

## **Savior: Surely it is God**

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John 3:16-17

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:16-17 (NRSV)*

Let’s pray. *Gracias God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that your word, your truth, might seep in. And then, O Lord, open our hands that in response we might serve. Amen.*

On October 14, 1987 in Midland, Texas a little 18-month-old girl named Jessica McClure fell into a well. Many of you may remember that. The well was eight inches wide - that's hard to imagine that she could fall in, but she did. She fell 22 feet down to the bottom of the well. It didn't take them long to realize that she was missing, and they got the authorities there. They tried to go and pick her up with some sort of cable that had a clamp on the end of it, but they aborted that attempt because they realized that if they dropped her for any reason or if her clothes tore or something then she would fall again, that indeed, by just pulling her out they might injure her more than she did on the way down.

They finally decided to drill a shaft next to the well and go all the way down 22 feet and then to drill another tunnel that went sideways that met up with the shaft of the well and rescue her that way. It was much harder than they thought since the rock was hard there around it. One of the things I found most interesting was that this was 1987 and the oil bust had hit in the end of 1986, so there were so many drillers who were out of work and they showed up. All of them showed up to try and help rescue Baby Jessica.

President Ronald Reagan said that "all of America are godmothers and godfathers today." CNN provided non-stop coverage of the whole event. They didn't have the technology they do today for horizontal drilling, so it took a long time. They said it only took about 8 or ten hours to get the shaft drilled but the sideways tunnel took much longer; it was 56 hours before she was rescued. They were afraid she might die of cold, of hypothermia, or that she might not have anything to drink. They would hear her singing the Winnie the Pooh song, which I thought that was powerful. Anyway, they rescued her, and it was a day of incredible celebration.

Here's why I tell you that story. There was nothing Jessica could do to save herself. Her only hope was a savior. There is nothing you or I can do to save ourselves - our only hope is a Savior. So what I want to talk about today, is our hope for a Savior.

Three hundred and fifty-four times in the Old Testament the Hebrew root *Yasha* is used and it means *save*. It is the root of the names Elisha, Hosea, Joshua. So many of the times that it's used is in the prophecies, particularly the prophet Isaiah. In first Isaiah the Assyrians are coming down and attacking Israel. They're going to ultimately capture and destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They never end up taking Jerusalem, but they get all the way down to the edge. The prophet Isaiah cries out to God: "Save us!"

The song that we sang a few minutes ago, the First Song of Isaiah is from Isaiah 12:2 where he says, "Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in him and not be afraid. The Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior."

This great desire within the Hebrew people that a Savior would come. The Psalmist uses the phrase often when he talks about in the laments as the Psalmist cry out to God, "The waters are coming over my neck - save me!" Or it says, "You have saved me from my enemies."

This great desire for God to be a Savior. That's why Charles Wesley wrote the hymn that we'll sing at the end of today's service: "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus." For centuries we've been waiting for a Savior.

In the New Testament when Zachariah sees John the Baptist, he sings a song called the *Benedictus*. That's a Latin term for peace, he says, "Now thy servant can depart in peace because I have seen the coming of the Savior." He's talking about John the Baptist here as the precursor to the Messiah. He says, "There shall be a mighty Savior to us arising in Israel, a new king to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins, by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us."

When Jesus comes down from the Mount of Olives on his way into Jerusalem, the people put palm branches on the ground and shout "Hosanna!" That means "Save us!"

The Hebrew people taught the world what it meant to count on God for salvation. When the Scripture says, "And you shall name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins" that's a powerful statement. We've been waiting for centuries for you to save us!

Will Willimon is a Professor of Christian Practice at Duke Divinity School and is a retired bishop in the United Methodist Church. Here's what he writes: "With single minded focus Biblical witnesses concentrate only on those matters in Jesus' life that are relevant to Jesus as Savior as if nothing else mattered. Perhaps that's one of the things they want to say. You don't know Jesus if you don't know he's the Savior of the world."

Today I really want to talk about two pieces. We're going to be dealing with this whole issue of Jesus as savior throughout Advent. I want you to leave with two things today. The first is that salvation is something God does, not something we do. God saves.

Remember what we said about Baby Jessica? There was nothing she could do to save herself, her only hope was for a savior.

Think about the First Song of Isaiah, "Surely it is God who saves us. I will trust in him and not be afraid. The Lord is my stronghold." The idea is a focus not on ourselves and on what we need to and what hoops we have to jump through, but it's that God is our Savior.

This message we heard a moment ago that is so familiar to all of us. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. That whoever should believe in him should not perish but have eternal life." Then it goes on to elaborate: "God did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save the world!" God is a God who saves.

I want to share two parables with you. One is sort of built on top of the other. They're old parables. One is a Russian parable about a scorpion and a frog. A scorpion is in the middle of a river and since a scorpion can't swim, the scorpion is drowning. He runs across a frog who's swimming across the water. He says to the frog, "Will you save me?" And the frog says, "I'm not going to save me, you're going to sting me. If I let you get on my back, you're going to sting me." Then the scorpion says to the frog, "Why would I sting you because if I sting you, you'll die and we'll both drown. That would be silly for me to sting you." And the frog thinks that a logical argument, so he says, "Okay, hop on my back." They start across the water and the scorpion starts to sting him. Stings him and stings him. As they're both drowning, the frog says, "I thought you weren't going to sting me." And the scorpion says, "I couldn't help it. It's in my nature to sting. That's what I do."

