

Waterford Mennonite Church

April 12, 2015

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Two services: 8:00 am; 10:45 am

How does Jesus save?

John 3:1-16; Ephesians 2:1-10

Last Sunday we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus.

We declared to each other: The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah.

And there's this, the Sunday after—from the letter to Ephesians

Paul says that God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us.... made us alive together with Christ—and raised us up with him....

What's that about? In what sense are we raised up with Christ?

Paul also asserts that by grace we have been saved—and this is not our own doing; it is the gift of God—

Pastor Neil Amstutz (year of the Bible), for the Sunday after Easter, asked me to speak to this question: How it is that Jesus saves?

He asked me to talk about the classic answers to this question; three models of atonement.

The very question implies that somehow we *need* to be saved. Do we?

Paul says, "You were dead through your trespasses and sins..."

Through the year of the Bible you no doubt spent time on the alienation between God and human beings that goes all the way back to the garden—

Alienation that shows up throughout the scriptures, as God works to reestablish ruptured relationships, broken covenants with God, with others, with all creation.

The violence, the hatred, the greed and abuse throughout scriptures—and manifest everywhere today

makes it abundantly clear that we need to be saved.... saved from our mistakes, our failures, our sin?

So how is it that Jesus saves us?

How is it that we are made alive with Christ;
that relationships are restored (both personal and systemic)
with God, each other, self, and all of creation?

This is a great mystery of our faith.

There is no end of proclamations and arguments about how Jesus saves;
arguments about our eternal destinies.

These arguments are intense. They matter a lot to us.

We want to be saved!

No doubt many of you could tell stories about how your notion, your
understanding of how Jesus saves was formed.

The topic would be worth many sermons and hours of study, conversation.

I'll tell two stories: one from an ordinary day in the Shenk home, some 25
years ago; and another one from the Gospel of John

A story of salvation on a small, everyday scale:

It was Sunday morning. Dad was out of town. I asked three-year-old Timothy
what he would like for breakfast. Timothy said he didn't know, and from all
appearances, didn't care. I checked with big brother Joseph. Joseph quickly
chose hot oatmeal. I took Timothy's silence to mean acquiescence, so I made a
pot of oatmeal, served each of the boys several dollops and sat down with my
coffee and sweet roll. At his point, when we were all seated at the table,
Timothy declared that he wanted cinnamon toast.

Breakfast was already underway. The oatmeal was served. I didn't feel like
jumping up to do more preparations, so I said, "No. It's too late." Whereupon,
Timothy threw a scene, crying loudly and heatedly objecting.

On the heels of such an outcry, I couldn't in good conscience give in and say,
"Oh well. Cinnamon toast isn't such a big deal. I'll jump up once more and get
it." I knew there was no going back—couldn't reward such behavior. So I
explained patiently, "Timothy, you had your chance and now it is time to eat
oatmeal. You like oatmeal too, with milk, raisins and brown sugar."

Timothy fussed on unrelenting. His wails made any mercy on my part
impossible lest I reinforce his unacceptable behavior. I'd backed myself into a

corner. Neither one of us was going to change our minds. It looked as though we were at an impasse.

I took Timothy on my lap and asked him to stop crying or go to the bedroom. He did stop crying but kept loudly insisting that he wanted toast and only toast! I explained again (less patiently this time) how I had asked him *first* what he wanted and since he hadn't had a preference I'd proceeded with other breakfast preparations. He had missed his chance.

Timothy sat quietly in thought for a moment and then suddenly he looked at me. "Let's start all over!" he said.

Immediately I saw a way out. I laughed. Big brother Joseph, who had watched his mother's stubbornness with growing concern, laughed. A big smile spread over Timothy's face.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath. "Timothy, what would you like for breakfast?"

His hearty voice rang out. "Cinnamon toast!" He jumped off my lap and happily climbed onto his chair to await its arrival.

Saved by the grace of a new beginning; an opportunity to start over.

How does Jesus save? How might it be that Jesus saves by giving us the gift of a new beginning?

Another story, this one from John 3: when Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews comes to Jesus by night perplexed about where Jesus gets his power to do the amazing things he's doing.

Jesus tells him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus is understandably bewildered. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

What follows is a fascinating conversation about what it means to be born of water *and* Spirit, and that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being

born from above... and this mysterious talk about earthly things and heavenly things and how challenging it can be to understand because it's all mixed up together—

until we get to this clarion affirmation—

one of the most familiar verses in the whole Bible,

one that we can probably say **together**:

“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.”

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him....”

Ah. To save us, to give us a new start,
to make it possible for us to be born again.
God so loved us. God gave us Jesus.

How does Jesus save?

Like I said this question has perplexed Jesus followers for centuries,
and they've offered all sorts of variations on an answer.

In brief, let me provide three classic answers to the question;
three very reduced, distilled understandings of atonement.

Atonement?

Atonement is an act that is intended to save; to pay for or erase a debt;
to make something right that has gone horribly wrong,
to make it possible to forgive, to start over,
to reconcile and restore a relationship that was broken.

