



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“Saved? Is That All?”

Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21 Fourth Sunday in Lent

When I was in college, my fraternity house had a roof leak. This was pretty serious, because the attic had been converted to one large dormitory, where all the guys slept. Not only did we have to move the beds around to avoid the leak, we also had a problem with the ceiling of the floor below, where two of my fraternity brothers had their study room. We paid a roofer to fix the top leak, we just let the dormitory dry out, but we needed to paint the plaster ceiling of that study room. We got some white paint, gave it a coat, and thought we were done. But in under a week, the stain we thought we had fixed bled through the paint; our cover-up had not been successful.

Sin is like that, as we’re going to find out today. Just because we say the magic words, “Jesus is my Savior”, that does not mean that our tendency to follow our own interests, common sense and life agenda has changed. “Sin” is the name the Bible gives to a condition of the heart that keeps God out of the decisions of our lives--and this disease of sin produces symptoms in the bad thoughts and acts we call “sins”. Likewise, “salvation” is the name the Bible gives to a changed status before God, and it is to have symptoms of health called the “Fruit of the Spirit” that emanate from that changed heart that lives close to the Lord. Like the proverbial hundred-mile journey that starts with a single step, salvation starts with a single decision, but is an ongoing process which we are to “work out”, as Paul says in Philippians 2:12, so that the “symptoms of spiritual health”, the results of God in charge of our lives, show up more and more. Or, as one slogan has it, “There’s a whole lot more to being well, than not being sick.”

Let’s hear what God wants to say to us this morning, through an episode of sickness and health in God’s people, as they were being formed in the wilderness after God’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. This is in the book of Numbers—a place not many of us go often...!—chapter 21. It’s the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible. As they did from time to time, the Hebrews had been rebelling and complaining against Moses, who was only doing what God told him to say and do. Find Numbers, chapter 21 in your Bibles. As I read aloud verses 4-9, see if you hear God speaking to you this morning. *[text]*

From time to time, God would tire of this ungrateful rebellion of his people, and God would get their attention with some heavy duty sign that would cause them to repent of their complaining, as here. Moses’ bronze snake lifted high on a pole is, of course, mirrored in the “caduceus”—the symbol used of doctors, ambulances, and medical care. God’s healing came through the snake as His people looked to Him, as He required. God’s healing comes through medical personnel, today, also.

The disease the Hebrews had in the desert was the sin of rebellion. I can understand that. They were wandering around for a generation, to rid the people of the cowardice that would not

move into the Promised Land God told them to take. It was to be a wholesale “genetic cleansing”, as it were. If I were part of that group, knowing that I was going to die in the wilderness and never enter the Promised Land—that my journey was a big exercise in futility, killing time until I died. . . I think I’d be “testy” with God and God’s leadership, too.

Sin, remember, is steering my own life instead of giving the wheel to God. The Hebrew people followed, off and on, the instructions of Moses, but they did not have a direct connection with God themselves. They had been slaves living in a rigid hierarchy of that institution headed by Pharaoh, the King of Egypt. Once they had gotten out of Egypt into the wilderness, time and again, they longed to quit their endless wandering, and go back to Egypt where they had “three hots and a cot”, even if that meant they would die early, worn down by the oppressive work of building the Pharaoh’s massive monuments. They lived at a distance from God, so they could not each receive God’s comfort, God’s character reformation, or God’s call. Everything came through Moses—and that was OK, since they were used to that “chain of command”, as we might say it today. The tendency to long for the rigid structure of an institution, like prison convicts released and then soon seeking a return to prison, is called “institutionalization”. And until that habit of the heart was broken, Egypt would still be in these Hebrews, even if they were no longer in Egypt. They would still be looking for the authority of Pharaoh, instead of looking to the authority of God.

Salvation—from first to last—is a gift from God. And we need God in our lives day by day, moment-by-moment, so that we have the Holy Spirit’s help to recover from the addiction we have to sin, so that we stop going without God in the choices we make. We are caught in our own habits of our hearts, habitually being in charge of our lives even though that takes us away from God. It’s a habit of the heart we need to break, but it’s so a part of us that we don’t notice it. Asking most people about what living in sin is like, is the same as asking a fish what water is like.

In the Gospel of John, that famous chapter 3, we find this encounter between Jesus and a teacher of Israel named Nicodemus. Their conversation leads to a significant editorial comment by the author in verses 14-21, that ties into the passage from Numbers we just read. Jesus, obviously, knew his Torah!

