

Salvation Ground

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[0 : 00] And the angel appeared to the very startled shepherds and the glory of the Lord shone round them and they were filled with fear.

And the angel said to them, do not be afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people.

For to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord. The first thing angels always say is do not be afraid.

Not because they're concerned about our composure but because they are bringing news from God of such wonder that they want the people to brace themselves so that they might hear something which is beyond comprehension.

And this angel says to the shepherds in that field so long ago, I bring you news of mega joy, literally. And what is the news of mega joy?

[1 : 11] It is one thing. In the city of David is born for you a Saviour who is Christ the Lord. That's what this is all about.

At the heart and centre of the joy of the angel, what makes the choir burst forward from heaven in glorious chorus is one word.

It is Saviour. Christ is born for you a Saviour. And of course this is why we meet here tonight and this is who we are.

It tells us why we are here. It tells us who Christ is and why he came. Christianity is a salvation religion.

It is focused on a massive rescue mission that has been mounted by God for all the people. And of course this message has been domesticated and distorted.

[2 : 14] This week I heard it said, Peace on earth and goodwill to everyone because God likes us very much. Which is kind of the opposite of a salvation message.

A salvation message means we are in some difficulty, even in terrible difficulty and someone needs to rescue us. And this whole idea of salvation and needing a Saviour is deeply embedded in our humanity.

And I think it's something the advertising industry understands very well and uses brilliantly to sell products. I don't know when you watch television whether you watch the commercials.

I think they are the best part of TV myself. They reveal a great deal. This week I saw on television that if you purchase a certain brand of adjustable mechanical bed, it will save you from the hell of sleepless nights and put you into sleepy heaven.

If you purchase meals from a certain company, you will be saved from a terrible and boring cuisine and you will be moved into gastronomic heaven.

[3 : 32] And this week the Vancouver Sun has run a series of articles designed to save your Christmas celebration and my Christmas celebration from being a curse on earth, a dull and unfashionable celebration by telling us how we should set our Christmas lights and by using gourmet groceries.

And the drug companies have got onto this. Anything wrong, take a pill and you'll be suddenly living in heaven. And I want to pay special testimony to the fact that that doesn't work.

There's so much in literature and art that's built around this yearning for salvation. We love stories of salvation and redemption. Yesterday we saw in the news a man who had been trapped in Stanley Park in a group of trees.

He'd been trapped there for five days, living off rain, water and the meagre supplies that he had with him in his backpack when on the fifth day he realised that he also had a cell phone in his backpack.

It's a true story. And I thought it was wonderful. He rang 911 and had a happy ending. He was rescued. And of course this is the way religion works, isn't it?

[4 : 53] Each religion offers a path of salvation. Each different religion has a different diagnosis of what's wrong, what the problem is and what we need to be saved from.

And each religion offers a path to salvation, whether it's through Buddhism or Islam or Confucianism. And I think it's here where we see the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Because God does not offer a path to salvation. What we celebrate tonight is that God offers a saviour. And I think if you think about this carefully, if you read the writings of Buddha, Buddha never said that he would be a saviour.

And Sri Krishna never said he'd be a saviour. And Muhammad certainly never said he would save his followers. But the angel says with absolute clarity, to you today is born a saviour who is Christ the Lord.

What that means, of course, is that Christianity is the reverse of a religion. It doesn't come to us and say you have to be enlightened, you have to be obedient, you have to be meritorious, you have to be religious.

[6 : 12] It says, you cannot save yourself, but I will send my son to do what you cannot do. Because the Bible's diagnosis of our trouble is much deeper and much wider than anything else in all of humanity.

And it requires God himself to come in the person of his son to save us. That's why in the first chapter of the New Testament, the angel said to Joseph, that Mary will bear a son and you'll call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

I don't know if you've ever noticed this before, but if you take a Bible, which I would invite you to if you don't have one, you can take one from the pew home with you tonight and keep it.

If you take your Bible and just put your fingers between the beginning of the New Testament and the end of the New Testament, you'll notice that it's much less than a third of the whole Bible. That this big section back here is the Old Testament, more than two-thirds of the Bible. And the Old Testament is God's revealing and acting in history, preparing the world for the coming of the Saviour.

[7 : 36] It's like kindergarten through graduation from grade 12, preparing the world for that day in Bethlehem when the baby would be born.

And that is why I chose the first reading about the birth of Noah from the book of Exodus. I bet you've never heard that reading at a Christmas service before.

It wasn't because of the windstorms and the rain. Early in the book of Genesis, we get a glimpse into the heart of God and we read these words.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humanity was great in the earth, that every imagination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil continually.

And the Lord was sorry that he had made humans on the earth and it grieved him to his heart. And so he said, I will blot out humanity whom I have created from the face of the ground.

[8 : 45] And you know the story, God brought a great flood upon the earth and opened the seas and they rose. And he instructed Noah to build an ark and it took him a hundred years and he was not the most popular man in town.

But through Noah and through the ark, God saved eight people and began again. And I wanted to read that to you because I want you to know that sin so deeply grieves the heart of God that he is willing to do away with his creation.

The trouble is, you see, when we hear this word sin, we don't think of ourselves. We think of others. We've developed a very sophisticated gradation system and we compare ourselves to each other and we reserve the word sin for people who are criminals.

And I'm not a criminal. I've never been charged with anything or not with anything too serious. I'm not a creep. What has sin got to do with me?

And the flood and the Noah events are there to teach us that we're dealing with something far more serious, far deeper than peace of mind, religious duty.

