

“It’s a Good Year for...Salvation”

Luke 2:25-35; Isaiah 42:6-9, 49:6, 52:7-10

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

It was New Year’s Day years ago. The Tournament of Roses Parade was on television. The parade begins at 8AM and follows a 5.5-mile route along Colorado Blvd. in Pasadena, CA. Hundreds of thousands lined the street to watch, and millions more watched on television. The parade is known for beautiful floats covered in flowers (roses are the most popular), marching bands and equestrian groups.

And so the parade was moving along as expected, until everything came to a stop. The floats and bands and horses just stopped. Nothing was moving. It was a “parade traffic jam.” The television cameras quickly found the problem: a float had stopped. And everything behind it was backed up. As the television cameras zoomed in you could see different people scurrying here and there all under, over, and around the float. The television commentators began to speculate that it was a mechanical problem, or maybe someone on the float got hurt or sick. Finally, after about 5 minutes the crowd parted and someone came through carrying a 5-gallon gas can. The float had simply run out of gas.

When the gas tank was filled and the float began to move a cheer went up from the crowd. And the parade once again began. And then the commentators shared with the television audience the big surprise: the float was sponsored by the Standard Oil Company. It’s a true story. Life can be funny.

The best solutions address THE problem. As the float stopped and people watched, the solution was not more roses, or another driver, or an engine repair. The solution was gasoline.

Very simply, in a spiritual and theological sense, I believe salvation works in a similar way. We see time and time again that the grace and power of God in Jesus Christ addresses the particular brokenness in people’s lives. Yes, there is the forgiveness to address the brokenness of sin in all our lives. And yes, there is resurrection and eternal life to address the brokenness of death in all our lives. But salvation is also more than that.

We see in Jesus’ life and ministry that God’s salvation looks like bread for the 5000 who were hungry. And salvation was sight to blind eyes. And salvation was healing for the lepers. And salvation was walking for the lame. And salvation was new life for the woman at the well, and Zaccheaus, and the woman caught in adultery. And salvation was fellowship to those who were outcasts. The grace and power of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ address the brokenness in our lives. It brings healing, better life, new life, and the promise of eternal life. That’s what

Christian faith is about. And so as the New Year begins it's an interesting thing to ponder how salvation, how might Jesus be saving my life today?

II. Brief Exegesis

I have always found it interesting to see how the gospel writers use the Old Testament to help tell the story of Jesus. And no one does it more than Luke. And Luke often cites passages from the prophet Isaiah. And often those passages are about the promise of God's salvation.

And so for the next few weeks Bill and I will be preaching on some interesting parts of Luke which reference texts from Isaiah. And we'll explore why Luke might be referencing Isaiah. And how much more it adds to understanding the story when we see it's a text from Isaiah.

All that is certainly true in our story from Luke today. The three texts from Isaiah that Luke cites are all salvation oracles. The prophet Isaiah over 500 years earlier foresees a day when God's salvation will break into the world in a significant way. In those texts we hear that God's salvation and the one who brings God's salvation will be:

"A light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring prisoners out of dungeons...the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare." (Is. 42:6-9)

And, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (Is. 49:6)

And, "How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news...Break forth together in singing...for the Lord comforts his people...all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." (Is. 52:7-10)

In the beginning of Luke's story about Jesus we meet this aged saint Simeon. Simeon is the best of ancient Israel. He was righteous and devout, spending his days in the temple, looking for the salvation of God, and filled with God's Holy Spirit. And because of all that Simeon believes he will not die before he sees God's Savior.

So when Joseph and Mary bring the infant Jesus to the temple Simeon knows Jesus is the one. This is the one of whom the prophecies of Isaiah speak. This is the one who will bring the salvation of God; the power and grace of God to heal the brokenness in life. And not just for Israel, but all people.