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. (NIV)

In John’s gospel, to “believe” in him (Jesus) is to follow him with your life. But we often miss that, perhaps because it is trying to expose our own sin. Instead, we hear this “believe in him” as an “intellectual assent.” “Yep, I walked forward at the crusade in 1988, and told my counselor then that ‘I believe in Jesus as my Savior.’” But that idea of “belief” would not have

made sense in Jesus' culture. To "believe" means, "it makes a profound difference in our lives." How do YOU believe in Jesus? How deep has your salvation gone, as of today?

Our last Scripture reading comes from Paul's letter to the Christians at Ephesus, chapter 2, verses 1-10. Writing to the friends he had made there, Paul reminds them of the life-changing transition "living in Christ" brings. I really like the way Eugene Peterson puts it in his Bible paraphrase, *The Message* . . . [text]

It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

It's all about God, not about us. Salvation is not obtained by the works that we do; instead, we are God's workmanship, the product of His gracious love moving in our hearts. We belong to Him. And we demonstrate that "belief" by doing the works God has prepared for us to do with Him. WITH HIM.

But once again, we exercise our sin nature by leaving God out most of the time. So many Christians read the Bible, collect the pointers we find there to works God obviously considers good, and we go about doing those. But we've left God behind. WE are deciding which Scriptures to focus upon. WE are deciding how to be good boys and girls. But unless we talk with God and hear from God, we can be spending our lives and efforts in good deeds, while God is actively at work nearby in a project He longs for us to join in with Him. Do you understand the difference? Jesus wants to save Christians, too!

Let's suppose we take a notion to invite some people over for dinner. Who do you invite?

Who would Jesus invite? In Luke 14, starting in verse 12, Jesus is at a banquet and there we find him saying . . . to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (NIV)

Hmm. I have to say, I don't think that way. When I decide I want to have other people over to our place and put on a big meal, I stick with people I know—*people like me*. They may be church people or not, but I ask people with whom I have a lot in common--or else, it might not be much fun. It might have awkward moments. I might find customs of some people at odds with what I expect. And if I invite poor people, what risks am I taking? Do I really want to be “downwardly mobile”, instead of “upwardly mobile”?

Do you have a grip on how different God's agenda might be from mine? And yours?

How about your Life Group? Are you and your friends pursuing God's agenda--discipling one another to a closer relationship with God, so you hear from God more and more often, and start following God together more of the time? Are you conspiring together to love people who don't yet love God, and love them into God's arms? Or are you just a social group that filters out the people who don't fit, socially? Do you invite people you don't belong to our church?

The question God is going to ask us Christians is not, “Are you saved?” but, “Is that ALL?” Or, maybe He'll ask, “Where have you been? Why did you not cross the social lines, political lines, racial lines, educational lines, and bring more people to my banquet? Why did you not join with those church friends and help each other obey the Head of the Church?”

Isn't that a haunting question—“Saved? Is that All?”

Let's sum up. All people are sinners. Christians are “saved sinners” working out our salvation. Our heart habits keep us gripping the steering wheel of our lives, instead of turning it over to God, moment by moment, using God's timing instead of the pace we have grown to expect. We may say we belong to Jesus, but our hearts keep us wrapped up in ourselves. And we keep trying to do life on our own, not really connected or depending upon our Christian friends for help in our salvation.

And God wants more—he wants US. He wants to right relationship with us acknowledging Him and praising Him by listening to Him and joining Him in what He is doing. He wants us to let Him work in us, changing our character and our values, so that we see things as He sees them, so that we hear the cries of the poor and oppressed, so that we put aside our agendas and join in His agenda.

Most messages I bring you on Sundays have some humor, and more illustrations to help us get what God has led me to understand from His Word. One of the risks of such a pattern is that messages can become “pleasant entertainment”. Today's message from God didn't have that pattern, and I hope you'll forgive the directness. It's what God wants us to get, today, tomorrow, for changing our lives. It's an old message, as you can tell from the age of His Word. And it dies here—unless you take it, and with God's help, move toward God in love.

We have some people who will stick around up front after worship, if you would like to have some friends support you as you ask God for help in breaking the habits of your heart, and living “the with-God life”, moment by moment.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on March 22, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]