[10 : 05] We're dealing with the God who made us. And as God looks at us and as he looks at his world, he thinks we need saving. He thinks we're in water over our head.

We're out of our depth. And the tragedy for many is that they just don't see it. If you read through the book of Genesis as we've been doing this term at St. John's, you'll see a deadly accurate

portrait of who we are.

It's not so much that we are full of hate for God, that we worship Satan and eat children. It's just that we live horizontally.

We don't give God much thought really at all. And so we have to play his role. And therefore, I decide what is right and wrong, irrespective of what God thinks.

I'm going to form my dreams and my hopes, irrespective of what God thinks. Which is why, of course, there is no peace on earth. Because if I'm playing God and you are playing God, we're playing God in a world where there's only room for one true God.

[11 : 15] The heartbreaking thing about the Old Testament is that time after time, in rescue after rescue, God does not just act in judgment, but he acts in grace and mercy and loving kindness.

Through the story of Noah and Abraham and Moses and David, we see that the heart of God is his desire for us to be with him.

And we see that the arm of God is strong enough to achieve it. That from beginning to end, salvation is from him and through him and to him completely and absolutely of his grace.

I think it's easy to miss this when we read the words of the angels to the shepherds, which we've heard over and over again. I bring you good news of great joy. There's this little phrase and it says, which shall come to all people.

Literally, it means it's going to come to every person, whoever, whoever will come afterwards, all people, every person.

[12 : 27] The fact that a saviour comes means that salvation is not restricted by my behaviour. Salvation doesn't just come to those who are on Santa's nice list.

It's for everyone, anyone who is born. You see how it's not like religion. The way religion works is that it requires us to make certain efforts to do certain works to save ourselves.

If you read the Buddhist scriptures, what you need to do is you need to work to attain enlightenment. You need to wake up to have an awakening to the truth that suffering is created by desire and there is an eightfold path to follow, right effort, right action, right thought.

If you read the Upanishads, the Hindu sacred scriptures, you have to practice Dharma to experience the divinity, again, acts of righteousness.

The same with Islam. Salvation comes as you surrender to Allah. The way you do that is through the five pillars, prayer, almsgiving, the shahadah.

[13 : 40] But ask yourself, who is the saviour in these religions? Who is the one who does the saving in Buddhism? It's not the Buddha.

It's you who has to walk the path of enlightenment. And who does the saving in Hinduism? It's not Sri Krishna who has to practice Dharma.

It is you who has to do it. And the same, of course, with Islam. It is not Muhammad who saves you. You have to demonstrate your meritoriousness by surrendering to the will of Allah.

That is the way it works in religions. Salvation is for the enlightened, for the righteous and for the meritorious. And I want to ask, what about us sinners?

What about us moral failures? What about those of us who are not meritorious and not enlightened, who realise that we cannot save ourselves?

[14 : 39] And the angel comes and says, to you is born a saviour who is Christ the Lord. It's very inclusive. You see, a saviour means that everyone is included.

The saviour will not exclude people based on their goodness, their ability, their moral character, their intelligence, the colour of their skin. The saviour comes not because of our goodness, but because of God's grace.

If you are a pluralist and you believe that all religions lead to God, you cannot believe in grace.

Human religion is about me creating a good record, offering it up to God and then he owes me.

But Christianity says God sends Christ and Christ develops a good record and offers it to us and we owe him. Good works are not enough to find him.

It's not the good people who find him. It is Christ who finds us. And I think that's part of the point of the chorus that the choir breaks into.

[15 : 56] Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

It's not that God has got one group he is pleased with and another group that he is not pleased with.

The point is that God sends a saviour to every single person precisely because he is pleased to do it. The salvation he offers us is based on his pleasure, on his free grace, on his love, on his mercy,

on his kindness to all who receive him.

Amen. Amen. Amen. And then we read, they went in haste and they found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in the manger.

They are directed to the food trough, the animal food trough. And I'm guessing it struck the shepherds as a little bit unusual that the saviour of the world who huge choirs of angels had been sent to sing about might have this accommodation that doesn't really reflect his dignity.

And of course that is our point, that the saviour becomes our saviour not by grasping onto what's his, not by holding onto his dignity, but by giving it away and by entering the world of flesh.

[17 : 20] He does it by entering flesh and by living our life and by dying our death. And that's what salvation looks like. He doesn't do it from the safe distance of heaven.

And that's why we rejoice together. Christ is born for us today. And if Jesus Christ is the saviour, then salvation is in him.

And we take hold of that salvation by taking hold of him. That is everything God has to offer us. Life and goodness and grace and forgiveness and mercy.

It is in Jesus Christ who gave up his glory so that we might have his. It's why we're here tonight. It's why the songs and carols we sing are so full of overwhelming joy and overwhelming gladness and praise.

And every word we sing is an act of faith that yes, Jesus Christ, I want you. I want the salvation God has given to us in you.

[18 : 30] I want to receive you. And we don't sing O come let us adore him. I mean, we don't sing, we don't adore things these days. And the hymn writer says, not just once, not just twice, but three times, come let us adore him.

Because you see, if a saviour has been born, it doesn't matter what you've done or what I've done, Christ was born for you. And you and I are embraced in that salvation that Christ comes to bring. And he holds it out to us and God offers it to us afresh. And as we take it, all heaven and nature sing joy to the world.

And we ought to do the same. So let's stand, shall we? And joy in heaven and nature and sing joy to the world.