

Blown by the Spirit

sermon digest

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John 3:1-17
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Some years ago, as a matter of fact, *many* years ago, about 40, to be exact, our son went through a phase that nearly drove us crazy. When we spoke to him to give him instruction or a reprimand he preferred not to hear, he came up with a repeated refrain: “What do you mean?” And although our words seemed perfectly clear to us and probably made more sense than he was ready to acknowledge, we found ourselves up against a continuing challenge to communicate.

In his recent book, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—and How They Can Be Restored*, eminent teacher and theologian Marcus Borg takes on the challenge of communication within and beyond the Christian faith. Christian language, he insists, is a major stumbling block with much of its basic vocabulary being misunderstood by Christians and non-Christians alike. Borg is not talking here about peripheral precepts of the Christian faith, but central ideas, huge words that are at the center of all we say and do. Words like salvation, saved, redemption, sin, God, Jesus and the Bible and collections of words such as those in our creeds and liturgy have acquired meanings, Borg suggests, that are serious distortions of the biblical and traditional meanings that brought them to birth. Borg sets out, then, to redeem our vocabulary, to move beyond the literal thinking that has come to dominate the modern age. Looking back to the well springs of our faith, to the scriptures that nourishes us, he seeks to construct a Christian primer so that we can read and hear the language of our faith without preconceived distortions getting in the way.

Be sure that Borg’s concern and our concern as we launch into on a venture this summer to reinvest the vocabulary of our faith with meaning are not about taming the Christian faith and somehow making it more palatable to the modern era. Borg’s concern and our concern are rather to free our faith from a cultural-linguistic captivity that has robbed it of its meaning. Rather than seeing the outcome of Borg’s venture and our venture as being something more timid, as something concerned with being less offensive to our cultural mind set, what we anticipate we will be more likely to come up with is a religious faith that is actually more radical—more radical both in its understanding of God and what our encounter with God asks of us.

This morning we begin our trek by looking at the meaning of salvation. Borg reflects on an intergenerational discussion he facilitated a short time ago. Half the group was in its 20’s and 30’s and the other half in its 60’s and 70’s. Most were committed, intentional Christians involved in their churches. The rest were earnest seekers no longer or not yet a part of a church, but seriously considering that there might be something of value in the Christian faith. Yet for 80% of the group, the word salvation had only negative associations, associations that often went back to childhood and the teen years when salvation signified going to heaven. For most in the group, going to hell had seldom been emphasized in the churches of which they had been a part. They were not from hell-fire-and-damnation kinds of churches, but they had a strong sense that the word salvation drew a sharp division between those who were saved or “in” and those who were not. For many the idea of salvation had a whiff of self-righteousness about it as those in the church reassured themselves that they were in the “in” group while most of the world was not. As one person in the discussion put it, “Salvation and smugness go together” [p. 37].

How is it with you? Do you find yourself cringing at too much talk about salvation? Are you reluctant to speak of yourself as being saved? If you notice, much of our talk in this church shuns revivalistic lingo. As Rodney and I worked on the service for this morning, we agreed that some of the old songs about salvation no longer fit. Is it because we are shy and embarrassed about who we are? Or is it that we have found something in the study and experience of our faith and our experience of the world around us that has made us seek new terminology?

I would suggest to you that it is the latter. I would suggest that our experience of a wider world than many of us knew in growing up has led us to respect people who are different from us, including people of other faiths and people of no faith. Although our religious commitments have a depth of meaning for us, we are unwilling to categorize, dismiss and condemn those who are different. We say openly and intentionally in our church covenant, “We believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world, yet we set no limit on the reach of God’s love or the activity of God beyond the experience and faith of Christians.” I suspect you know that in some quarters that is heresy. And yet for us, it is a critical aspect of who we are and the faith we profess. Are we at fault here? Are we compromising our faith? Are we abandoning the Bible?

The answer, of course, could well be “yes.” If we are merely preoccupied with being sure that we fit into

the society in which we move, if we are fundamentally concerned with just not making any waves, if we just want to be 'niller and inoffensive, then the faith that we embrace or maybe more accurately, the faith which we shrug, is anything but the faith of the great cloud of witnesses who went before us, making huge waves as they went. If, however, our change in terminology and in theology from that we knew growing up more adequately reflects the faith of the Bible, we are on good ground.

The biblical meaning of salvation, saved and savior is very different from the revivalistic renditions of the last couple of centuries. The biblical concept of salvation is far richer and more comprehensive than the familiar preoccupation with sin and forgiveness, heaven and hell that has increasingly dominated the church in the modern era. It is about far more than merely giving intellectual assent to a set of doctrinal presuppositions. It is about the transformation of life this side of death. It is about personal transformation, and it is about political transformation. It is about transforming our lives as individuals and as people living together in societies.

