

Epiphany III Year A 2017

In the name of the one God, Creator, Restorer, and Challenger

You say I am repeating myself... Shall I repeat myself? Okay, another word about *salvation*... Salvation that word we say all the time in the church... every Sunday in the Nicene Creed, “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.” We hear the word in scripture, in the Psalms, from the pulpit, in our liturgy.... Salvation is at the heart of the spiritual quest... and yet the word has become tired and hollow.... We Episcopalians have abdicated the frequent use of the word to the so-called Evangelical traditions... I remember in junior high and high school teenagers who were caught up in the Christian renewal movement, were always asking the rest of us if we were saved.... I would come home from school and ask my mother if I was saved, and she would dismissively say, “of course you are; they don’t know what they are talking about.”

But the question of salvation is crucial nonetheless... and no matter however the word has been used over the centuries of the church... Salvation is at the heart of the Gospels, at the heart of faith, at the heart of our spiritual practice. So, I will repeat myself: We live in a world of hyper individualism. As early as the Enlightenment of the late 17th century individual freedom and advancement... self-interest and self-sufficiency have taken on iconic stature.

During this period of history there emerged a renaissance of ideas... in the arts and in the sciences... technology of course followed along with these ideas... earlier, the printing press, global navigation; astronomy, mathematics, philosophy... these ideas combined with the discovery and wealth of the New World engendered a fascination with the human mind and imagination and its seemingly unlimited potential... Later Nietzsche would call this phenomenon the 'ubermensch'... the superman; and would declare that the new god of the emerging modern era was the human mind and its infinite capabilities; Hegel coined the term, the 'rise of the autonomous self' to describe the ascendance of the imaginative human ego capable of controlling its destiny and the destiny of others.

Now in so-called post-modernity we are still obsessed with the individual. Our modus operandi is all about *my* success, my happiness, *my* well-being, *my* security... In our world celebrities, and athletes are our idols... or our friends who we think have it all together... all projections of how we would see ourselves. And the church has acquiesced. Salvation over the centuries has been taught by the church as having to do with me, my happiness, my worth, my self-esteem... and if salvation doesn't satisfy in this life, then there is always the next... when I will be utterly satisfied and happy, forever, that this life is a mere prelude to the true life,

a true life out there in the heavens ... And this mentality drives our economy and the political process... we vote our so-called pocket-books, our self interest, and call that a good thing... We see this pathology(I'm calling it) being acted out in macrocosm, on a global scale as well... The world's wealth is more and more in the hands of an elite few... Governments, including our own, have become infrastructure for the acquisition of personal wealth... In spite of having the technological means to sustain this planet... sustain it in abundance... the gap between those who share in that abundance, and those who are not is widening exponentially... and that, we have learned in our history, will only lead to violence... we know that because we have seen it from generation to generation... History teaches us that greed and envy and the quest for self-fulfillment is our undoing.

Beside the waters of Babylon, the site of exile for the people of Israel, the scribe called Isaiah speaks of the means and ends of self-interest and greed and envy and violence as the 'region of deep darkness'...His people enslaved by a powerful kingdom with world conquering aspirations. And he is speaking of salvation up and against that... salvation which is freedom from such evil... Matthew in speaking of the ministry of Jesus is quoting Isaiah... his people living within the same paradigm of injustice and oppression... Both writers, Isaiah and

Matthew speak of light, an ancient and profound metaphor... light from God which will restore the people to the life which God has promised them... salvation then is about the freedom to live in safety and dignity... freedom to share in the abundance of the creation... and please hear this, I am of course repeating: Salvation is not about the individual, but about a people... salvation is about the viability of the community... that is why in the gospels Justice, that great equalizer of people, that thing that raises all boats, is the paradigm of God's rule, because justice is the means by which people are free to live out their humanity.... Throughout the sweep of the human story, it is at last justice that liberates us for true life. That is why all of the gospels are focused on the matter of justice; that's why I preach about it all the time.

So we have just inaugurated a new president of these United States (this is not about beating up on Trump)... and we will inaugurate other presidents to come... but let me remind you brothers and sisters, that we are first and foremost citizens of God's just rule... Ours is a higher patriotism than to the powers and principalities of our world... So no matter who we have elected to tend to our civic life our vocation is to stand for justice always... Our sacred Scripture is unequivocal: our vocation is to welcome the immigrant... our vocation is to embrace the outcast.... Our vocation is to heal the sick.... Our vocation is to set the

prisoners free... our vocation is to feed the hungry and bring welcome news of liberation to the poor among us, to raise them up... our vocation is to raise up the dead of our world to life. Our vocation is salvation, in short... And salvation is not a thing to be attained, but a practice of loving our neighbor as we love ourselves... Salvation is a way to live, a practice, a process. I'm not making this up... this is the heart of the gospels.... So that means that the vision of the gospels are at their essence social, economic and political.... That the vision has its commerce in the world, beyond our walls. That means that our role in our common life is to stand for sacrifice and vulnerability... to stand for the dignity of every human being.... And we are taught in Genesis that we are to be good stewards of the planet... If this administration, or any administration, is not serving the interest of all, if it is not holding equal justice as its guiding principal then as Christians we are to resist.... Because we are patriots of the gospel... we are followers of Jesus... And let me say, this is not a liberal or conservative thing, those are unfortunate labels... You know, people in Mobile label us the "liberal church." No... we're a gospel church... Our allegiance is to the Jesus movement that would see all welcomed at the table of plenty, welcomed into the land of justice, the land of light... Our allegiance is to see that people are healthy... Jesus after all was a healer.... Our allegiance is to break down walls, not build them... In our world,

we are our brother's and sister's keeper... Our rubric is not self-interest, but selfless interest. Our way is the way of sacrifice and vulnerability.... And we are to persist against evil, as our Baptismal Covenant puts it... and evil is born of self-interest; and self-interest begets injustice and violence. Evil is not a monstrous unconquerable enemy, but evil is manifested or subverted simply in our choice of whether to serve or not. And serving requires rapt attention and standing up for the Good.

So as the baptized we are activists for Love... God's dream for the world is love, and we are the means of love as God's people, God's patriots... the means being justice and kindness and inclusion and embrace.... We only exist as a church for the ones outside our doors.... And we must be vigilant.... As Christians we don't have the luxury of apathy or complacency.... Because we are about salvation, the dignity and well-being of God's people, and time is so very short.... Because many of God's beloved live still in that region of which Isaiah spoke, the region of deep darkness....and the Love of God will not stand for that!... Let us with all that we are bear the light of love to our brother, our sister who strain at the yoke of unjust self-interest....Let us choose to be patriots of the good... I am of course repeating myself, but let those with ears... hear.