

Jesus Saves

Deuteronomy 26 and Galatians 4: 1-7

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Our scripture today from Deuteronomy is a creed spoken by the people of Israel as they brought their gifts from the harvest to the altar. Hear again what the people would say:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. He went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.”

In the litany, God is known as the one who saved a community from the forces that sought to control their lives. Each time the people of Israel brought the first fruits of their harvest to the temple, they remembered--God is the one who rescued them.

It is no secret that Israel had doubts. Just after Israel was released from Egypt, we will remember after they celebrated their freedom that it wasn't long until Israel was angry with God. In the wilderness Israel whined again and again, saying things like, “Why did God lead us out here that we might die.” Israel cried out to return to the security of slavery, the security of a master they could see over the mystery of the powerful love of God.

But when the community worshipped, they confessed that God saved them—not from fire in the hereafter, but from the suffering of their past. It was an oft spoken litany, because their salvation wasn't always apparent. It wasn't an easy belief to hold on to. Remember these were, for a time, a conquered people worshipping in a temple of ruins. Yet, Israel insisted throughout her years recorded in the Bible that, even when all went wrong and they were sent away from their land, God is to be known as the one who saves.

Without that belief spawned in Israel's toil, I dare say, Jesus is just another man. We confess Jesus is Lord because, as God did for Israel, Jesus saves.

Paul, a good Jewish scholar, understands that Jesus was sent by God to further God's saving work. In his letter to the Galatians, a community where Jewish Christians are excluding Gentile Christians from supper, Paul suggests that the people of Israel, while they have a special relationship to God, are no freer, without Jesus, than their Gentile counterparts.

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us...

While we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.

Pharoah has many names: ego/id, the powers and principalities of the world, Satan. Elemental Spirits is another name for that which seeks to have power over creation; that which seeks to usurp God's place.

The guardians and trustees refer to the law, the many rules of Jewish order, including dietary restrictions which are the basis for the Jewish Christians not sharing in table fellowship with the Gentiles. For Paul, the law isn't God's last work. It can't be, because it divides those who are to be one in Christ. The law, Paul argues, was God's way of keeping his people from wandering off until Jesus could create a new way.

when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Jesus' saving work is here described as his redeeming Israel from the law. Jesus does not seek to lead us into the land of milk and honey. There's no such promise of comfort or security. Rather, Jesus sets us free to be God's children, living in a relationship defined by God's grace. Jesus, rather than the law, saves us from wandering according to the whims of the elemental spirits of the world.

One more note on the creed from Deuteronomy. It ends with a word spoken directly to God. "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." It ends with an individual voice speaking to God as if God will hear. It is the confession of "God has saved" that opens the possibility of a conversation.

Amazing Grace, our first hymn, was written by John Newton who cried out to God for mercy when a storm took hold of his slave trading ship. While he didn't stop

his trade immediately—conversion takes time—he entered into a conversation that led to his ordination into Christ’s church. He became a powerful preacher and hymn writer.

A Mighty Fortress is Our God, the hymn we will sing at the end of worship, was written by Martin Luther. Luther was stuck in the horror of trying to please God by being more pious than any other. Then he had years to lecture on the Psalms, Hebrews, Romans and Galatians. Somewhere along the line he was captured by God’s grace. Faith, not works, he exclaimed. He began a conversation which eventually gave birth to the Reformation.

Both men, I suspect, would have no problem saying they were saved—one from a storm at sea, the other from a storm in his soul.

Then there’s Paul himself, who lived as a Pharisee, seeking to kill those who would follow a law other than God’s own law. He was a man of singular purpose until that day he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He was struck blind. It took another disciple, Ananias, to trust God’s word to him that he was to go to Paul (the one who persecuted Christians) and give him back his sight. And Paul, who had been saved by this vision of Jesus, became the great disciple.

“Because you are children”, Paul writes, and one suspects that what he is about to say, he knows a lot about, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”

It was God’s saving work that gave Israel her identity as God’s people. It was God’s saving work through Jesus that gives us our identity as God’s people.

Chip reminded us last week that we at Community Church believe we are called to change a few *a lot*. You, who have attended here a while, know you can’t simply speak a few memorized Bible verses and then run the other way. This isn’t the place for that. God is here. Jesus lives here. The Holy Spirit moves here. We, who come to Community Church, come to encounter God, and are not satisfied until we take on the mantle of one of the great disciples, until we give voice to our faith in way that changes us, and moves others to change, *a lot*.

Many people want to change their lives. I remember a sign in the gym that said, “change your life in 20 minutes.” I see Oprah’s large following. Many people feel something is wrong with the way they are living and are looking to find a way to make it right.

There are many guides. There are many ways to change. There are many who will tell you how to be healthy and more alive. But it is Jesus, and only Jesus, who saves.

“But I don’t need to be saved, thank you.” A number of years ago, I knew a man who had come to church for the sake of his children. He was in the midst of a crisis but unwilling to look at his own part in it. When I approached him at coffee hour he was visibly uncomfortable. He quickly dismissed me saying, “I know God loves me,” as if that would be the only thing God would want to say to him. The man who was in visible pain came to church so his children might be set on a wholesome path, but he resisted taking any step of faith himself. It wasn’t enough for him or his children. If only we could have prayed together, brought Jesus’ light into his darkness. Maybe then, Jesus could have reached him and his children.

Jesus cannot enliven a soul who is intent on being his own savior.

While you can pick and choose among the great precepts of Christianity and strive to be faithful to God, you can’t be a great disciple of Jesus until you know what it is like to be saved by him.

There’s plenty to be saved from. Save me from my ego, save me from my fear, save me from my trouble, from worry of hateful leer, save me from being holier than thou, save me from idle vows, O Jesus save me when I go astray...lead the way O Lord, lead the way.

Jesus knows well the elemental spirits that seek to hold you in their power. He can free you. Invite him in.

Even if you’ve been “saved” before...invite him in again. There’s no limit to our need. There’s no limit to Christ’s power.

Invite him in.

If you are struggling to do so, call me, Chip, or your mentor. Allow someone to pray over you. Allow someone to invite Jesus in. Because it isn’t all up to you. Even Paul had Ananias.

When I was back in Connecticut I spent time with my mentor and friend Tessa. I asked her to pray with me. It was hard to make that request. I felt so very vulnerable. Yet she opened the way for me to journey in a new way with Jesus.

In his presence I saw myself exchanging a cloak of protection for the gift of flowers Jesus offered. We all are in need of grace.

Jesus saves.

I'll give Martin Luther the last word...

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing.
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name.
From age to age the same.
And he must win the battle.