

What Are We Being Saved From?
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Colossians 1:11-20
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Today is Thanksgiving Sunday! That feels like a nice way to spend a Sunday morning right? Giving thanks for all the many blessings bestowed upon us by our loving God. Our families, our friends, our very lives. It feels right to come to church to give thanks... with images of Turkey Drumsticks dancing in our heads!

But, there is more to this day...

You see, today, we are also at the end of the church calendar year, with a new year starting next week with the first Sunday of Advent. In the church calendar, this Sunday is called the Reign of Christ Sunday.

The Reign of Christ!

It makes Jesus sound very King like doesn't it? Such a concept is not in keeping with our progressive understanding of the Christian faith.

Well, our passage in Colossians reflects this theme when Paul lifts up the strength, guidance and redemptive power of Jesus as gifts of faith available to the faithful in his first century church. As the modern-day church, what are we to make of this passage? And what is Salvation anyway? What are we being saved from?

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's elegant and accessible translation of the Bible, Peterson sets the scene with a description of the Christians in the Colossian church. He reminds us that they were surrounded by a polytheistic culture: "Most people of that day believed the air around them was thick with unseen spirits that humans ignored at their peril...So, the Colossians were terrified that if they didn't appease the spirits, they laid themselves open to disease and poverty or worse."

They were afraid. Thankfully, those fears have evaporated with our more modern understandings... or have they?

Yesterday, Lisa and I traveled to the UCC church down in Ashland to take part in the Installation Service of the Rev. Christina Kukuk, their new and very gifted Senior Minister. It was good to be there to represent First Congregational for we have strong ties with that church. As many of you know, we shared the blessing of the interim pastoral leadership of Rev. Diane Hooge, who followed her extraordinary ministry here with a year and a half ministry in Ashland. But, what you may not realize is our history goes back even further than that...yesterday, a member of their church asked me to thank you for their very existence. She said, "Your congregation planted and nurtured our church back in the early 70's and if it wasn't for you we would not be here today." That acknowledgement is certainly something we should hold dear for the Ashland Church is home to a remarkable ministry.

Well, on the way home, Lisa and I noticed several HUGE billboards by the side of I5. Maybe you have seen them.

WHO IS JESUS? read one. With a phone number listed next to the question 1-800-The-Truth. Which I thought was rather handy, though I must admit I am a little tempted to try dialing 1-800-The-Lie, just to see what message I get!

Then, up the road a bit farther, another sign with bold block letters, “DO YOU WANT TO GET INTO HEAVEN?”

To be honest, I didn’t get the number on that one. We drove past it before I had time. Presumably, it was a reference to the saving powers deemed exclusive to Jesus Christ and not merely a safety warning to keep our eyes on the road to prevent driving off said road to our untimely death! Frantically dialing 1-800-The-Truth as we careen headlong into a steep ravine is not the way I want to go!

Obviously, for many Christians, the Reign of Christ, is one characterized by POWER. Namely, a belief in Christ’s saving power to allow a True Believer immediate and unquestioned entrance into heaven. A gift of God’s redemptive capacity and grace saved for Christians exclusively.

Jesus saves! Is how you hear it proclaimed.

So, membership in a church indeed has its privileges! You didn’t realize this when you signed up did you?

Well, I have always had trouble understanding the attraction of this theology. And to be honest, it made me angry at fellow Christians who held such a belief to the exclusion and damnation of members of other faith traditions or no faith for that matter. I just couldn’t understand the perceived need or desire to worship and believe in such a severe and damning God. But then, I gained new insight through God’s gentle guidance and by a very sad and tragic circumstance.

Jennifer, was a lovely caring and generous soul. A mother of four, the youngest being 3. I first got to know Jennifer through my interviews with her and other members of the search committee of the church I would eventually serve.

I still remember hearing Jennifer complain of terrible headaches during those interviews, we would not know for a couple of months that her symptoms were the result of a terminal cancer.

The last year of Jennifer’s life was marked by poignant beauty, steadfast loyalty, heart rending sadness, and grace-filled blessings. All who knew and walked with Jennifer felt deeply touched by her gentle radiance.

