

“The Lord Saves”

Matthew 1:18-25

There is a common strand woven through our lessons today. When the armies of Assyria 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 believe that the temptation to look for something outside of Christ to make our forgiveness and salvation feel complete is because deep down there is a lack of trust in the reality of complete and total forgiveness by grace alone. And where you have a lack of trust in God’s grace, there you will find guilt. When there is sin which has not been forgiven and forgotten – at work, at home, out to dinner with friends or family, guilt is always there.

Last week I said, “Even in your foolish moments, in Baptism, God has made you holy.”

When we make stupid, selfish mistakes, and then having to live with the consequences invites the specter of guilt.

When we try to fix this apart from repentance, confession, and forgiveness by grace alone, we end up seeking out bad advice. False teaching is bad advice. Sometimes the bad advice given can be well-meaning and can seem like forgiveness through grace is being offered or discussed. I have heard people say, “God has forgiven you; now you need to forgive yourself.” And this advice seems 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 is doing the forgiving? Who is the one who saves? Jesus is not in that picture.

To ‘forgive yourself’ is not only impossible; it is foolish 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 yourself. 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 lurks within is not because you haven’t forgiven yourself. No, the problem is when we never truly believed that God had forgiven me. That is 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.

Then you have the flip-side: those who hold onto their anger and refuse to forgive. I had these two old brothers in Wisconsin who hadn't spoken in decades over some disagreement. Some offence was given, and said offence was held onto because each brother was convinced that they were right. I wish I could go back and ask them if feeling that you were in the right was worth the cost of losing your brother. Besides, as we are going to hear in our Bible study this morning from First John chapter two, "Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. . . . and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" [1Jn. 2:9-11]. Refusing to forgive has a cost – even beyond the spiritual harm one can do to themselves. In some families, it has a terrible cost.

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

All the dark deeds in which we engage, all the lies and deceit; all the hurtful words, all the shame and heartache and regret that we feel—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 and yours. Even if my wife and children and friends and family refused to forgive me when I have sinned (which, thanks be to God, is not the case), I would still rest peacefully in the only absolution that ultimately matters: the absolution of Jesus Himself. No one can nullify His work on the cross for me.

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