



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Are We Saved?

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 15, 2015
The Fourth Sunday in Lent: Based on John 3:14-21*

Somewhat unusually, I'd like to begin today by asking you a few questions. I hope you don't mind. Are you saved? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior? Have you been born again, saved by the blood of Christ? If you die tonight, do you know where you will spend eternity?

If even one of these questions makes you slightly uncomfortable, I can assure you that you are not alone. Simply asking them takes me far from my comfort zone. On the other hand, if each is easy for you to answer, that's okay, too, for here they are: Huge questions that live and breathe at the heart of the religious culture of our era. Despite my discomfort in imagining God's salvation in this language only or even primarily, the truth is that in a large swath of Christianity, the answer to these questions, each of which in fact is the same, determines a great deal about how things will turn out for the answerer—at least in the mind of the interrogator. "Interrogator" is a bit more pejorative than I actually intend, for the questioners are often well intended, even if invasive and somewhat irritating and almost always irrepressible. Maybe I do mean interrogator, but certainly good-hearted interrogators. Regardless, the questions are real; and for us to be involved in the religious discourse of the culture, we need to know what we mean or don't mean by these deeply loaded words.

The third chapter of John, from which we have just heard the most famous verse in Christian scripture, John 3:16, is the primary source of these questions and this kind of thinking. These few verses more than anywhere else in the bible provide the setting and derivation of the desire to know: Are we saved? Again and again you have heard me and many others in this pulpit attempting to contextualize these words from John, to explain the deeply drawn lines of who is in—who is saved—and who is not. The extreme divisiveness of these words, particularly in comparison to the other gospels, demands that we visit them again and again with our most serious and honest exegesis.

You will recall that John was the last of the canonical gospels to be written. The community was in great turmoil and despair. On each side of a great divide good people among the community of John were hurt and angry. At this point in the history of the church (around the turn of the first century), Jews who followed Jesus had come to believe that their belief in Jesus meant that there must be a complete break from the Judaism of their past. Though they continued to claim the truth and richness of the Abrahamic tradition, they had concluded that only those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah could be saved, could know the salvation of God. There was no notion that differing religious understandings could live alongside one another pluralistically and peacefully. One side was right; the other was wrong; and that sadly was the end of the story. The Gospel of John proclaims quite clearly for all with ears to hear, "Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

For me, though, these words neither reflect the overriding message of scripture nor resonate with what I believe with all my heart to be true about the living Christ. They flow from a fractured and deeply hurting community. Tragically as Christianity in some of its iterations has played itself out over the centuries, an unquestioned, non-contextualized acceptance of these words has perpetuated angst and misery and violence. Recognizing that truth, it is little wonder that many of us, far from smudging John 3:16 on our foreheads at football games, avoid the language altogether. As a result, should we be asked, "are you saved," we'd most likely mutter something quietly and get away as quickly as possible or in my case probably engage in a long, tedious and generally obnoxious theological diatribe—one unlikely to bring honor to God or to me.

And, yet, I stand before you this morning as one who understands himself as “saved”—or perhaps more truthfully as one who believes himself to be by the grace of God in the process of being saved. And the questions come: saved from or saved to? Having long ago had to admit—not without some fear and trembling along the way—the incongruity of a place of eternal damnation at the hand of God, I do not, therefore, feel saved from hell, disbelieving its possibility as a permanent place of residence. And, yet, in fact, there are times that nothing—no amount of saving grace—seems able to save me from sojourns into the realm of hell on earth, moments when fear, doubt, sin, anxiety, hopelessness win for a time. And, yet, I do not experience these episodic collaborations with hell to have occurred at the hand of a wrathful God but as moments when *I* have simply lost my way. So do I consider myself through my belief in Jesus to be saved from hell? Not so much. And for certain I do not feel saved from the realities of life. Neither my love of God nor my desire to follow the ways of Jesus save me from the vicissitudes, disappointments, illnesses, losses of life. I suppose in the way of a child I’d love the notion of being saved from such things, never having to lose or to hurt; and, yet, almost immediately upon thinking that way, I’d begin to understand that salvation such as that would take me from life more than place me at its center—for to be alive is to hurt and lose as well as to know joy.

So I think for me the answer to the question, are you saved, is best stated as, “Yes, I am saved; indeed am being saved not so much **from** anything but **to** something, to life, to a life of integrity, truthfulness and faithfulness, the process of being saved less a *fait accompli* and more a lifelong journey into the heart of God.” Are we saved in order to have eternal life? I don’t know the answer to that. What we most surely know is that when Jesus prayed he prayed that the kingdom of God would come on earth. Those words give us the clue to our greatest hope—that the kingdom of God comes very near now—and our greatest challenge—that we play a role in it. We are saved to life that has the quality of the eternal now; and that, my brothers and sisters, is an amazing kind of living—a life in which each moment signifies, when poignancy is not in the future but a present reality, when fullness is not a reward at the end of life but the gift of a life with God now. Please hear this: I am not saying there is not life beyond this one. It is impossible for us to know that. But what I am saying is that with Jesus we pray in the hope that the kingdom of God will come on earth, not in some distant land but on this earth, in this place, which we know. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” With that great hope comes our deepest challenge that we are to play a role in bringing salvation to *this* world, doing all we can to make it a place of goodness and bounty for all.

The hope of our salvation, then, the conviction that we are saved or are being saved does not make us arrogant; it makes us conscious and alive and aware that above all else we are saved by something far beyond ourselves. We are saved less to know than to hope, less to be certain about everything than to be open to unending mystery of God, less to reprove others and ourselves, saying this is right and this is wrong, than to love generously and forgivingly. For you see we can’t ever believe correctly enough to be saved; we can’t live righteously enough to earn salvation; we can’t do enough good works to make us worthy. And the incredible, truly incredible, almost unbelievable in our meritocratic way of understanding life is that we don’t have to. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians gives it to us straight: it is all grace. Salvation comes because we are loved—not because we ask to be, not because we deserve to be, but because God is God. There can be no better news than that.

In the name of God: *Amen*.