

## Isaiah's Greatest Hits for Advent: Salvation

**Luke 1:46-55     Isaiah 9:2-7**

### **Isaiah 9:2-7**

- 2** The people who walked in darkness  
    have seen a great light;  
    those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
    on them light has shined.
- 3** You have enlarged the nation,  
    you have increased its joy;  
    they rejoice before you  
    as with joy at the harvest,  
    as people exult when dividing plunder.
- 4** For the yoke of their burden,  
    and the bar across their shoulders,  
    the rod of their oppressor,  
    you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- 5** For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
    and all the garments rolled in blood  
    shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
- 6** For a child has been born for us,  
    a son given to us;  
    authority rests upon his shoulders;  
    and he is named  
    Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
    Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- 7** His authority shall grow continually,  
    and there shall be endless peace  
    for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
    He will establish and uphold it  
    with justice and with righteousness  
    from this time onward and forevermore.  
    The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

This is the word of the Lord.

In a small town, the kind of town that only has two or three stop signs, on main street, a church and a bank are at opposite ends of an intersection. And as you walk or drive down main street you see the church's sign and then the bank's sign. The church sign says, "Jesus saves." The bank's sign says, "And so should you."

On this third Sunday of Advent, we consider the message of salvation that is proclaimed at the coming of Jesus Christ—who is proclaimed as the *Savior* of the world. This was the message of the angels to the shepherds in the fields, who proclaimed good news of great joy, for all people: for unto you this day is born in the city of David, a *Savior*... Next week we will hear Zechariah's song at the birth of his son, John—who will grow to become John the Baptist. Zechariah's opening words are: "God has raised up a savior for us..."

What is salvation? What does it mean to be saved? What is meant when churches or people say, "Jesus saves"? The word salvation is used a lot but we don't often pause to consider what it really means in its fullness and richness.

Generally, in a dictionary, salvation is defined as "Preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin, or loss." In the religious sense, in Christianity, specifically, salvation is typically thought of as deliverance of the soul from sin and

its consequences through faith in Jesus Christ. And that is certainly an important part of salvation. Essential, even.

However, when we explore this Biblically and historically, in both Jewish and Christian history and theology, we find that salvation is much broader and richer and more complex than simply saving souls so people go to heaven.

Biblically, it actually has as much, *if not more*, to do with the here and now than it does with the ever-after.

In the Old Testament Hebrew, the root meaning of the word for salvation, or to save, is “to become spacious,” “to be broad,” or “to enlarge.” It carries the sense of deliverance from an existence that has become compressed, confined, and cramped. That is lovely imagery, isn’t it?

Therefore, David says (in Ps.118:5), “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me *in a broad place*.” And that line, of having feet set in a broad place, or a spacious place, is repeated several times in the Old Testament, and it’s a salvation concept.

This is the idea conveyed in this morning’s passage from Isaiah when the announcement is made that God has “enlarged the nation.” This isn’t exclusively about numerical increase or size. That’s a salvation phrase. It’s a way of saying, God has saved us, by bringing us out of the confined existence of exile and

captivity, and delivering us into a spacious land where we can spread out. Which leads, of course, to rejoicing. And to peace. And justice and righteousness and all of those grand and beautiful words and concepts that we heard in Isaiah 9. Salvation has life-giving ripple effects.

Interestingly, when we get to the New Testament, the word in Greek for “save” also means “to heal” (same word!), and, “to rescue.” In the gospels Jesus almost never uses this word, salvation. He tells stories that illustrate it, and he himself demonstrates it through his actions, especially in healing people. There are several *episodes* of salvation activity in the gospels, not the least of which, of course, is the death and resurrection of Jesus. But that is the *culmination* of Jesus bringing aid and rescue and setting people in a broad and spacious place, who had been in a confined existence.

I am convinced that one of the main reasons that many Christians don’t read the New Testament is because they think that salvation, or “Jesus saves” only means that he died and rose and saved my soul. And therefore, that’s all I need to know. But there is a lot, in 4 gospels, that happens between Jesus’ birth and death that is salvation activity. That’s why I say that his death and resurrection are the *culmination* of what he said and did over the course of his 3

year ministry. And why salvation has as much to do with the here and now as the ever-after.

So, instead of using the word “salvation,” I prefer to talk about “God’s saving help.” Which comes to us in a multitude of ways.

For starters, just read the psalms and see how many times David says, “Save me, O God...” And he’s not talking about taking his soul to heaven. He is asking for experiences of God’s saving help in some particular way, **now**. For example...

Ps.18:3: “I will call upon the Lord, so shall I be saved from... my enemies.” Salvation in this sense is a real rescue from real people intending to do real harm.

Ps. 69:1: “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.” In other words, I’m overwhelmed. Anyone feel that way sometimes? Feeling cramped by, or drowning in, life’s events, world events, or by anxiety in general? In this case, salvation means peace and rest and an ability to breathe deeply amidst the swirl of life events. Similarly in Ps.34:4: “I sought the Lord and he heard me; he *delivered* me from... all my fears.” Salvation from fear.

Ps.6:2-6: “Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony” (in other words, my body hurts! Any one feel *that??*); he goes on: “my bones are in agony and my soul is in deep anguish. Turn, Lord, and

*deliver* me; *save* me because of your unfailing love. Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave? I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.” What is David asking God to save him from in this instance? Illness. A sickness of some kind. Salvation, in this case, means healing. Being restored to health. And, by the way, isn’t that a great prayer? I love it: “C’mon God, who praises you from the grave?” A little bit of bargaining with God. And it’s kind of cheeky: “Don’t you want to be praised? How can I praise you if I’m dead? So, why not heal me.” That’s an assertive prayer! Moving to the gospel of Luke...

