

“Is Jesus the Way to Salvation?”

Psalm 121, John 3:1-17

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

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Today we continue the Lenten series of sermons we began last Sunday, a series designed to address some of the more perplexing problems of faith and life. Each of these five questions arises from the assigned Biblical passage for the day. Last Sunday, we wrestled with what to do about the devil. Next Sunday, we will inquire as to the whereabouts of God when terrible things happen. This morning’s question, Is Jesus the way to salvation? arises from an encounter between a religious leader named Nicodemus and a first century rabbi named Jesus.

In today’s religiously pluralistic world in which 70% of the world’s population is not Christian, this is an important question – Is Jesus the way to salvation? It is an important question in our religiously diverse nation, where one’s neighbor is almost as likely to be a Buddhist as a Baptist. Even within the Christian communion, there is great debate about whether or not the Christian way is the only way to salvation.

The research arm of our denomination, the Presbyterian Panel, has reported that one third of the members of the Presbyterian Church USA agree with this statement, “All different religions are equally good ways of helping a person find ultimate truth.” Four out of ten disagree with that statement, and the remainder are unsure. I tried to do the math in my head and I just couldn’t follow it. Maybe you can.

Let us just say that the debate goes on, though it is worth noting that the first question persons who join the Presbyterian Church or present children for baptism are asked has to do with professing faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Is Jesus the way to salvation? This question sometimes arises in families. Whether or not a person is saved can be a matter of quite intense conversation at the time of death, particularly in southern families or evangelically-oriented families.(1) Wives worry about whether their husbands are going to make it to heaven or not and vice versa.

Some preachers have been known to use the occasion of a funeral to warn the mourners that those present had better be born again or spend eternity being sorry. A particularly troubling example of that for Al and me took place several years ago in a memorial service for a long-time friend. The preacher emphasized again and again that in order to be saved; one had to be born again. At least half those in attendance at the memorial service were Jewish. Does it really

honor and serve the gracious purposes of Jesus Christ for people of other faiths to be disrespected? I don't think so, not ever.

Is Jesus the way? And are those who do not confess him as Lord to be considered unsaved? One way to answer that question is to use the Biblical proof-text method. A proof-texter might turn to the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts to make the case: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) The proof-texter might turn to the fourteenth chapter of the gospel of John's gospel: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me," or the third chapter of John: "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again,"...those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only of God."

Now if you want to make the counter argument but still play the proof-text game, there is plenty of ammunition for you too: 1 Timothy 2 speaks of God our savior who desires that everyone be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. There is 2 Peter: "God does not wish that anyone perish but that everyone come to repentance."

Whatever "side" you are on, the problem with this methodology is that it begins with a presupposition and then plucks passages from scripture to support that presupposition. I think that is an inherently intellectually flawed approach. I want to suggest that we do something different today, that we listen to the passage, that we listen as Nicodemus struggles to understand Jesus and his message of salvation, rather than imposing our prior assumptions about Jesus and his message of salvation on the passage that we have read.

New Testament scholar Gail O'Day wisely recommends that we not approach the passage in the same way Nicodemus approached Jesus, which was as if he already knew the answer. (2) Nicodemus was a slogan man. He had pronouncements to make. "Jesus, you are a teacher who comes from God. I am clear about that, and I know you couldn't do what you have been doing if you did not come from God. I am here for you to talk to me just a little bit so that I can figure you out." But Jesus had come with the purpose of inaugurating the kingdom of God, and he wasn't in the least interested whether or not Nicodemus could get a perfect 1600 score on the Salvation SAT.

He wanted Nicodemus to understand "redemptive transformation," which is what Jesus was all about. (3) He wanted him to understand and be open to receiving the new life that he had come to offer, and so he said to Nicodemus, "Very truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom without being born from above." The Greek word can be translated either way - "born again" or "born from above". "From above" indicates that God's action, rather than a human choice, is the operative power in the matter of salvation.

Nicodemus was as puzzled as I am sure you are at this moment. How can anybody be born from above, born anew, or however you want to translate it after one has grown old? He couldn't figure out the concept. How do you reenter your mother's womb? He heard Jesus on a literal level, but you miss the meaning if you stay with literalism. Jesus pressed on, "Very truly, I tell you, you can not enter the kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit. You must be

born from above.” Entrance into this new order is not something that Nicodemus has to gain or even can gain. It is what God intends to give. For us, entrance into the new order is made visible for us in the sacrament of baptism.

Jesus appealed to Nicodemus’ religious memory as he continued the conversation, trying to get Nicodemus to let go of his own assumptions. He said, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of Man be lifted up.” The Greek word means both “to lift up” and “to exalt”. Here is the paradox: Jesus is going to be exalted by being lifted up to the place of crucifixion and death.

Then finally, Jesus says, “Come on Nicodemus. Come with me into the heart of the greatest of all mysteries, the love of God.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

John 3:16 - For some people, it is the most prominent gate-keeping scripture there is. You want to know who’s in and who’s out in this matter of salvation? Just read John 3:16. It is like the arm in the parking lot – it goes down, it goes up. You don’t believe – you are out. You do, you are in. But what if Jesus meant something quite different? After all, he was not speaking to someone who was outside the realm of acceptability. He was talking to a leader at the synagogue, someone who was there every time the doors were open. Consider that John 3:16 might be directed specifically toward insiders who had difficulty accepting the freedom of God to love whomever God chooses.