And then Simeon begins to cite the texts from Isaiah written more than 500 years earlier. What Luke is telling us is that this salvation of God for all people didn't just "come out of left field." This is part of the plan of God spoken 500 years earlier by the prophet Isaiah. The long-awaited plan of God's salvation is now taking place. And it's happening in Jesus Christ. The salvation of God in Jesus Christ has a history. And this aged saint Simeon is the one who sees what's happening. Jesus is the prophesied one. The rest of the story, and the coming of the Church (when it's at its best) will demonstrate how right Simeon was. Jesus Christ is about

God's salvation for all people; "a light of revelation to the Gentiles." (Lk. 2:32) Jesus is the one, and the time is now.

III. Brief Theological Reflections

The grace and power of God in Jesus Christ brings healing and hope to all the brokenness of life. And it's as specific as gasoline for a float stopped along a parade route.

So as the New Year begins, what might God's salvation mean to you? Perhaps you've known grief and loss through a death this past year. God's salvation for you could mean the comfort and hope of resurrection and eternal life and resting in the grace and peace of God. Perhaps you know the guilt of mistakes and wrong decisions. God's salvation for you could mean forgiveness and the decision to live in new and better ways. Those are the big ways that we all find our lives touched by the brokenness of life at one time or another. And the good news of God's grace and power addresses those broken parts of life in ways that give hope and healing. But God's salvation is also more than that.

And so I was thinking about the way of life so often lived around us...a secular way of life...a broken way of life. I believe that one of the most important things Christians and the Church can do today is bear witness to a different way of life...a new way of life...a saved way of life.

We live in a culture that encourages the holding of grievances. We live in a culture that encourages getting even, getting back, getting more than even. We live in a culture that sings the fallen song of Lamech from Genesis 4: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged 7 fold, Lamech is avenged 77 fold." (Gen. 4:23-24) It is a broken way of life and leads to death.

The way of life, the way of salvation is forgiveness. I have taught couples in premarital classes, and try to practice myself, a way of forgiveness informed by the field of psychology called cognitive therapy. In short, it means that I can feel all types of things. But I'm going to choose to do what my mind tells me is the right thing. And so, I choose to forgive because I know it's the way of life. Specifically, it means; 1-I'm not going to bring it up with the person again; 2-I'm not going to bring it up with friends; 3-I'm not going to dwell on it myself. And when I do those three things a strange thing happens; I begin to move in the direction of forgiveness. I may not feel like forgiving right away, but sooner or later the feelings of forgiveness happen. Our hearts follow the right choices we make with our heads. It's like; if you want a bruise to heal you stop poking it. If you know the brokenness of grievances, the way of salvation is forgiveness.

Or how about this; we live in a culture that encourages fear of differences. We live in a culture that increasingly has no room for people from different countries, or who speak different languages, or whose skin is different colored. We live in an arrogant and self-serving culture that has no respect for different worldviews or different political positions. We live in a culture that

arrests immigrants by the thousands without just cause and erases the history of minority groups because it's inconvenient to a particular worldview.

And so salvation means living into grace and humility. It's to believe and practice the song we sang as kids: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." All the little children. And their parents. And their grandparents. Salvation is freedom from fear.

There is a woman who owns and works in a restaurant here in the valley. I go in occasionally for lunch. We've gotten to know each other a little. One day I went for a late lunch. I was the only one there. And so we got to talking a little. I knew she was from India. She knew I am a pastor. And so I asked her if she was a Hindu. She nervously said "yes." I asked her where she went to temple. She said she and her family go over to Youngstown. I then asked her about the Hindu community in the area. And as we talked, the more comfortable she became. There was nothing to fear. It was just two people talking about life and faith. Respect and humility. Maybe that might be salvation for you; building a relationship with someone who is another race, or another religion, or gay or lesbian, and being free of fear.

It's a New Year. It's a time we ponder a new start. I'm not necessary a fan of "resolutions." That feels too much like all or nothing. And being human we often fail. So instead of "resolutions" I prefer "intensions." That means starting in a new direction. And if I fail, I just get up, and try again. It's living in grace. It's living in new ways. It's living into salvation. How might the grace and power of God's salvation in Jesus Christ be saving you this New Year?