One time when Jesus does use the word “salvation” was when he was at Zacchaeus’ the tax collector’s house (Luke 19). Remember, he climbed a tree because he wanted to see Jesus and couldn’t see over the heads of the crowd.

After Jesus notices him in the tree, he calls him down and then invites himself over to Zacchaeus’ house. Something happened during their time together that changed Zacchaeus, and he repented (! like we talked about last week), he changed his mind and changed his ways, and decided to give back what he had extorted from people as a tax collector. And in response, Jesus says this: “Today, salvation has come to this house; for he, too, is a son of Abraham.” Salvation, in that instance, meant Zacchaeus having his identity restored, *and* his

humanity: of being seen and known for who he truly is, among the people. Talk about being set in a broad place! Zacchaeus had lived in a cramped and confined space of selfishness and greed, and of being despised by everybody. So his change of mind and heart, (his repentance!) because of his encounter with Jesus, saved him by restoring him to the human family. And to his Jewish heritage.

A couple more examples... In the book of Acts 16:30, after Paul and Silas' kindness to a jailor after a jail break (when the prison doors flung open and the other prisoners started to make a run for it, Paul and Silas stick around and convince the Roman prison guard not to commit suicide, because, in his mind, he failed to contain the prisoners, which meant a death sentence from the Roman authorities)—because of Paul and Silas staying and showing kindness, the jailor asks, "What must I do to be *saved*?" It's a way of asking, how do I get out of this way of life that I'm stuck in, which is causing harm? How do I get off the hamster wheel of being a tool for the powers that be? Paul's answer: follow Jesus, then you *and your household* will be saved. Interesting, salvation in that case wasn't individualistic, but an entire household is affected by one person's "change of mind," and change of a way of life. Again, salvation has ripple effects.

Romans 7:24, in one of the apostle Paul's most transparent moments in his letters, he says, "I don't understand my own actions; I don't do the good that I

*want* to do; and I *do* the bad things I *don't* want to. Who will *rescue* me from this body of death?" In other words, "Who will save me... *from me??*" Sometimes the salvation we need is from ourselves, our misguided thinking and self-will and our inability to do the good and healthy things we actually *want* to do. It doesn't mean we're bad people. Paul isn't dissing himself. He's just saying, it's a conundrum; I'm a mystery to myself sometimes. When I want to do good, I don't seem to be able to. I don't want to do bad, but I seem to be drawn to it like a moth to a lamp. Help!! And he concludes, in Romans 8, that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Nothing. "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us..." Now *there* is salvation. A complete acceptance of the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ. Which Paul prays (in Eph.3:18) we would experience in its height, depth, length and breadth—a love which is... spacious! We are set in the broad place of God's expansive love.

As we heard in Isaiah: salvation meant having the bar of oppressors removed, of being rescued from war. Of being escorted into light from a time of darkness (again, from exile).

Mary, as we heard, praises "God my savior." For her, it meant that she was being noticed, and lifted up, and honored by being included in God's plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. *And...* in her song it also meant justice—



equity—everyone being equal in God’s sight, as the Messiah begins to take center stage. Salvation in the sense of God working to set the world right.

So, can we see how large and multi-faceted salvation is?

Salvation isn’t just forgiveness of sins so God will let us into heaven.

Forgiveness of sins is important, and, central to our faith. Author Brian McLaren makes a great point, though, in saying that having faith in Christ and accepting God’s forgiveness of sins through Christ is the *prelude* to salvation. The good stuff happens, real salvation happens, *after* we make a commitment of faith and receive forgiveness. Forgiveness is the starting line, not the finish line, of salvation. Ponder that for a while!

And, of course, salvation means having our spirits united, inwardly, with God’s Spirit—the Spirit of the risen Christ—so we enjoy spiritual and eternal blessings on a daily basis. This isn’t just a ticket to heaven, though. It’s an everyday reality. Yes, someday we will enjoy a heavenly banquet—it’s part of what we celebrate at this table when we celebrate communion. We anticipate that heavenly banquet, we wait for it, and hope for it. And, *while* we wait and hope, we are “saved” daily by God’s presence with us, God’s joy welling up in us, God’s peace calming us, and God’s wisdom guiding us.

Because, in Isaiah’s words, this God-become-flesh in Jesus Christ is...

- Wonderful Counselor—that is, he is wise and gives wise instruction.
- Mighty God—that is, powerful to strengthen us, inwardly; and he brings power to heal.
- Everlasting Father—a nurturing parent who is without beginning or end—always with us in kindness.
- Prince of Peace—the one who makes us whole, who reconciles people, and who is peaceful in all of his ways.

During Advent and Christmas, we claim that salvation has come, in Jesus Christ, and continues to come, sometimes, perhaps, in ways that aren't visible to us. But if we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts and minds that are open, we can not only acknowledge God's saving help, we can be one of the helpers (to use a term that Mr. Rogers used), working with God to also be part of God's plan of redemption, like Mary.

What about you this morning? How have you experienced God's saving help? And therefore, how can you return thanks? And, during this Advent season, in what ways do you *need* God's saving help? And therefore, wait with hope and expectation.

Let's sing Mary's song about God's saving help.

Canticle of the Turning