

John Sampson
"Good Work"
Text: Luke 13:1 - 9
Preached at KVCC
March 24, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Salvation.

I find that I need to speak about salvation this morning.

As followers of Jesus and his message, we can't avoid engaging with it.

The idea of salvation is right in the center of our sacred stories, and wrapped up with how our tradition understands who Jesus is. It's wrapped up in our hearts in who we believe Jesus is to us.

I find that I have to speak about salvation because it haunts our Lenten journey, and the events of Holy Week that are getting closer and closer. And without some kind of understanding of salvation what can Easter mean for us?

I have to speak about salvation because this morning's story is about the saving of a fig tree that has not yet born fruit. It's about a gardener who promises to save the tree by committing to nourish it so that it will become what it is, and finally bear figs.

I speak about salvation because it's part of the human story; it's part of our story.

And I want to put it right out there at the beginning that although salvation is upheld as something joyous by our tradition, for many of us the word itself can leave a bad taste in our mouths. This idea, that so many have hung their hopes on, can bring to mind hard binaries of the saved and the fallen, of religious figures making judgments on God's behalf that lead to coercion, and inhumanity, and of violence. Salvation, throughout our history, has often only been the prelude to its inversion, damnation. And it can be an idea that seems to deny the very value of this life in this world in favor of a life that only attains its full meaning in a heavenly hereafter, only after we're dead.

With all of this history can the very idea of salvation be saved?

For me, the answer to this question is, it depends.

It depends on what we actually mean when we say the word salvation.

This morning I offer you one definition to consider. It may find an echo in how you understand salvation. It may not. It may lead you to consider what salvation is in a new light. And all of these possibilities are OK. Because in this congregation we don't believe that we understand God's unfolding through Creation in the same way.

So I begin my definition of salvation where our reading begins.

And it begins in blood. It begins with Jesus' followers speaking about events that we have no other record of, either within the Christian scriptures, or through non-Christian secondary sources. The first event refers to Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea during the later years of Jesus' ministry, mixing the blood of Galileans with

sacrifices. The second has to do with a tragedy where a tower falls on a number of people killing them all.

But for Jesus these aren't isolated events. They're part of an economy of brokenness that touches not just the lives of those victims so long ago, but impacts all of us, even today. For Jesus, these tragic events don't happen because the victims are especially bad people.

This isn't a wages of sin story.

In each of these two tragic stories Jesus asks rhetorically if those who died are any worse than any of the rest of their neighbors, with the suggestion that they aren't. The economy of brokenness, according to Jesus, is simply part of the human experience.

Now let me modernize our two events, so that we can see them in the light of our lives.

At that very time there were some present who told him about the school children and adults who were shot dead in Parkland, FL. He asked them, “Do you think that because these students and adults in Parkland died in this way that they deserved it because they were worse people than any of their neighbors? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

“Or those thousands of children who were ripped from their parents at our southern boarder, some of whom may never be reunited with their parents, do you think these children are worse than any American children? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, your families will be ripped apart just as theirs were.”

It's now that we can begin to understand what salvation could mean. For Jesus, salvation is of the here and now, and it's only possible within the background of a pervasive human brokenness. It's not of the brokenness of our lives, but its disruption. Salvation is the breaking of the circular economy of human failing that visits one group of people, and then brings its tragedy to the next. And Jesus tells us that to break this cycle of brokenness can only be achieved through repentance, through a changing of the direction of our lives.

Brokenness starts in the shootings of Parkland, and continues to Christchurch, and will come to our very doorstep here in the North Country unless we as a people repent, unless we as a people decide we will take action to change the course of our lives, and our nation, and work towards a different future for all of us. This is salvation.

Brokenness starts at our southern border with Mexico, and may come to families here in our own town, unless we change the course

of our lives and act to make sure that no other families are ripped apart in our country and beyond. This is salvation.

Salvation is the fruit of looking at the brokenness of our lives and committing ourselves to working and struggling to change the future. It is the work of hope that believes the way our story begins is not the way our story must end.

Perhaps for some of us this way of thinking about salvation may be a way to save it for us, may be a way to allow this posture of hope to be reclaimed for our lives. Because if we lose the possibility of salvation what are we left with?

I was struck by the words of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who wrote towards the end of his essay *Pilate and Jesus*, “the world in its fallenness, does not want salvation, but justice.” In a world that often seems unable to really imagine the actual

disruption of the brokenness exhibited in Parkland and Christchurch, and along our southern border, all we are left with are the disconnected patches that justice allows for. Instead of the changing of our hearts and our history that is salvation we fall back into the legalism of justice. Justice allows for a tactical engagement with brokenness, while salvation is the strategic overthrow of the broken inertia of our lives.

But for the works of salvation to be effective, I believe they can't use the tools of brokenness to overcome brokenness. Blood is not the answer for blood.

The blood of Jesus hanging on the cross is not going to assuage the blood of our hurting world. Instead of being a symbol of salvation, Jesus' blood is the very manifestation of the brokenness of hearts that will not change, that will not repent. You see Jesus is not the

perfect sacrifice that will atone for our sins. That's not the salvation he offers us.

According to our reading he offers instead to be our gardener.

He offers to save us, by showing us who we really are, who we really could be: if we were just loved a little bit more, if we were just nourished, if someone would just take care of us.

You see in our story Jesus offers to be the gardener who will help us bear the fruit of repentance, of turning our lives around, of walking a new path of compassion and love for each other. He offers to nourish us with his words, and his example, so that we can live into the truth that we are the children of God, that we carry the image of God within us, and that we are capable of the great and wonderful works of true humanity.

Here and now, not through blood, and not through the cross, and not through the passion.

But by bringing sight to the blind, by freeing the captives, by loosening the bonds of those who are imprisoned. This is salvation.

And although I speak as if Jesus is something other than us, he's not. He shows us what we could be by living into our full potential. He shows us what we already are. We are him. We too can be the gardeners who help and nourish each other. We too can be the ones who help those not yet bearing the fruit of compassion and repentance finally live into what it really means to be human. We too could be our saviors.

So yes, I think the idea of salvation can be saved. If it moves beyond needing blood, if it cracks the cycle of brokenness, if it is for all of us.

I think salvation can be saved if it is the work that leads to there never being another Parkland or Christchurch. Yes, I believe salvation can be saved if it is the work that leads to no more families being broken apart on our southern border, or in this town.

I think salvation can be saved just like a fig tree that needs a little bit more love, and a little bit more nourishment. Yes, I think salvation can be saved not through a perfect sacrifice, but by all of the gardeners who are willing to get down and get their hands dirty in the work of love.

Amen.

