

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Vocabulary of Faith: Salvation”
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February 3, 2019

Exodus 15:1-7; Romans 1:16-17

“Have you been saved?” Those were the first words a member of my former church heard when he visited another congregation in San Antonio. He told me that he was running late for church, but rather than skip, he would try out the new Presbyterian congregation that had opened about a mile from his house. His first impression was that the building was nice and that worship time on the sign out-front insured him that he was not late there. As he walked in a man with a greeter badge approached him and the first words out of the greeter’s mouth were, “Have you been saved?” Needless to say, my church member was a bit taken aback. He was taken aback because as a good mainline Presbyterian he had no idea what he was being asked. Had I been there to translate, I would have said, friend, you are being asked, have you made a profession of faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior, which insures that at the end of your life you have your ticket to heaven and not a pass to hell. I could have translated it because I speak fluent southern evangelical. For better or worse though, this understanding is not limited to certain churches. It has become, since the Middle ages, the way the church in the West has talked about salvation, which is a shame, because it is, in the end, not Biblical.

To understand this, I want to take us to our two texts this morning. First, our story from the book of Exodus. To set the scene, recall that God’s people had been living in Egypt initially living the good life. But over the years they moved from being free-people to being slaves. They were oppressed and beaten down. It had become so bad that Pharaoh desired that all male children be killed. The people cried out to God. God heard them and sent Moses to seek their release. Though Moses had no real power, God used him to challenge the king. Ultimately God acted and brought about their freedom and release. In other words, God saved them. This is what the people in the story were celebrating. They were celebrating salvation. They sang this song. *“The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation.”* And, what is important to remember, is that God freed them not only because they were God’s children, but because God had a job for them to do, which was to make possible the blessing of all the people of the earth; to help people find peace, flourishing and justice. This is what salvation meant in the Hebrew scripture, and I would argue meant to Paul, the good Jew that he was.

Now we turn to Paul and his words to the church at Rome. As a reminder the similarities between Egypt and Rome were uncanny. They both were powerful and domineering empires. They both were ruled by kings that claimed to be gods. They both claimed that they were the saviors of the world. And, most importantly they not only oppressed the world around them, but

they oppressed God's people. With that in mind let's listen again to Paul's words to the Roman church. *"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."* When Paul used the word salvation, I would argue that the concept of salvation being a ticket to heaven was not even on his radar. Instead he was pointing his readers back to God's great acts of salvation; the Exodus from Egypt, the return from Babylonian exile and others, and saying, in Jesus God is not simply setting one nation free but is liberating the world that it might find peace, flourishing and justice in real time. To understand this, I offer my translation of Paul's words. *"The God of Israel, the one true God of the universe, having promised to repair a broken creation, sent Jesus into the world to not only defeat the powers of sin and death but to also become the true King of the world, who would liberate creation by initiating a new kingdom in which all humanity could share in the peace, flourishing and justice God intended."* For Paul, to speak about salvation was to speak about how God, through Jesus, was liberating both individuals and creation from the power of sin and creating a new reality, in real-time.

What this means for us, is that salvation, or being saved, is not about getting our ticket to heaven but it is about participating in the life and world liberating work of Jesus, which sets individuals and the world, free to find peace, flourishing and justice. How do we participate? First, we sign up to be part of God's liberation adventure. We do this by professing that Jesus is Lord, meaning the real king of the world, and savior, the one who transforms us and creation. By signing up we receive the benefits of membership, which include the continuing work of God in our lives making us into new and ever being renewed people. Second, once we have signed up to be part of this liberating work, we are live faithfully by loving God and neighbor. This second part is a reminder to us, that just as God liberated Israel because they were supposed to be blessing all of creation. We are liberated for the same reason, to be a blessing to the world. As our tradition puts it, we are liberated for service through salvation.