

“The Lord Saves”

Matthew 1:18-25

There is a common strand woven through our lessons today. When the armies of Syria and Ephraim were threatening Jerusalem, God told King Ahaz that he has no reason to fear them. They shall not remain. And through the prophet Isaiah, God told Ahaz to ask for a sign. Instead, Ahaz masks his unbelief with the sanctimonious excuse and puts the Lord to the test by saying, “I will not put the Lord to the test.” Isaiah tells him, “The Lord Himself will give you a sign.”

Paul, in his opening words in his letter to the Romans tells of God’s work. He was called to be an apostle; set apart for the Gospel of God; through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, we have received grace and faith. All of this has been given from God.

In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear of how the birth of Jesus took place. Before Mary and Joseph were married, she was found to be with child – from the Holy Spirit. And the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him the truth about this child. He is from the Holy Spirit. He will save His people from their sins. And you shall call His name Jesus – which, of course, means “The Lord saves”.

The Lord Himself has given the sign that these things will happen. The Lord calls His people; sets them apart; creates faith; and bestows grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus whose name means “The Lord saves.”

There is nothing in the salvation “process” (for lack of a better word); there is nothing in the salvation “process” that includes your work. There is no method to salvation. The name Jesus means “The Lord saves.” It does not mean “The Lord does most of the saving, and now let me tell you what you must do to make it complete.”

I read a very interesting article written by a former classmate of mine. His name is Chad. For those of you on Facebook, you may have seen it already. He speaks of guilt. He describes guilt as a stalker casting a shadow over his life. At work, at home, out to dinner with friends or family, guilt was always there.

I do not know the exact details of his past. All I know is that there were sins which cost him his marriage, his pastoral office, and his position as Seminary professor. His world collapsed around him. He writes: “I lost everything that mattered to me.” “Making huge, stupid, selfish mistakes”, (his words) and then living with the consequences invites the specter of guilt.

To the people to whom he would bare his soul and express the sorrow, remorse, shame, and loss he was feeling, the frequent, well-meaning advice given was “God has forgiven you; now you need to forgive yourself.” And he said the more I heard it, the more this advice seemed spot-on.

“We all make mistakes. After all, to err is human. I need to accept the fact that there’s nothing I can do to fix my past. These feelings of negativity, failure, shame, guilt—they’ve pried open the door of my heart, hung pictures on the wall, made themselves at home. I need to evict them, to reclaim my heart as my own. What does it matter if others

have forgiven me, if even God himself has forgiven me, if I'm still withholding forgiveness from myself? . . . Only when I forgive myself will this haunting ghost of guilt finally vanish for good."

When you really look at those words, "I need to forgive myself." Who is the one who forgives? Who is the one who saves? Jesus is not in that picture.

Chad said, "For a time I believed such advice. No more. I know now that to 'forgive yourself' is not only impossible; it is foolish, dangerous, and futile. It is the vain attempt of a soul plagued by guilt to seek relief in the very last place he should be looking: in himself. Telling a friend, "forgive yourself," is the equivalent of telling a dying person, "heal yourself." Absolution (forgiveness), like medicine, comes from outside of you, from the hand of a healer."

The sorrow, the shame, the remorse, the guilt that lurked within him for years was not because he hadn't forgiven himself. Chad said, "My problem was not that . . . I hadn't forgiven myself. No, my problem was that I had never truly believed that God had forgiven me. That was the issue."

When you are struggling; when you are hurting because of sin; when you have broken someone's trust; when you are feeling empty; when you are feeling worthless; when you have lost everything that matters to you; the solution to the problem is not found inside of you.

When I am struggling, hurting, or feeling empty, you telling me that "You are strong and you will get through this" points me to me, and I already feel empty and worthless, and now (on top of everything else) I feel guilty for not feeling stronger.

Don't tell me that I am fine. Don't tell me that I am OK. Tell me that the hurt and emptiness I feel is real because sin is real. Then tell me that God has an actual answer for it that will bring an end to it once and for all. His actual answer is found in the absolution, in the grace of Baptism, in the forgiveness won through the broken body and shed blood of Christ.

As we prepare for the coming of Christ. It is for this reason He came. God so loved the world (that was hurting, angry, fallen, empty of goodness) that He gave His only-begotten Son, that sinners like Chad and you and me will not perish but have eternal life.

Chad wrote, "All the dark deeds in which I engaged that brought ruin and disaster upon my marriage and family and career; all the lies and deceit; all the shame and heartache and regret that befell me afterwards—all of that God forgave in one fell swoop, because he transferred all of that evil upon a perfectly righteous man who willingly gave his life in my stead. Even if my wife and children and friends and colleagues and students had refused to forgive me (which, thanks be to God, is not the case), I would still rest peacefully in the only absolution that ultimately matters: the one Jesus himself gives from his ugly cross of beautiful love."

We all come before him hurting and empty of goodness. The Lord saves. We pray this Advent Season: Come Lord Jesus. Amen.