sunday.

What are we saved for? For a permanent celestial vacation, or for doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. Are we saved for self

congratulations, or for inviting the children, the hungry, the poor, and the sick to dine with us?

Some say salvation is being saved from hellfire for life in a gated community. But others say we are saved from brokenness and isolation, that is, we are saved from sin. We are saved from sin so we can minister to others. So we can be Jesus to those in need. So we can be a tabernacle of God's Holy Spirit.

But our culture's exclusiveness has rubbed off on the church. We want to draw a circle to exclude people who are not like us. And we project our exclusiveness onto God. Finally, our perception of God's exclusion of others reinforces ours.

Scene 2 – Who?

Who saves? In the mission field in Guatemala and back home, is it we who save souls, or is it God who saves souls? And regarding our personal salvation, is it God who saves us, or do we save ourselves? Haven't we damaged our relationship with God? Yes, but our parental, reconciling, and inspiring God forgives. Doesn't God run out to the prodigal as soon as he sees the prodigal's silhouette on the horizon? Isn't saying we pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps like saying God either doesn't care about us, or that God created the world and went on vacation, leaving us home alone to fend for ourselves? Some would rather believe they are self-made, rather than admit in humility that they need a little help.

We ask who does God desire to be saved? 1 Timothy 2:4 tells us that God "desires everyone to be saved." 1 Timothy 2:5-6 tells us there is "one God ... and one mediator ... who gave himself as a ransom for all." The problem with any particular theology that turns its back on including those who are strange, even for good reasons of logic and self-assurance, is that particular theology proposes either a less than generous God, or a less omnipotent God than 1 Timothy observes.

What does it imply for our relationships when we hear that God's desire is for all to be saved? American poet Robert Frost wrote, "Before you build walls, make sure you know who you are walling out and who you are walling in." Whenever one builds a wall, one might ask, would Jesus be an outsider or an insider? Jesus, who in his inner circle included tax collectors, streetwalkers, and traitors. Building walls to exclude others is tricky business. You never know who you are excluding. You might be excluding Jesus. I think there is no heavenly applause when someone is excluded. I think when people are excluded that God cries. Inclusion is tough, because it encourages openness to the stranger, and acceptance of the stranger in terms broader than we are used to. But in John 14:2, Jesus tells us that in his "Father's house there are many dwelling places." Even one for me. Even one for you.

We have discussed the whats and the whos of salvation. But some think salvation occurs on some celestial shore far far away.

Scene 3 – Where?

We ask where does salvation occur? In a post modern universe where up and down are relative, is the kingdom of God a gated community on a cloud, another planet, or another dimension? Is God's kingdom a nation with closed borders and a border patrol? Or do we experience salvation as God's love at a heavenly banquet to which even we are invited? Sometimes a heavenly banquet here on earth. The travelers on the road to Emmaus knew Jesus in the breaking of the bread. And don't we see the kingdom of God whenever we see someone comfort a child or the poor? Maybe the kingdom of God is not a location, that is, a noun. Maybe instead the kingdom of God is a verb. Just maybe. I want to think about that for awhile.

We have covered the whats, whos, and wheres of God's kingdom. But when does the kingdom of God come?

Scene 4 – When?

Should we be concerned about the thirsty, the hungry, the starving, the lonely, and the sick children of God, or shall we assume that God will reward them in the afterlife? Is their salvation, their wholeness, to occur only after they die, or does eternity begin now? What would Jesus say?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are hungry now," and "Blessed are you who weep now." Jesus knew that people who are hungry now are not comforted by being told they will be filled in the bye and bye. God's time is not manana. God's time is now. Yes, eternity does not begin when we die. Eternity begins now.

We have now covered the whats, whos, wheres, and whens of God's kingdom. But how does it work? Is it all us? Is it all God? Or is it a little of both?

Scene 5 – How?

How do salvation and wholeness, happen? Scripture tells us that in Jesus, God makes clear the kind of relationship he wants us with us, and with each other. Jesus gives us a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us. Just as we occasionally have trouble understanding other people, creating moats between them and us, how much more so do we have trouble understanding our triune God? But God's resurrection of Jesus tells us no one is beyond the power of God's reconciliation. For God has always loved us. Titus 2:11 tells us, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all."

Do we have to take salvation whether we want it or not, or is salvation offered to all though refused by some? Like the prodigal son, when he runs away from home. And God lets him. Jesus compares God's relationship with us to the relationship between a parent and a child. Doesn't the good parent occasionally let a child go, trusting the child to make the right decision?

Conclusion

Sometimes we build walls and sometimes we build bridges. Unfortunately, a few more walls than bridges, right? Jesus suggests we rent a crane, one with a big steel ball at the end, and start knocking down the walls. With the walls knocked down, and with God's help, we can begin to build a bridge between us and the person with whom we didn't get along. When we build bridges instead of walls, love and joy begin to pass between us.

Bridge building becomes possible through the example and sacrifice of Jesus. His cross bridges the chasm of alienation that separates God from us. And spans the gulf that isolates us from family and friends.

Yes, it is God who saves us from sin, for continuing Jesus' ministries, but why? John 3:16 tells us, "For God so loved the world." Not Brentwood, not those who speak English, not the USA. The world. Even you and me.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say