

## Lent IV Year 2018

This of course is a famous passage from John's Gospel. Y'all may remember the guy with the rainbow hair who would hold up a placard during sporting events: John 3:16: God so loved the world that he gave his Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. I have spoken to you often from this pulpit about salvation, and what that word means in our culture, as opposed to what that word means in the context of scripture, and there is a decided difference...and that reminded me of something our son Rhett said when he was a teenager...perhaps I remember it still because I remember being a teenager and how awkward it was...I can't much identify with girls...but I can boys, I can tell you it was an awkward time....some guys were already shaving while some still were playing with army men... alas, the girls tended to like the ones who shaved... I was a late bloomer...so was Rhett, so maybe that's why I remember this vignette.

I can't remember the grade, but it was during junior high...excuse me, now called middle school...and apparently this cute girl kind of liked Rhett... and he apparently had barely noticed her...and I asked him one day about her, sticking my parental nose in his business....Rhett, I said...what

about 'so and so' ...she's a nice girl...what do you think of her?...to which he replied.... "Dad she's "*saved.*" He didn't mean it in a good way.

This morning I want to talk about salvation. We've all been hearing about it all of our lives whether in church or without. In the Gospel of John from which we are reading, the word saved or salvation is used some sixty eight times....(yes, there are actual biblical scholars who have counted) twice the total of its use in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined. It is used throughout the Pauline letters; and its use is ubiquitous in Hebrew scripture...so we can say without a doubt that the theme of salvation is chief among the themes of scripture.

I remember in the late sixties and early seventies, itinerant troops of the so-called Jesus people (young and old) coming through town...asking the question of the age...Are you saved?...I asked my mother... "Well Jim we're Episcopalians and don't really talk that way," she said....but there were classmates at school who wore pins that said, "Do you have it? I made the mistake of asking one of them," have what?" And immediately three or four of them pounced and asked me to accept right then and there Jesus as my personal savior. I asked my mother again whether I was saved or not...she gave in and said "well of course you are darling...of course you are"...but she never told me what it meant....It was as if these people

possessed something I didn't have...And then just a few years ago... there it was again on a billboard on Springhill Avenue...."Got Jesus?" You know, like got milk. In the post-modern Christian world, the world of hyper-consumption, salvation is something you possess; something we possess often at the exclusion of others.

But since the theme of salvation is paramount in John's Gospel, I want to talk to you about what salvation means in context of this late first century, perhaps early second century literature written to and for a community making its way in an oppressive, shame ridden world...a world trodden under by empire..... a world suffering the disparities of the status quo. "Everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." The writer says. So the first point to be made is that this is not about life after death; what modern Christianity considers the reward of salvation. Eternal life for this writer is a present reality. Eternal life is reality, the way life is at its heart when we're paying attention... This is about living a life full of meaning and purpose now... It is about living not as if we were dead, perishing, but being fully alive...T.S. Eliot thought the modern dilemma to be that we are living as if we were dead; "death in life", he called it...The second point has to do with the word *believe*: Sandra Schneiders has done extensive work on the Gospel of John, and her translation for the word

*pisteo*, here translated believe... Her translation is not believe but... trust into... not a belief per se, an assent to dogma, but an active way of life... trusting into the way of Jesus... acting as if... trusting into a way of compassion, and mercy, and inclusion and embrace... trusting into a way that bears justice... trusting into a way that bears healing... belief is trusting into a way of life, a practice, a process.

The other important point to be made here... and you've heard it before, is that the figure of Jesus, the Word, the Son of Man, is always referring to the community, the followers of Christ... the community committed to following in the way... so salvation then becomes, not a state of mind or being, but a way to live... We live, as the people of God, lives of salvation... So what this gospel is about is not a coded invitation into a personal relationship with Jesus... I surely don't know what that is... but an invitation and admonition, of profound consequence to be sure, into a way of life that bears light to our world beset by darkness... We dear brothers and sisters live salvation... we trust into this way as the only way that saves... there is no other way to God Jesus tells us... this way of living for each other, loving one's neighbor, in short... The only hope for our world is that we live under the divine rubric of sacrifice... It is sacrifice that will save us from the evils that find their way into the created order... salvation

becomes, takes on flesh and blood, as it were, in every act of sacrifice. The sole purpose of the baptismal community is to nurture such a life, and not for ourselves but for those to whom we have been given. Salvation is about restored community and our participation in it. It is not about me. It is about us. That is a crucial distinction.

This gospel is speaking of a practice that comes from heaven and makes its home in earth...Earth is the place for Love, Robert Frost writes...heaven and earth one place, one reality...this in truth is the way the earth is made and we in it...that lives lived for the other is that which transforms and saves. When we view the life of faith as trusting into...trusting into a practice...then belief, dogma, and theology, and “right thinking” take a necessary back seat...this way of a life even finds kinship beyond our mere denominations...beyond mere religion...Wherever justice and mercy, and peacemaking and kindness and loving sacrifice is lived; wherever dignity is served...there the Christ is... alive in community.. We are to live salvation...I don't care which creed (and I'm pretty sure God doesn't care which creed!)...It is in the community in the process of reconciliation wherein we see the face of the risen Christ...the days of salvation being a personal possession we must kiss goodbye...salvation is not possessed but practiced. To find God is not to figure God out amid our

theological speculations. To find God is to practice God, if you will. Belief is easy. Loving your neighbor is work... and it is our work brothers and sisters.

The cardinal symbol of this in today's passage is the raised serpent in the desert. John cites the passage from Numbers about Moses raising up a serpent in the desert, and connects the typology to Jesus being raised on the cross. The serpent, many of you know, is an ancient symbol of healing and reconciliation...we know that through healing we are quite literally reconciled to the community. Healing is not a solitary practice; but one of community. The serpent and staff, the Caduceus, is a symbol in medicine...you see it on the doctor's letterhead...on pharmacy logos...healing our first call...and now as the community of faith it is we the serpent, we the Christ, we lifted up for the good of the whole...to practice the art of salvation is to be lifted up by God's favor as healers and reconcilers and perhaps most importantly as advocates...healers of the primordial wound of our world... and voice for the voiceless...we who would stand in the light of salvation for our brother and sister. The serpent lifted up...Christ lifted up...the community lifted up...lifted up for the sake of our world...the practice salvation is eternal life...another term lost in our culture...eternal life does not speak of a never ending future but a way of

life now wherein we live quite literally in the presence of our God. To practice salvation is to walk with God in the flesh. If you want to know God, be about the practice of Love.

To live, to trust into, lives of salvation, we live in the presence of God...not something to possess, but something to give away...and the stakes, the stakes have never been higher....Are you saved?....That isn't the question....The question is: I am a follower of Jesus. How shall the world be saved through me?