

Savior: A Saved World

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Isaiah 64:1-2; Isaiah 65:17-25

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! Isaiah 62:1-2 (NRSV)

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. Isaiah 65:17-25 (NRSV)

Let me tell you about Shane. He grew up in the suburbs, in a middle-class family. His dad worked downtown and made that long commute from the suburbs into downtown every day. His mom was an accountant and she worked near their home and had a relatively flexible schedule. Shane had an older sister and a younger brother. As he grew up he did all the stuff that kids do. He played in the sports leagues, the Little League, in soccer and baseball. He was mediocre, not really a great soccer or great baseball player. He was a pretty good student, but not a great student. And all was well until he got to high school.

Then something switched. He just began to get in trouble, his grades began to decline. He didn't make the football or the baseball teams, or the soccer team any of those tryout teams. The academics had become pretty competitive and he didn't really seem to excel there either. He started hanging around with the wrong people and got involved in drugs and drug use.

His parents were really upset; they didn't know what to do as you can imagine. They went to see the pastor of their church who talked with them and prayed with them and put their family on the prayer list. Then the whole prayer team at the church prayed for the family.

A counselor was recommended, and they took Shane to the counselor, but he was uncooperative. He just didn't want to go and just sat there.

He had gotten a little part time job at age 15 when he could get one. It was at a video game store because he was a video gamer. They got a call from the store where he worked that he had been caught stealing money from the till to support his habit. And when he had been arrested, he had drugs in his pocket.

So it was crushing and when they went to court the judge said that he could have deferred adjudication if he would participate in a rehab program and get into therapy. So they asked if he could see a private counselor and they changed to a different counselor.

When they went to this different counselor, in the second session something interesting happened. The counselor said, "Look, I'm seeing Shane, but I have to see all of you. You all need to come together as a family. We'll do family therapy once a week."

That didn't sit well with the family. The brother and the sister said, "We don't need to go to counseling. Shane's the one with the problem. He's the one always in trouble and we're doing fine. Why do we need to go to counseling? He's the loser in the family."

And the dad said, "It seems dumb to me, but I'll go. I'm not a drug user and I don't know what the problem is." Mom said, "I'll do anything if we can get him well." So ultimately, they all ended up in family therapy.

And what they realized in their conversations that there were all sorts of stuff. That the other two kids were resentful because Shane got all the attention and that made it a terrible mess. It developed that the mom was resentful because the dad just went to work every day and checked out. Then when he got home, he was checked out. It revealed that there were so many other things underlying.

I tell you that story because we always like to think that when we pray for a Savior, that God will save *me* and *you and you*. But the truth is that we need a Savior together. That there is a system, a family system that needs saving.

The verse we've chosen as our theme verse for Advent is from Matthew 1:21 when the angel speaks to Joseph and says, "You shall name him Jesus..." And the root of the name is *Yasha* - which means *to save*. "You will name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins."

What's interesting is that if you look up that word *people* in Greek the word is *laos*, like the country Laos. That's the closest English transliteration. And if you look it up it says, "Singular noun." It's *people*, not *persons*. It's not the plural of person. It's a word that is a collective word like *family* or *tribe* or *community*. He will save their family. He will save *his* family from their sins.

We live in a world that is full of family systems, all sorts of systems. There are social systems, there are economic systems, there are cultural systems, there are ecological and biological systems and political systems. And all of these things are interrelated and entwined together just like Shane's family system was all entwined together.

Everybody, that's you and me, we all play a part in the brokenness - the sin - of the system of which we're a part. And we like to say, it's not our fault. We might say, "Poverty's not *my* fault." Or "racism isn't *my* fault." But we're part of that family system and we have to acknowledge and come to terms with that when we pray for a Savior, we're praying God not just to save me and you and you but to save us. To save all of us together, to save God's family.

What is it poet John Donne said in the 1600s? "No man is an island, entire to himself. Each one of us is a part of the continent. We're all connected together when one suffers, we all suffer, when one rejoices we all rejoice."

So just one of the ways we looked for God's salvation. We yearn during the season of Advent, we long for God's salvation. It's that God would come a fix this mess, this family system that is broken. He would save his people.

Now in the Gospel of Matthew this is what we call the Jewish Gospel. And one of Matthew's focus areas is that it's aimed at a Jewish audience and it's trying to say that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and that Christianity is actually the true Judaism. That he is the fulfilment of the Jewish Messiah.

So when Matthew points to the angel saying that he will save his people, Matthew's readers probably think that this refers to the Jewish people. The people of Israel. But as the drama unfolds it's not just the people of Israel, but the family of humanity, the whole world.

I want you to think about it. In our American culture we think so individualistically. I believe in individual rights and responsibilities of course. But the Biblical culture is far more communal than that. Throughout the Old Testament when God is angry, God is angry at whom? God is angry at Israel. And when God offers mercy and grace, God offers mercy and grace to whom? Not to maybe you, and you and you, but to Israel, all of Israel together, the family.

God wants to save us. Now what do we do then? The passages we read today and that you heard - these are in the form of a conversation. It begins in chapter 64 with Isaiah praying on behalf of the people to God. He says, "Would you just tear open the heavens and come down and fix this broken world we live in? That the very mountains would quake at your power. Just come and fix this!"