How does one atone for, or create the conditions for all to be restored to wholeness and health?

One of the classic answers is variations on what is sometimes called
substitutionary atonement.

Likely, everyone here knows what it is to feel guilty from time to time.

When we act out in selfish ways, we can cause great harm to each other, to ourselves, our community, our environment...

Normally we assume that any of us guilty for harm done should be blamed; we should be held accountable, should pay the price to make things right.

And that's the way things ought to work from day to day.

But what about in an ultimate sense?

Do we have to carry this burden of sin, guilt, failure with us—in an accumulating tangled weight all the way to the grave?

Substitutionary atonement, and scriptures that support this understanding of how Jesus saves, suggest that rather than you or me needing to indefinitely carry a heavy burden of guilt for our sin and failure, Jesus stands in as a substitute.

Jesus absorbs whatever punishment or suffering is needed to make things right rather than you and me.

Because of Jesus readiness to accept blame rather than inflict harm on others, he saves us by absorbing all the accusations that anyone of us deserves. He frees us to let go of the burden of our own failure and guilt.

Jesus saves us by standing in as a substitute for us.

This is expressed in biblical passages such as 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness,' I Pet 2:24.

Another classic answer to how Jesus saves is called Christus Victor, meaning Jesus saves us because he was victorious over the powers, whether the devil, sin, the law, or death itself.

In his death and resurrection, Jesus overcame the hostile powers that held us all in subjection.

In this way of thinking about how Jesus saves, the focus has to do less with personal guilt for sin or need for divine forgiveness, and more to do with triumphing over the rulers and authorities of the present evil age.

Inasmuch as we are victims of these evil forces, Christ's victory means that we're no longer trapped; we're no longer subject to evil or death.

In fact, not only are we individually freed, but the whole cosmos is redeemed because, "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them" (Col. 2:15).

The original sin of Adam and Eve subjected us all to death.

Now, by an act of divine love, God in Jesus fully entered into our suffering, into the bondage of death, and in so doing, turned it inside out by making it a conclusive moment of victory.

Because of the way Jesus faced death, and was raised to life, we can truly say:
O death where is thy victory; where is thy sting?

Finally, there is a third classic model of how Jesus saves us called the moral influence theory.

In this line of thinking, Jesus saves us by serving as a moral exemplar;
as one who, by the way he lived, calls us toward a better life,
both individually and corporately.

We know the scriptures tell of God's many efforts to get his people to live uprightly.

God gave the Law. He sent the prophets. He punished and cajoled,
and the people simply couldn't ever seem to get it right.

So God sent his son, Jesus.

Jesus showed us finally what it means to live fully the God-Spirit infused life.
He preached good news to the poor, opened the eyes of the blind, liberated the captives, set the oppressed free.

Most importantly, in his death, Jesus, chose the way of love.

He voluntarily laid down his life;

He broke the cycle of violence by choosing to love rather than hate.

As a morally exemplary human being, Jesus saves us by showing us how God wants us to live;

to lay down our lives in order to break the cycle of violence;
to give life rather than take life.

So how does Jesus save?

I suggest that, rather than one classic answer being right and the other wrong, or one trumping or discrediting the other as happens in so many arguments about the atonement, each of these answers helps us understand how Jesus saves.

And together, they provide a more whole and helpful completeness than does any one on its own.

Jesus saves us by providing a freeing, liberating way to deal with personal guilt, and the longing for forgiveness,

Jesus saves us by defeating death and the powers of this evil age on a cosmic scale, and that directly speaks to our own fear of death...

And Jesus saves us by a life of grace and truth, by showing how one can use

power to break the cycle of violence and freely choose to lay down one's life rather than take life.

In each of these ways, the biblical writers expound on how Jesus saves us.
Jesus invites us to start again.
To be born again.

And the way this saving happens won't be the same for each of us.

The gospels are full of stories about the different ways Jesus saves:

- Freeing the paralytic from the burden of his illness, and forgiving his sins.
- Freedom for the woman taken in adultery—from the condemnation of her community, and the invitation to sin no more.
- Surprising Zaccheaus with a visit to his home, which so deeply moved Zaccheaus that he decided to give away half of his possessions to the poor, and Jesus said: "Today salvation has come to this house..."
- The invitation to Martha as she grieved the death of her brother Lazarus, to believe in Jesus, the resurrection and the life.
- For Nicodemus, the invitation to be born again, from above.
- For Paul, the great enforcer of the law, the powerful liberation from legalism to embrace the transformation of grace.

Salvation looks different for each one.

But for each, there is an encounter with Jesus; a sense of starting over;
like being born again, and again,
with the Holy Spirit at work every day to bring grace-filled
transformation..

What I read in the scriptures is that our God is in the business of saving, *big time*—in Jesus!

Not in a slam dunk, now you've got your ticket to heaven and are home free
kind of way.

But in a daily way, offering us the immeasurable riches of his grace,
to start over again and again.

For God so loved the world, he sent his son, not to condemn, but to save.
And by grace we have been saved, raised to life, through faith.
This is not our own doing; it is the gift of God.