I am not saying that what you and I believe about Jesus Christ is unimportant. I believe it makes all the difference in the world. I believe that Jesus Christ is the unique Savior of the world. I have bet my life and dedicated my ministry to that. It is in his beautiful story of hope and salvation that I find the deepest meaning of existence. But I also believe that what God decided about the world in Jesus Christ is more important than what you and I decide about Jesus Christ. It is what God does that is the efficacious force finally in the matter of salvation. If you were to ask me, “Have you been saved? Have you been born again? Have you been ushered into that transformed life made possible in Jesus Christ?”

I would say, “Indeed I have, and I can tell you exactly when it happened for me. It was when Jesus Christ died on the hill called Calvary, outside of Jerusalem. I was baptized into that salvation when I rode on my father’s arm down the aisle of a church to be baptized when I was a baby girl.” Redemptive transformation that is what Jesus was about, and those who accept that transformed life are the ones who inherit eternal life.

Let me say this. Eternal life does not mean immortality after we die, as if the whole point of the Christian faith and the Christian church is what happens to us in heaven. Eternal life is life that is entirely possible to live in the here and now in the unending presence of God. Jesus’ gift of his own life through being lifted up on the cross makes eternal life possible on this earth.

There is no question that in the third chapter of John, this new life is linked with belief in Jesus as Lord. There is no question that from the beginning, the one confession that has unified the Christian church throughout the ages has been this one – “Jesus is Lord.” (4) Christians are those who believe that God was made known through God’s own self disclosure in Jesus Christ, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. This is the good news that we have to share and that we are commissioned to share with all the world. But belief in the lordship of Christ is no reason to believe that Christian believers are any better, more admirable or more loved by God than anyone else. What is it the Book of Ephesians says? “By grace you have been saved through faith, and it is not your doing; it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8)

When we speak of God’s grace, we would do well to remember that you and I can never restrict divine grace. We cannot restrict God’s grace to those who profess faith in Christ. Neither can we assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. All of these matters are in God’s capable hands and are not for us to determine. (5) Whew! It is not our job to be God. It is God’s job to be God, and therefore we can joyfully proclaim by how we live and what we say, what we believe Christ was and is up to in the world, freeing people from oppression and self-hatred, freeing people even from death. (6) This is the fullness of life to which Jesus bore witness.

Here are the two things that must be held together: the freedom of God to be God and to act in whatever way God’s sovereign will chooses and the glad belief that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. What a witness the church could make if we trusted God with the matter of salvation, and we got on with the business of loving our neighbor and living out the story of God’s love in Jesus Christ. What a witness we could make if we stopped seeing salvation as a ticket to heaven and started seeing it as a way of living in the here and now.

One recalls the sobering words of Jonathan Swift in the 18th century. “We have just enough religion to make us hate. But not enough to make us love one another.” What if we became completely dedicated to Jesus Christ, not in the sense of beating up other people with the gospel or feeling superior to them because we have it and they don’t, but loving as Christ loved? It is so interesting to note that the longest passage in the whole New Testament on this whole matter of salvation is found in the 25th chapter of Matthew. Do you know that passage? There the litmus test is not an assent to any kind of belief. (7) The Lord Jesus Christ sits on a throne and all the nations of the earth come before him, and he separates all the people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be on his right hand and the goats will be on his left, and he will say to those on his right, “Come those of you who are blessed by the father, inherit the kingdom that has been yours from the foundation of the earth.”

What will be the basis of the judgment? “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, I was the outsider, and you welcomed me. The kingdom is for you.”

Salvation is not a state of being. It is a way of being, living and acting, of being opened up in a way you have never been opened up before. It is leaning into the life-giving wind of God’s Holy Spirit. The great Scottish missionary, Leslie Newbigin, once said, The question for Christians is not how can I be saved? There is only one question that matters: How can God be glorified?” (8)

Oh, Nicodemus, we thank you for taking us into the heart of salvation today. We are so glad for you, Nicodemus, that you stepped right into the middle of salvation when you went to Jesus long ago with your own questions about life and faith. We know you got it because of what happened in the end.

Friends, in Christ, do you know who went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body after he had died on the cross? It was Joseph of Arimathea and another man whose name was Nicodemus. The two of them took the body and wrapped it in spices and in linen cloths and laid it in a tomb. Think of all the people whose lives have been touched by Jesus, all whom he had healed, all to whom he had spoken the good news. Of them all, one of the two who were granted the privilege of preparing his body for burial was Nicodemus, whose own life had emerged like a butterfly from its cocoon after Jesus turned his mind inside out one night and opened his eyes to see that right then, in him, God was reaching down to embrace the world in love.

(1) Dr. Malcolm Brownlee, "Is There Saving Grace for Those Who do not Profess faith in Jesus Christ?" *Theology and Worship*, PC(USA)

(2) Dr. Gail O'Day, *The Word Disclosed*, CPB Press, 1987.

(3) An expression used by Dr. Ed Farley, professor of Theology at Vanderbilt Divinity School

(4) "Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ," The 214th General Assembly (2002) of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

(5) Ibid.

(6) A Declaration of Faith, PCUS

(7) Samuel Adams, "The Christian Encounter with Religious Plurality: A Reformed Perspective," The University of Chicago Divinity School, 1999.

(8) Ibid.