

"Salvation is His Name"
Matthew 1:18-25/Isaiah 7:10-17
12/27/09 (1st Sunday of Christmas)-FPC
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Text: Read Matthew 1:18-25

II. Exegesis

Joseph is a good man. And he is a religious man. He and Mary have made a promise to each other. They are to be married. But word comes to Joseph that Mary is pregnant. The promise.....the plans.....the talk between them.....it has come to a dead end. His world has been turned upside down. He will quietly make plans to go his own way. Even though this hurts, he does not seek to hurt Mary. He does not want to disgrace Mary. He is a good man.

But just when Joseph thinks he has things figured out, his world gets turned on its head again. There's a dream.....and an angel. The child is of the power of God; a miracle of the Holy Spirit. He does not need to fear; Mary has kept their promise. Something bigger than he ever dreamed is happening. The child is to be named Jesus, because he will save the people.....he will save them from their sins. And as Isaiah promised King Ahaz a child named "Emmanuel" was to be born to remind them that "God is with us" in a day of crisis, so this child that Mary will bear is a reminder that "God is with us" too.....Emmanuel.

Joseph is a good man. And he is a religious man. And so when he awoke from the dream he believed the word of the angel, and did all that he dreamed. The promise to Mary was kept. The child was born. And he was named Jesus.

III. Application

"You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Mt. 1:21) The name "Jesus" is similar in Hebrew and Aramaic to "Joshua," and means "saving" or "Savior." Names in this culture were important. They were believed to reveal the person's character and God's plans. So in the name of this baby we see something about Jesus, and the plans of God.

But what exactly does it mean that he is named Jesus? What does it mean that he will save his people from their sins? For years now many people would say that it means that....."Jesus saved me from the condemnation and judgment of my sins, so I can go to heaven when I die." Now while that is a part of the theology of salvation, if that is our only understanding of Jesus as Savior we have some problems. First, that

means that salvation is primarily about the future, and not now.....my destiny, not my life now. I think that's a problem. Second, that also means that salvation is primarily about me and what I get, and not about "loving God and loving neighbors." I think that's a problem. And third, if this is our only understanding of salvation, we are ignoring much of what the Bible says about salvation, and much of what Christian theology says about salvation. It's like looking across the rush of a mighty river and saying that a particular small part of the river, the part we are familiar with, is all that really matters. We miss the dynamic, power, exciting nature of the rest of the river. "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins".....so what does that mean?

First God's salvation in Jesus Christ means telling the truth....or judging. It means that in Jesus Christ God tells us the truth about the way of our lives. I may not want to hear it, but I need to hear it. Last week Jeanne and I were in Pittsburgh, and as sometimes happens, we were talking, and I missed our exit. Well, Jeanne told me. It wasn't what I wanted to hear, but it was the truth, and it was important so we didn't keep going the wrong way. And as I've shared with you, in March I'm going to participate in a mid-career "tune up." I'm going to have an evaluation of my physical, spiritual, financial and vocational health at a retreat center in North Carolina. I'm sure I'll hear, "Glenn, you need to exercise more, work less, drop 10 pounds, save more, relax more, and pick up a few more hobbies." That's not something that I look forward to hearing.....but it is the truth, and it's important for my long-term health.

Salvation as judging is not always pleasant. It's why Jesus had so many problems and conflicts with the religious leaders of his day. In Jesus God was showing them their sins and problems.....their confusions and misunderstandings. But they didn't want to hear it. And on the cross the darkness, sin, pride, self-righteousness, and cruelty, of human beings is laid bare. It's not a pretty sight. But it is the truth. And the truth is we may not want to hear it either.

Salvation as judging is not popular today. It's understood as too negative.....too critical.....too much a downer. The power of positive thinking is popular. Helping people feel better is popular. But without telling the truth salvation is just toleration of sin, and stroking our egos. Without judging there is no confession of sin, no honesty and no cross. And it's an alarming thing how all of those things have gone missing in the lives of some congregations; no honesty, no confession, no cross.

Salvation is judging.....and it is also forgiveness. It's hearing that God is a God of grace and mercy, so we are forgiven. It's forgiving each other. It's forgiving ourselves. Salvation removes the burden of guilt and bitterness, so we know healing

and peace. Ernest Hemmingway began his short story “The Captain of the World” with the following lines:

“Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the diminutive of the name Francisco. There is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of El Liberal (the city newspaper) which said: ‘Paco meet me at Hotel Montana, noon, Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.’ At noon on Tuesday a squadron of the civilian guard had to be called to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.” (The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, 1987, p. 29)

The joke is that there are so many young men named Paco in Madrid. But the deeper truth is the desire of so many to be forgiven; sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, friends and colleagues. God’s salvation in Jesus is “Meet me. All is forgiven.” And the forgiveness expands, like ripples on a pond.....we forgive others.....they forgive us.....we forgive ourselves.