And God responds with this amazing picture of what God intends to do. Did you hear the language? Just so beautiful. "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people. No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be an infant who lives but a few days or an old person who does not live out a lifetime." Oh, my goodness! A healing of disease.

"They shall not build and another inhabit. They shall not plant and another eat." The exploitations - slavery will be done away with. "Before they call I will answer. While they are yet speaking, I will hear." This relationship - this broken relationship - between God and the people will be resolved.

"The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like an ox. And no one shall hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." Conflict, war, will be done away with.

Wow! Now let me ask you a question. Do you pray for that? Do you pray that one day that will come to pass? I'm going to be honest - I don't so much. I'm pretty selfish in my praying. Me and mine. I pray for my family. I pray for my kids and for myself. I pray for my friends, for all of you, and all my congregation. I pray for those on our prayer list.

But maybe I've just grown cynical and I think to myself "Come on! World peace? Naw - not happening! End of disease? That's a pipe dream - a utopia."

Maybe that's the problem. Maybe we have just forgotten that God will actually come and save us. That God will make it right again. That we will pray those kinds of fervent prayers.

There's a practice in the ritual that's called "The order of daily prayer and praise" and it comes out of a Roman Catholic tradition called "The praying of the hours." And in the daily prayer there's what's called "The Prayers of the People" and I want you to hear what they say.

"Together let us pray for the people of this congregation..." And there the people lift up names and respond, "Lord, hear our prayer." Then it goes, "For those who suffer and who are in trouble." The people respond, "Lord, hear our prayer."

I think most of us are with it on that. They continue: "For the concerns of this local community." Okay, we can begin to expand our prayer life. "For the world, its people, its leaders." Hmmm - well, maybe don't get quite there, do we?

I just wonder what it would be like if we chose to pray for the world. That God would save us. Would save his family. The human family. That's all intertwined together.

Now there's another important piece to it. The second thing we can do in addition to prayer is to do something. Now, remember we've been operating under the premise... what I hope you go home with from this whole series on Salvation is that there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, our only hope is a Savior. Does that mean we don't do anything? That we don't work at it?

Henri Nouwen who's an incredible spiritual author for so long has written many books. But he has this concept called "active waiting." He really spoke to me. He wrote, "Waiting is essential to the spiritual life. But waiting as a disciple of Jesus is not an empty waiting. It is waiting with a promise in our hearts that makes already present what we're waiting for. We wait during Advent." That's what we're in now "...we wait during Advent for the birth of Jesus. We wait after Easter for the coming of the Spirit. And after the ascension of Jesus we wait for his coming again in glory. We are always waiting but it is waiting in the conviction that we have already seen God's footsteps. Waiting for God is an active - yes, joyful - waiting and as we wait, we remember him for whom we are waiting and as we remember him, we work to create the world he desires to create. We create a community ready to welcome him when he comes." Active waiting.

Let me give you sort of a silly example - but it helped me as I thought through this. When I was growing both my parents worked outside the home and so we had a housekeeper that came to clean on Thursdays. Her name was Rosella. And poor Rosella. I blamed her for everything

broken, every bit of food missing from the pantry. I'd say, "Rosella must have eaten that." Or "Rosella must have broken that." Poor lady.

So on Thursday mornings when she was to come my mom left the house before I got out. So she had a hot plate for us with breakfast on it. There was always a note of instructions. And on Thursday mornings it would say. "Clean your rooms, Rosella is coming today."

Now that made no sense to me when I was a kid. I have to tell you. Why would I clean my room if Rosella is coming today? I suspect you all got that sort of message too. Why would I do that? So I said to my mom, which is not smart by the way, "Why would I have to clean my room? That's Rosella's job to do." Not smart.

The bottom line is that as she explained it we do it because we want to be ready for her. We do it because we want to demonstrate what she does we think really matters. We do it because we are all in the business of trying to get the house clean. Even though *she's* the one who actually makes it happen. We do it so we'll all be aligned together toward our work. That's my language; she didn't say it like that.

I think that's what the picture is for us. No, we don't think that because we bring food to CCSC that we're going to end world hunger. No, we don't think that because we make a gift to the Amazing Place that we'll end dementia. But we want to fervently demonstrate to God that that's what we want. And we want it enough to put our feet and hands to it.

Imagine this picture. Let's say I'm praying, "God, just end world hunger!" And there's someone who's hungry sitting next to me and I'm eating my dinner. I'm saying, "End world hunger! End world hunger!" Is my prayer heartfelt? Is it real? No, because to really demonstrate what matters to you you do something with your hands and your feet and your life. We pray with our hands and our feet not because we think that by doing that our little tiny bit is going to change everything. But because we want to say to God, "C'mon, God! We have a mess here. Our only hope is a Savior. Come and save us."

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we confess to you that sometimes our prayers are all about us. We confess to you that sometimes we're interested in saving ourselves and the people we love and not so interested in your world. Oh, forgive us, God, and remind us that we are all a part of one another. Send your Savior to put us right again. Amen.*