

“Easter People: Salvation”

Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24, Acts 4:5-12

April 21, 2024 ~ Good Shepherd Sunday

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In today's lesson from the Acts of the Apostles we find Peter and John, having spent the night in prison, standing before the temple priests answering their angry questions. It's early in the life of the young church and the text moves from telling us about the relationships within the church, to the way the Spirit empowers their preaching and action outside of the church. One day, on his way to prayer in the Temple, Peter heals a man, lame from birth, by invoking the power of Jesus' name. While the healed man clings to Peter and John, praising God, a huge crowd gathers around them, and Peter proclaims that “in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” Between the healing and the preaching about 5000 people are converted and Peter and John are dragged off to prison by the Sadducees and priests. Our text picks up there.

Read Acts 4:5-12

What happens in the early church in Acts often parallels what happens early in Jesus' ministry in Luke's gospel. Remember, they're written by the same author. When Jesus first appears on the scene in Luke's gospel he proclaims that the spirit of the Lord is upon him to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. He backs up his claims by healing people, so we know that the good news of God in Jesus Christ is about more than just what happens when we die. I assume this isn't a newsflash for you but so often American Christians get tangled up in knots about being saved and about salvation, and Peter uses that word here, to defend himself.

In Luke's gospel first Simeon, seeing the baby Jesus in the temple, and then John the Baptist make the connection between Jesus and salvation. Now Peter standing before the Sadducees and the high priests proclaims that the power for him to heal comes from Jesus

and that salvation is found in Jesus. All through Luke and Acts, salvation and healing come together. Clearly the author has a wholistic understanding of salvation.

Emerson Powery, professor of Biblical Studies at Messiah University, writes that healing, wholeness, and salvation are all relevant to one another. “The gospel materializes in embodied acts. The gospel affects the physical as well as the mental, emotional, and spiritual. This story emphasizes the wholeness that comes in the message and power of Jesus. It’s a message that touches bodies as well as souls.”

The author of 1 John echoes this understanding in thinking about the ways we’re called to emulate Jesus. “Just as he laid down his life for us we ought to lay down our lives for one another” begins the author but then moves to the material needs of our siblings in Christ saying, “God’s love does *not* abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need but refuses to help.” Laying down our lives in this case is akin to putting the needs of others before our own. Loving God for this author manifests itself in actions not only in words. It’s our actions that enable us to know if we’re obeying God’s commandment to love God and love neighbor. Sometimes I’m surprised that Martin Luther, who wanted to pull the epistle of James from the Bible for its emphasis on works righteousness, did not similarly object to this letter which also emphasizes that it’s our loving action, our care for others and the ways we share our resources with those who have need, that together reveal God’s love for us.

For some this emphasis on the material may feel too earthy, too low for our transcendent God, but not for author Cole Arthur-Riley. In her book *This Here Flesh* she writes, “We are remarkably material beings. When we speak of bearing the image of God, I believe no small part of that is a physical bearing. You may have heard it said, “you don’t have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body. I’m not sure exactly where this notion came from,” she continues, “but the sentiment survives. Many of us in pursuit of the spiritual become woefully neglectful of the physical. We concern ourselves with a doctrine of salvation that is oriented around one underlying hope: heaven. And our concepts of heaven are often disembodied, a spiritual goal to transcend the material world eternally.”

Even those of us aren’t that attached to those “pie in the sky” theologies need to remember this wholistic and material understanding of salvation, because when we detach salvation and the gospel from the material there are many consequences. It was this kind of theology that enabled colonization and slavery. Arthur-Riley, who is a young Black woman, writes, “All our charades of honoring the invisible things at the expense of the material served to obscure the very material injustices by which Black people have been historically excluded.” Sneering at social justice is born of this separation too because bodies become

unimportant, expendable even, a means to an end for production or someone else's pleasure.

So I believe that holding together the material and the spiritual is crucial for Easter people. It's crucial to have this wholistic understanding of salvation. But remember too that it's Good Shepherd Sunday. "The Good Shepherd makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul. He sets a table before me even in the presence of my enemies." We serve a God who invites us to rest also; both as a sign of our trust in God and as a sign of God's love for us.

I've had people ask me on more than one occasion, "Am I doing enough?" Are we doing enough? It's a question we need to ask, particularly in the face of increasing need in Harrisburg and around world. But the truth is, we can't meet everyone's needs, sometimes we need to say no. Sometimes because of our resources and sometimes because it's the best thing to say in a particular case. And today I don't want to preach another sermon that's only about our need to do more and more and more to demonstrate God's love in the world and God's love for us, in part because so many of you are actively demonstrating God's love through the ways you are present to your neighbors. I have seen how easy it is for earnestly faithful people to exhaust themselves on behalf of their families, their jobs, their church, and the people in their lives and communities who have real need. I've seen them exhaust themselves to the point that they can no longer serve with grace, and they turn on the very people they're serving. I've seen it in myself at times and it's not pretty.

I have a secret to share about a time when my daughter was in 3rd grade and her elementary school decided to use the book *The Giving Tree*, to encourage students to do kind things for one another. I'm all in favor of teaching children and adults to do kind things for one another. I believe in, and preach, and practice to the best of my ability the importance of selflessness, but I find the book *The Giving Tree* to go beyond being kind, into encouraging the kind of overly selfless giving that depletes us and to which women are particularly, not exclusively, but particularly, prone because our culture *encourages* it in women.

If you don't know the story of *The Giving Tree*, it's about a young boy and a tree personified as she. The young boy sits in the tree's shade and swings from her branches and the tree loves the boy and is happy. But as he grows up, the boy comes back repeatedly asking for more and more of the tree - He takes her apples and sells them for personal profit, removes her branches so he can build a house, and chops down her trunk so he can build a boat and sail away. She never says, "no." In the end, the tree has nothing left to give and is reduced to a stump upon which the boy, now an old man, sits. And yet, writes Shel

Silverstein, the tree is happy. “Nonsense!” Is what I say. She was exhausted and had nothing left to give.

My secret is that I went to the school’s guidance office, which was encouraging the campaign, and asked them to please find another book. I didn’t want my children, and my daughter especially, to be subjected to the lessons of that book. They actually did. But when I was with some other mothers and the change in book came up, I never told anyone that I asked for it. Maybe I wasn’t the only one, but as a pastor, as a Christian, I was a little embarrassed by my reaction to the book, I didn’t necessarily trust my response, what if I’m wrong about it?” I thought. But today I feel different.

I appreciate the wisdom of the lectionary bringing us these texts from Acts and 1st John on Good Shepherd Sunday. This year I hold them all together to remember that wholeness is everybody’s need. Instead of making these texts about whether or not we do enough to be present to others, let’s hear them as an invitation to think about the bigger picture. Salvation means being generous, it means confessing the injustice and imbalance of wealth in our culture, it means recognizing the needs of others and seeking to be one part of a solution, but it also calls us to embrace for ourselves at times, the care and rest Jesus offers. We cannot serve the needs of others and nurture the dreams and goals of others without tending to our own wholeness before God.

Let us trust that our Good Shepherd “will lead us in paths of righteousness for his sake” as promised. If the Holy Spirit needs to convict you to you to say “yes” more often, to think more about the needs of others and less about yourself, I hope you will feel convicted. But if you are exhausted, so busy nurturing and serving other people that you are becoming depleted, then I hope you will embrace the rest that even Jesus embraced. I hope you will see yourself as one who needs healing and wholeness too, as one deserving salvation in full. Amen.