The words salvation and saved and savior are prominent in the Bible. As Borg points out, they occur something like 500 times in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible we use in worship. Roughly two-thirds of those occurrences are in the Old Testament. Surprisingly, they occur more frequently in Psalms than in any other book of the Bible, including the New Testament. Yet they are seldom associated with salvation in the afterlife. As a matter of fact, most of the Old Testament reflects no belief in an afterlife. Only when we get to the book of Daniel, the last book of Hebrew scriptures to be written (165 BCE), do we come to the first clear reference to life beyond death; and even there salvation is not associated with the afterlife. Even in the New Testament, salvation is only occasionally associated with an afterlife, with heaven.

Salvation is a critical concept of scripture, but it is far more than the "insider/outsider" rendition of the world we have tended to make of it. It is about liberation from bondage, as in the story of the exodus. It is about return from exile. It is about being rescued from our infirmities and trouble, as Psalm 27, which Sarah read this morning, proclaims:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh--my adversaries and foes--they shall stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear.

It is about more, however, than just being rescued. It is about entering a new kind of life, a life of covenant with God:

One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple. . . . I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

It is about deliverance, but it is also about transformation. Throughout the Bible, it is about moving from being blind to having sight, from death to life, from infirmity to wholeness, from fear to trust. But be sure, it is not about a transaction that happens once and seals our fate. It is not about becoming presumptive as if we somehow have a corner on God. It is about monumental change that affects our whole lives. It is not about self righteousness or self satisfaction, for it is not about personal achievement. It is about gift.

Salvation is about opening ourselves to the Spirit (the Wind) of God. Enter Nicodemus. Unfortunately, we have tended to deride him over the years. We note that he came to Jesus *by night*, a detail that we believe has to have significance in the book of John where darkness is associated with unbelief, ignorance, temptation and evil. We have tended to picture Nicodemus as a coward, skulking under the cover of darkness in his approach to Jesus, lest his colleagues find out about his inquiry. We have sneered, as Nicodemus struggles to comprehend what Jesus is saying, at his literal mindedness. He is a Pharisee, after all! And so we dismiss him as a legalist and dim witted. Only a fool would assume Jesus was talking about re-entering his mother's womb, we tell ourselves. Of course, we are blessed with a lifetime of hearing the story and two centuries of biblical interpretation.

What if, however, we identify with Nicodemus rather than castigating him? What if we see him as something on the order of what Methodist pastor Patricia Jarris calls him: the Patron Saint of Seeking? [*Christian Century*, J 30-F 6, 2002]. What if instead of deriding him for his lack of understanding, we confess our own struggle, our own lack of understanding? And what if we find ourselves received along with him into the very presence of Jesus—a Jesus who does not deride Nicodemus or us for what we do not know but who points us to the lifelong quest of being faithful to the unpredictable and uncontrollable Spirit (Wind) of God?

The rabbis had urged the study of Torah during the nighttime when the distractions of the day could be

put aside. Taking some of that precious time for study to seek out Jesus and learn from him, Nicodemus opened himself to a new discovery that would take him he knew not where. According to the continuing story in John, it took him into broad daylight where he would defend Jesus before a council of the Pharisees; and it would take him to the tomb where he would prepare Jesus body for burial. That is the way it is when we open our lives to God. It is about an ongoing process of following God's Spirit, as we say in our baptismal service, into newness of life. It is not about dusting our hands and assuming we've believed enough or done enough to save our hides. It is about opening our lives to learning and growing and being surprised at where life and the Spirit takes us all the days of our lives.

Thomas Long, an esteemed preacher and teacher of preaching, shares a recent story from John Buchanan, who after 48 years of pastoral ministry retired this year from the pastorate. Reflecting on his half century of ministry, Buchanan recalled the experience of one Sunday morning performing the baptism of a two-year-old boy in his congregation. After baptizing the child, Buchanan dutifully following the Presbyterian prayer book, put his hand on the little boy's head and addressed him in the Trinitarian language of the church: "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-oh." It was, of course, an amusing moment for the congregation; but Buchanan writes, "it was [also] an appropriate response . . . a stunning theological affirmation" from the mouth of a child. That "uh-oh," Long observes, was the realization that everything had changed, that this child would never be the same. No longer did he belong anymore to just his biological family.

He had been born all over again, this time into God's Trinitarian family. . . . He was being called in his baptism to live a different way in the world, God's way, a way that is sometimes met with rejection and scorn. No wonder he said, "Uh oh." Life would never be the same [*"Start of the Trail," Day 1, 2012*].

A badge of pride? No. A badge of courage, maybe. Would that we had the insight of that child. Would that we knew deep down in our bones that we are raised to walk in newness of life, faithful to the God who will lead us in surprising new ways. Would that we were wise enough and insightful enough to utter an "uh-oh" before the very prospects of all that lies before us—an "uh-oh" perhaps followed in time by an equally effusive "wow!"