Now I think some Christians heard that parable and they told a different parable that goes like this. There was a scorpion that was drowning in the middle of a river and two monks saw the scorpion. They were washing their bowls in the river and one of them said to the other, "I'm going to go out and save that scorpion, out of the middle the river." And the second monk said, "That scorpion will sting you when you go out to pick him up. It's in his nature to sting."

The first monk says, "Watch this." He goes out and he picks up the scorpion and is carrying it back to the shore, and the scorpion begins to sting him over and over again. He gets back to the shore and he puts the scorpion down. Then the second monk said, "Why did you do that? You knew that scorpion would sting you. It's in his nature." And the other monk said, "It's in the scorpion's nature to sting, but it's in my nature to save. That's what I do."

So, we have a corrupted nature and because of that what we do is sin. That corrupted nature, that Paul sometimes calls the sin nature within us, is to sting. But it's in God's nature to save. In God's tender mercy God chooses to save us, not because we don't say, "Okay, I'm not going to

sting you!" In fact we crucified him. No, he said, "I'm going to save you because it's in my nature to save."

I must tell you that it really gets under my skin when I hear people talking about "getting saved" like it's an achievement. Like, "I got saved yesterday!" It's as if they're saying, "I did this! I jumped through a hoop and did the right thing. I read the right words."

It isn't something we do, it's something God does.

A long time ago when I was a very young pastor, I heard a preacher preaching and he told a story that has stuck with me. He said that two guys are talking, and one says to the other, "Are you saved?" and the first guy said, "Yeah, I'm saved." The other guy didn't think he sounded very spiritual the way he said "Yeah, I'm saved." So he said, "Then tell me the exact day and time that you were saved." The guy thought for a moment, and he said, "Well, I can't tell you exactly the date and time, but I know it was on a Friday afternoon about three o'clock 2000 years ago." Salvation is what Jesus does. It's not what we do.

Pretend that I have a really rich Aunt Mildred. I don't but let's pretend. I do have an uncle who's not bad off but unfortunately, we're not that close. So I have this really rich Aunt Mildred who lives a long and happy life and she dies. I go to her funeral and we grieve her loss and celebrate her life. I go back home and about ten days later an envelope arrives. It's a thick Manilla envelope. I open it and I get out the letter from a lawyer who says that Aunt Mildred has left me \$10 million.

That would be "gospel" – that would be good news. I'd give a little of it to the church I'm sure. Some little bit.

I get this \$10 million, so do I go around telling people, "I opened an envelope yesterday!" No, it's not about me opening the envelope. It's about Aunt Mildred's generous generosity and her love for me, and her willingness to give of herself to me. It's about Aunt Mildred - it's not about me!

Let's say I needed an organ transplant and you chose to give me a kidney. Would I go around patting myself on the back saying, "I got a transplant!" as if I'd done something great for myself? No, I'd be so incredibly grateful, and I would proclaim the amazing gift of the donor who chose to give me the kidney. Salvation is something God does, not something we do.

Yes, we have to open the envelope, but that's just a small piece of the puzzle. Salvation is built on the incredible, the tender mercy, the love of God.

That's the first thing - salvation is something God does. Here's the second thing that I hope you take home today. The first thing we must do is to realize we need a Savior. Remember Jessica - there was nothing she could do to save herself. But she did know she needed a savior - that was her only hope.

As religious folk, I must confess we get sort of smug, self-satisfied, or sort of self-righteous. We come to church on Sunday mornings; and we look at the people we see on the way. We see the guy coming out of his house in his bathrobe to get the paper, or the guy who's mowing his lawn, or we see a person putting his golf clubs in the back of his car. You see them and you think, "I'm going to church! I'm doing the right thing. I'm a good religious person. We've kind of got it together and we're making the right decisions in our lives, and all those others...? Poor things! Bless their heart."

I love the writing of Flannery O'Connor. If you've never read her short stories go find some and read them. She's a Christian writer - Roman Catholic - who passed away a long time ago. But she's just an incredibly profound writer. You can get one called "Revelation" and I know it's on line. You can find the PDF of it and it's powerful.

Many of her stories are written in the South among people often in a small town who are good folk. But they believe that because they're respectable good folk, they've got the right answers and other people don't. She wrote, "Smugness is the cardinal Christian sin." Self-righteousness. This sense of "I don't really need a savior because now I've got it figured out." And it's not just Christian folk. It's many of us in our society.