And so, my first reaction was one of frustration when I heard that Roger, her close friend, and a very conservative Christian, spent the last hour of her life by her bedside, before I could get back from a Retreat. My frustration gave way to anger when Jennifer’s husband reported that Roger spent his entire visit pleading with his friend to profess her belief in Jesus Christ as her savior on her deathbed.

“Say it Jennifer!” he implored over and over again, “Just say it... please!”

I was incensed. How could he do such a thing to his dear friend...and to her loving family? Jennifer was now safely in the embrace of our loving God but the profound grief of her family was now enduring was made even more unbearable by the doubt he needlessly and carelessly cast into their hearts! The children were there when he pleaded with their mother.

Then, something filtered through my rage, and offered insight into his motivation, and that of other conservatives for that matter. Like those believers in Paul's early church...fear was at the root of Roger's faith life.

I thought to myself, Roger LOVED his dear friend...there was no doubt. He would never do anything to hurt her or her beautiful family on purpose. And then it struck home—the enormity of the issue.

Roger was afraid of God! Terrified.

Roger believed the air around him was thick with the unseen condemning Spirit of God that humans ignored at their peril...so, like the early church, Roger was terrified that if he didn't appease this spirit, he laid himself open to the wrath of a punishing and exacting God.

In short, Roger was trying to SAVE Jennifer from God through a professed belief in Jesus Christ. Jesus was Roger's Savior FROM a vengeful God. To Roger, and to many other terrified Christians, Jesus was a ticket to heaven with a corresponding, "Stay out of You Know Where" card.

The famous theologian, Paul Tillich outright rejected the notion that salvation is about going to heaven. He wrote, "...it is certainly not, what popular imagination has made of it, escaping from hell and being received in heaven, in what is badly called 'the life hereafter.'"

Instead, Tillich offers a two part definition of salvation. First, he builds upon the Latin root, *salvus*, to say that salvation means to heal and make whole.

Second, he also defines salvation as liberation. Tillich goes on to propose that to heal and to liberate are the same thing.

He also stresses that this is not just an individual concept. Discussing what is meant by saying Jesus is savior, Tillich writes, "...we mean that in him we see the power which heals us by accepting us and which liberates us by showing us in his being, a new being—a being in which there is reconciliation with ourselves, with our world, and with the divine Ground of our world and ourselves." We are not saved as individuals, but in unity with all others and with the universe.

In our recent Sunday morning Adult Education Class, *The Foundations of Faith*, Don Gall and I noted that the word salvation, though found frequently throughout the Bible, is seldom about an afterlife. Neither are saved and savior primarily about being saved from our sins so that we can go to heaven. As Don said, "To understand this, you must allow their meanings to be shaped by their biblical contexts. The first biblical context shaping the meaning of salvation is the story of the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites, trapped between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea, are saved by God's intervention: 'Thus God saved Israel that day from the Egyptians,' and the Israelites could sing, 'the Lord is my strength and my might, and God has become my salvation,' and God could declare 'besides me there is no savior.'"

What the meanings of salvation in both the Old and the New Testaments have in common is that salvation is understood as "deliverance," "rescue," "transformation." To be saved is to be delivered or rescued from that which ails us. Salvation is also about entering into a new kind of life, a life covenanted with God, about being transformed into a new creation. It is about political transformation, about moving from injustice to justice, from violence to peace.

Salvation is about a two-fold transformation of ourselves and of our world—and who does not want this? Especially today? This is Good News people!

We have a God who loves us and doesn't need boxes checked or certain words uttered with our dying breath to seal that love.

We have a God that moves through us and within us and who offers a strength that will mitigate the many fears which threaten to take hold of our lives.

We have a God who showed us life-changing power though the Grace of Jesus Christ who came not to condemn but to lift up and set free!

We have a God who offers Salvation for healing and wholeness and who offers a new beginning especially when we think we don't deserve one.

We have a God who loves us! No phone call required!

Happy Thanksgiving everyone!

Colossians 1:11-20

¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from God's glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to God, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.