

*Jesus Saves!*

November 21, 2010

Christ the King Sunday

Pastor Vern Christopherson

When I was growing up, I used to go with my dad—who was a pastor—to the Gospel Mission in Sioux City, Iowa. I remember seeing a big neon cross on top of the building. Under it was a sign in large white letters, “Jesus saves!” It was followed by an exclamation point. We were going to the mission to put on a worship service. Every night 40 to 50 rough-around-the-edges men showed up for a hot meal and a warm bed. But there was a catch: before they could eat, they had to sit through the worship service, including the sermon. Generally they were a well-behaved bunch. But unlike Lutherans, they weren’t afraid to talk back to the preacher. And if you happened to ramble on a little too long, they started giving not-so-subtle hints that it was time to wrap it up.

It was my first exposure to “winos,” as folks used to call them, and to homeless people. The Gospel Mission had the distinct feel of old-time religion. You could almost hear the pulpit pounding preachers, “Men, if you were to die tonight, do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt where you would go? You gotta get saved before it’s too late!”

Well, nobody ever got saved in our worship services, at least not that I could tell. I wasn’t even sure what it meant. Did it mean these men needed to come forward during an altar call, get down on their knees, and make a commitment to Christ? Did they need to quit drinking once and for all? Did they need to straighten up their lives and get a job? Whatever it meant, the underlying message was clear: accept Jesus as your personal savior or else.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. We acclaim Jesus as our king. He has ushered in the reign of God. Why did we read the story of the crucifixion? Because that’s when Jesus is first crowned as king. Sometimes we forget what a preposterous story this is. A misunderstood carpenter’s son from some backwater village half-way around the world gets himself strung up on a tree—this is the one to save us. So says Luke in his gospel. “Savior” is one of his favorite titles for Jesus.

The witnesses to the crucifixion think it’s preposterous too. The bystanders scoff at him, “He saved others; let him save himself if he really is the Messiah of God!” The

soldiers mock him, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” One of criminals pleads with him, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself...and us.” Clearly whatever kind of king Jesus is, he’s not climbing down from the cross. No, precisely here is where he is going to save us.

So what do you think: Do you need saving, really? Be careful how you answer that because it can put you in the same company—at least in Jesus’ eyes—as the winos and prodigals and prostitutes. Surely *they* need saving, but *you*? You seem like such a nice person. If *you* need saving, you might as well put a sign around your neck announcing, “I can’t make it on my own, not without help. I’m not the person you think I am. I’m not whole.”

This brings up another issue: *what exactly does Jesus save us from?* This is where it starts to get complicated. According to the pulpit pounding preachers, Jesus saves us from sin and death and the fires of hell. In the gospel of Luke, however, the answer is much broader than that. The word *sozo* means *to save*, but it also means *to rescue, to set free, to heal, to make whole*. In other words, the answer to the question “What exactly does Jesus save us from?” depends on what sort of trouble we’re in in the first place.

Luke gives us several stories of trouble...and also a way out. If you’re beaten up and left for death by the side of the road, “getting saved” means a Good Samaritan is coming to bandage your wounds. If you’re a rich tax-collector named Zacchaeus, “getting saved” means that Jesus is coming to your house to help rearrange your financial priorities. If you’re a prodigal son who’s left home and squandered all your inheritance, “getting saved” means that your dad is waiting on the front porch for you to come back home. Notice that none of these people come forward for an altar call, but all of them experience some form of God’s saving help.

So here’s the question: how did we get from Luke’s broad definition of salvation to the narrow definition of the pulpit pounding preachers? In a word: history. Imagine you’re living in the early centuries of Christianity. Your life expectancy is maybe 25-30 years. Poverty and sickness are never far from your door. You marry someone of your own class, probably not out of love, and you begin having children immediately, many of whom will die in infancy. You work hard from morning until night just trying to scratch

out a living, but you're always one famine away from starvation. So what is salvation likely to mean in this situation? Heaven. Jesus saves you from death!

If you live in the Middle Ages, around the time of Martin Luther, the fear of death hasn't been eliminated, but it's been softened by the belief in a glorious afterlife. The Church has been teaching about this afterlife. It's been asking a pointed question: What sort of an afterlife will it be for you and your loved ones? It could be heaven, but it could just as easily be hell, or somewhere in between. You're anxious about meeting your Maker—that your life will be weighed in the balances and found wanting. What is “salvation” likely to mean in this situation? A release from your guilt. Jesus saves you from eternal punishment.

The pulpit pounding preachers are a continuation of this long line of history. Maybe that shouldn't surprise us. It's not as if our anxiety over guilt and death is completely gone. Still, if you were to ask someone today what they're most anxious about—*what they need to be saved from*—I'm guessing very few would answer “guilt” or “death.” After all, we've got medications for our guilt and hospitals to keep us alive. No, a more dominant concern today seems to be the lack of purpose in our lives. *Why are we here? What are we supposed to be doing? How can we make a difference?* Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, attempted to answer these questions. It was a runaway bestseller. The feeling of purposelessness extends from the college graduate who can't find decent work, to the recent retiree who's wondering how to fill up the extra time well, to everybody in between. What is salvation likely to mean in this situation? A sense that my life has some sort of purpose, some sort of calling.

Again, let me ask you, do you need saving? Remember, your answer to this question—at least according to Luke—will depend on what sort of trouble you're in. Maybe you're afraid of dying. Maybe you're burdened with guilt. Maybe you're lacking a purpose in life. Or, maybe it's something else. Maybe you're self-centered. Maybe you're full of pride. Maybe you have trouble forgiving others. Maybe you're stuck in a dead-end job. Maybe your marriage isn't all you hoped it would be. Maybe you're battling a critical illness. Unlike the pulpit pounding preachers, I think we might need saving in variety of ways and at different times in our lives. I think of it less as once-and-for all event and more as *a lifelong process of being made whole*.

Let me give you an example. I went to see Jessica Wiggins in the hospital a month or so ago. In case you don't know, Jessica is a 38-year-old wife and mother of three. She's been battling stomach cancer for the last several months. It was serious enough that doctors did surgery to remove her stomach and part of her esophagus. Now Jessica is going through chemotherapy. She'd be the first to say that some days are better than others. It's hard to stay positive.

When I stopped at Jessica's room, I noticed a drawing on her door. It was a verse from Acts 16: "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." She told me the drawing was a gift from her ten-year-old daughter, Isabella. Isabella came upon this verse when she was reading Acts. She wanted to give it to her mom.

I told Jessica how much I liked the drawing. And then I shared—much as I have today—that another word for "save" is "heal." I said, "Jessica, what if we were to change the wording of the verse to read: *Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be healed*. How about if we pray for healing right now?" Jessica nodded her head. So that's what we did.

What I'm trying to say is this: We're all going to have times in life when we cannot make it on our own. In a sense, that's the human condition. Whether we're young or old, rich or poor, wino or teetotaler, we have a need for God to come and save us, for God to come and free us from our fears, to forgive our sins, to give us a sense of purpose, to heal our deepest hurts, to make us whole. In the midst of our condition, we need to trust that, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

We're not exactly sure how God will answer that prayer. It doesn't mean that our outward situation will change instantly or maybe even at all. But it does mean that Jesus will be with us in our troubles.

Jesus saves! That's what the neon sign says. He's our king. He saves us on a cross. It's a preposterous story, but it's our story. What Jesus offers us on the cross is not protection from life's troubles, but rather his companionship in the dark night. He has been there. He knows the way. He will see us through. Amen.