David Brooks wrote a book called *The Road to Character* in 2015. I'm going to read you just a piece of it. We've been using this in our Men's Life which we finished up last week. He writes, "I've also become more aware that like many people these days, I have lived a life of vague moral aspiration. Vaguely wanting to be good, vaguely wanting to serve some larger purpose while lacking a concrete moral vocabulary. A clear understanding of how to live a rich inner life. Or, even a clear knowledge of how character is developed, and depth is achieved." Then he says something that really spoke to me, "It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You follow your desires wherever they take you and you approve of yourself as long as you are not obviously hurting anyone else. You figure that if people around you seem to like you, you must be good enough. And in the process, you end up slowly turning yourself into something a little less impressive than you had originally hoped."

This sense of a self-satisfied moral mediocrity, "I don't need a Savior. I'm good enough."

Now David Brooks misses the point, because he was asked why he wrote this book. He said, "Honestly, I did it to save my own soul."

Friends, you can't save your own soul. Maybe he did it to realize his soul needed saving and that's a good thing. But we have to realize that we need a Savior, that there's nothing we can do to save ourselves.

Author Keith Miller wrote a book probably about 30 years ago called *The Hunger for Healing*. He took the Twelve Steps of a recovery program and he applied it to the Christian life. Here's Step One of the Christian life: "We admitted we were powerless over sin and our lives had become unmanageable."

Sometimes we think that we can grit our teeth and work hard and pray hard and study hard and come to church a lot. We can do good things, and tithe, and if we do all things, we can save ourselves. Friends, our only hope is a Savior.

I don't know what salvation looks like for you this Advent season. This "Save us from our sins." How does the sin of the world, and of your life show up in your life? How does it manifest itself?

Maybe there is an addiction or compulsion that you've tried and tried to shake. You've tried to beat it. You've worked hard at it. You've tried to build discipline, but you keep failing. You need a Savior.

Maybe it's a marriage that is struggling and you've read the books and you've been to counseling, and you thought that would magically fix it, but it hasn't. And you keep waiting that something's going to make it right. You need a Savior.

Or maybe you're in an inappropriate relationship. You know it's wrong, you know it's the wrong thing to do, but you find yourself continuing to be involved in this relationship. You can't seem to break yourself free. You need a Savior.

Maybe there's a loneliness that just lays over your heart all the time - even when you're with other people. You need a Savior.

I don't know salvation would look like for you this year, but I really want to challenge that this Advent isn't just when you sing nice songs. When we get to Christmas, we're going to proclaim that we have a Savior. But in this Advent season, let's long for that Savior. Let's pray for it, let's have this deep desire that God would intervene, would break into our world, into our lives and save us.

Let me close with one other story. On October 25, 2006 after they had Thanksgiving dinner, James and Katie Kim and their two children, Penelope age 4 and Sabine, who was 7 months old, set out from Seattle, Washington to go to their home in San Francisco. They were going to stop at a place halfway called Tu Tu Tun Resort. It was on the Gold Coast of Oregon. So as they're coming south, they missed their turn. They checked the map and instead of turning around and going back to main road over to the Gold Coast, they saw that there was a logging road that ran west to the coast. They thought they'd take that road. They did and it just got narrower and narrower till there was a fork in the road. They took the wrong fork and there was supposed to be a gate that was closed there but it wasn't closed. It had been left open so hunters wouldn't get stranded up on this logging road. The snow got deeper and deeper and it wasn't plowed anymore.

They were running out of gas and they were lost. Finally at 1:00 in the morning they got stuck. They stopped. They said, "We're going to wait for daylight, and someone will be able to find us."

They waited until morning and nobody came. The second day, no one came. The third day nobody came, and the fourth day, nobody came. They ran out of gas and they were cold. They burned everything they could to stay warm. They took the tires off the car and burned them to stay warm and to create smoke so someone might see that. They knew people would be looking for them. On the sixth day no one came.

On the 7th day James Kim said, "We can't wait any longer. I'm going to have to head out and see if I can find some help." They looked at the map at where they thought they were. There was no cell phone service there. So where they thought they were they thought it was a four mile walk to this lodge. He said, "I'm going to take off and if I don't find it, I'll come back within the day."

Well, he didn't come back. And the next day actually someone not associated with the search, it was a helicopter pilot who spotted them. Katie and the kids were rescued. But they found James' body two days later and he had walked 16 miles and was only one mile away from a lodge and it wasn't even the same one he was looking for.

Now why do I tell you that sad story? Because I think it can be a parable for us. Now I'm not critical of Mr. Kim. I would have left probably before day seven. But there's a point when we feel we can only wait for a Savior so long. As Tom Long says, "You can only stand on your tiptoes so long." Then we think, "I've got to take it into my own hands. I've got to save myself."

Friends, we can't save ourselves. And when we try to save ourselves, what we find ourselves doing is walking away from salvation. Our job is to pray, to do our very best but our only hope is not what we can do ourselves. Our only hope is a Savior. "Surely it is God who saves me. I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold, my sure defense and he will be my Savior."

*Gracious God, we confess that too often we just decide to save ourselves. Too often we don't believe we even need a Savior, that we live good lives, and all is well. Forgive us, God, we pray that you would open within us a longing for your salvation. That in this season we would pray that you would come and come quickly. Because our only hope is in you. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*