

Jesus – Savior

December 6, 2020

UMC Geneva IL

This past week I ran across an interesting article in the Tampa Bay Times written by Stephen Prothero, a Professor from my alma mater, Boston University School of Theology. It's titled "This They Believe." (1) In the article he wades into the thorny thicket of what the world's religions agree upon, where they differ (in many cases radically), and why this all matters. According to Prothero, "What the world's religions share is not so much a finish line as a starting point. And where they begin is with this simple observation: Something is wrong with the world...They part company, however, when it comes to stating just what has gone wrong, and they diverge even more sharply when they move from diagnosing the human problem to prescribing how to solve it."

"Christians see sin as the human problem, and salvation from sin as the religious goal. Buddhists see suffering as the problem, and liberation from suffering as the goal. Confucians see social disorder as the problem, and social harmony as the goal. And so it goes from tradition to tradition, with Hindus seeking release from the cycle of life, death and rebirth; Muslims seeking paradise via submission to Allah, and practitioners of Yoruba African religion seeking sacred connections – among humans, between humans, and the persons of power they call the *orishas*, and between humans and the natural environment."

Indeed, something is wrong with the human condition. We call it the human predicament. We, as Christians name the fundamental human predicament as "sin." And Christians find deliverance from sin – salvation – through faith and trust in the Savior – Jesus! In short, the human need for a Savior presupposes the need for salvation. Salvation from what? Sin!

Last week we explored the Royal Titles for Jesus at his birth: the Messiah, the Christ, the King. Today we examine the Deliverer's Title for Jesus: the Savior. The name "Jesus" is the English rendition of the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which in turn comes from the Hebrew name for God, *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* and the cognate verb *yasha* mean "to save" or "deliver." Thus, *Yeshua* (or Jesus) means "God saves," "God delivers." Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus says, "And she (Mary) will bear a son, and you (Joseph) are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people

from their sins.” In Luke’s story, the angels announce to the shepherds, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

So it’s important for us to get a handle on the biblical notion of sin. What does it mean? In the Bible, sin is often described as “missing the mark” or “straying from the path.” To miss the mark means failure to hit the mark God has set. Jesus described it most succinctly as loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. Adam Hamilton’s explanation of straying from the path is superb. “The path we’re meant to live, the ideal we were created to pursue, is laid out throughout scripture. It includes practicing justice, demonstrating loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. (Micah 6:8) It is captured in the Ten Commandments, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and his parables, the words of the prophets and apostles. His Great Commandment is summarized in the Golden Rule: ‘In everything, do unto others as you would have them do to you.’” (2)

Just think of what our world would be like if we all hit God’s mark and walked God’s path! Why... we’d have no wars, no prisons, no refugee crises, or people dying of malnutrition. Racism and bigotry would end. Assault, cruelty, dishonesty and unkindness would be things of the past.

Christianity asserts that “sin” is the fundamental problem of the human condition. And sin means both the innate tendency to miss God’s mark, to stray from God’s path as well as the act of doing so. The result? Suffering, guilt, shame and alienation.

The archetypal story of Adam and Eve found in the very first pages of the Bible bears witness to the human condition and its effects. Adam and Eve strayed from God’s path, they missed God’s mark, when they gave in to the talking serpent that beckoned them to eat the forbidden fruit, promising they’d become like God. This story is not meant to convey scientific or historical truth. It’s meant to convey timeless, existential truth about the human condition, the human predicament. This story vividly portrays the essence of sin as selfishness, hubris or pride, and the human proclivity to displace God with ourselves – failing to let God be God and placing someone or something else in the supreme place that belongs to God.

If you look carefully at the story of Adam and Eve, you'll see sin's effect on human relationships. Four relationships, to be exact – first with God, then with others, then with our very selves and finally with creation. All four relationships are marred, disfigured, distorted by sin. Sin fractures our relationships – alienating and separating each one of us from God, others, ourselves and nature. Read the story of Adam and Eve carefully...it's the story of our lives. When we stray from God's path, God seeks us out, seeks to be in close relation to us, but in our guilt we hide from God, we try to cover up our sin, we make excuses, we blame others, and in doing so we alienate God and others. Our shame, in turn, reveals our fractured relationship within ourselves. And is it any wonder that humans, alienated in all these personal relationships, then go out and exploit nature instead of caring for it, spoil and pollute creation instead of nurturing it – to the detriment of all creation.

That's the human condition! That's why we need a Savior! We need saving from ourselves and all these broken relationships. We need to be restored. We need to be reconciled to God, others, self and creation. I love the way the Apostle Paul speaks of the incarnation and the comprehensive salvation we have through Jesus when he writes in Colossians 1:19-20: "For in him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to God's self ALL THINGS, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the cross."

"An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Amen.

Rev. Rich Darr, Pastor

.....

- (1) Stephen Prothero, "This They Believe," Tampa Bay Times, May 3, 2010.
- (2) Adam Hamilton, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020, p. 53.