While God’s salvation in Jesus as judging angered many of the self-righteous, God’s salvation as forgiveness welcomed many of the lost home. That’s why Jesus was surrounded by tax collectors and sinners.....those of the margins and those given up on as lost. They had heard words of judgment all their lives. But they had not heard words of forgiveness. God’s salvation as forgiveness broke the power of guilt. It still does.

Salvation is the truth of judgment, and the mercy of forgiveness. It is also the demand of new life.....it’s teaching a new way of life. As the early church told stories about Jesus that became the gospels, they told of a charismatic leader, a miracle worker, an apocalyptic prophet, and most of all a teacher. As God’s kingdom, God’s reign, was breaking into this world in Jesus Christ, Jesus taught how to live in this new kingdom; “You are the light of the world (Mt. 5:14);” “Seek first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33);” “Build your house on the rock, not the sand (Mt. 7:24-7);” “The kingdom of God is like a sower who went out to sow (Mt. 13:1-9);” “Forgive seventy times seven (Mt. 18:22);” “Go and do likewise....like the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:37);” “A shepherd had one hundred sheep and lost one.....A woman had 10 coins and lost one.....A father had two sons and lost one, who in time was welcomed home (Lk. 15);” “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.....and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mt. 22:37-39).”

Salvation is teaching.....it is calling us to new ways of life. My first real job was splitting cedar into shakes for roofs. I was given the job, given the tools, and given many cords of cedar to split. It was all grace. The guy who owned it all was taking a

chance on me. But I was also given something else; I was given teaching. An old man, Jack, showed me how to read the wood, how to split around knots, and how to flip the cedar blocks over after ever split so the shakes would taper, and lay flat on a roof. Left to my own I would have made a mess of the job, wood and tools. But with teaching I made shakes....and by the end of the summer I made enough money to buy my first motorcycle. There is salvation in teaching. Left on our own we tend to make a mess of things. Shown our mistakes and vanities, we are forgiven, and then taught a new way to live.....a way that shares in the kingdom of God. Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of God, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (Mt. 7:21)," and it is written in James, "So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead (Js. 2:17)." Teaching and living a new way of life is the grace of salvation in Jesus Christ.

So, is salvation believing in Jesus so I will go to heaven when I die? Yes, but it's also so much more. It's also hearing the truth that I'm doing it wrong, forgiving my sins, and teaching me a new way of life. It's judging, forgiving and teaching.....past, present and future.....who I was, who I am, and who I will be.....that's salvation.

IV. Conclusion

In his book, A Generous Orthodoxy, pastor, writer and speaker Brain McLaren shares this story:

"Some people I know once found a snapping turtle crossing a road in New Jersey. Snapping turtles are normally ugly; gray, often supporting a slimy coating of green algae, long gator-like tail, and massive snapping jaws. But this turtle was even uglier than most; it was grossly deformed due to a plastic bottle top, a ring about an inch and a half in diameter that it had accidentally acquired as a hatchling, when it too was about an inch and a half in diameter. The ring had fit around its midsection like a belt back then, but now, nearly a foot long and weighing about nine pounds, the animal was corseted by the ring so that it looked like a figure eight.

"My friends realized that if they left the turtle in its current state, it would die. The deformity was survivable at nine pounds, but a full-grown snapper can weigh thirty pounds. At that size the turtle would never survive. So they carefully snipped the ring. Off it came from the squirming turtle.....and nothing happened. Nothing.

"Except for one thing; at that moment the turtle had a future. It was rescued. It was saved. It would take years for the animal to grow into more normal proportions, maybe decades. Perhaps even in old age it would be somewhat guitar shaped. But it would survive, and it would have new life." (A Generous Orthodoxy, pp. 106-7)

McLaren continues:

“A ring of selfishness, greed, lust, injustice, fear, prejudice, arrogance, apathy, chauvinism and ignorance has similarly deformed our species. When I say that Jesus is Savior, I believe he snipped the ring by judging, forgiving, teaching, suffering, dying, rising and more. Jesus is still in the process of saving us.” (ibid, p. 107)

Judging.....forgiving.....teaching.....that is salvation. He is named Jesus.....and he is saving us from our sins.

(The basic summary of salvation as judging, forgiving and teaching follows the discussion in Brian McLaren’s book A Generous Orthodoxy, pp. 99-110.)