

BE THE CHURCH: FIGHT FOR THE POWERLESS

Exodus 2:15-20

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If someone challenged you to summarize the main themes of the Bible in just three words, what words would you choose? There are many good options. You could say, for example, “abundance,” “compassion” and “righteousness.”

You might say, as the early church Fathers did, that the Bible is about God, and God can be summarized in three words: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Or you might say, as Paul did in Corinthians, that the most important three concepts are “faith”, “hope” and “love” - these three.

As I have been thinking about concluding our “Be the Church” series, three words have been coming to my mind.

Before I introduce them to you, I want to thank Kyle Rose for his message two weeks ago on gratitude, and I want to thank Tim Schulz for his message last week on protecting the environment. I have heard many positive comments about both of those worship experiences, and I think I have heard more people talking about this worship theme than any of our others. I have found people looking at the banner, keeping the bulletin covers, even putting pictures of it on social media. It seems to be resonating with people - the ways that we are called to be the church.

We conclude the series today with our last phrase: “Fight for the Powerless.” Next week the season of Lent begins, and our theme for Lent this year is “Grace Wins.”

Let's spend a few minutes this morning on three words. The first is "salvation" - it's not a word I use a lot. It sounds old-fashioned. It may bring to mind a fire and brimstone preacher banging on the pulpit telling you to repent and be saved from the hellfires of eternal damnation. And that's one way to think of being saved; it's not one that's particularly biblical, though. The Bible is much more focused on how people live in the present.

The Bible does talk about our need for salvation, though. Throughout the Bible, God works to save people. God worked through Moses to save the people of Israel from slavery and oppression at the hands of the Pharaoh. The Ten Commandments were given as a way to save people from lives of chaos - they are a prescription for a harmonious and fair way to live. When people began to wander away from the Ten Commandments, God worked through the prophets to save them again. The prophetic messages continually called people to remember who they are, to remember that God loves them so much that God wants them to live lives of wholeness and peace.

One of the purposes for Jesus' life and ministry was to save poor and downtrodden people from the oppressive practices of the Roman Empire. And while he was about that work of salvation, along the way he saved others. He saved those condemned to a life of begging by healing them and returning them to their communities. He saved those who were excluded and shamed by accepting them. He saved those who were hungry by feeding them.

The Bible is a story of salvation, multiple stories of salvation which cause us to ask the question, "From what do I need to be saved?"

We recognize our need for salvation when we are aware of our faults and our shortcomings which keep us from living the abundant life God has in mind for us. From what do you need to be saved?

I want to be saved from selfishness, because when I'm thinking about myself and my own comforts and pleasures - those are the times when I feel furthest away from God. I want to be saved from a preoccupation with my own happiness.

From what do you want to be saved? From an addiction that is dragging you down, and your loved ones along with it? Do you long to be saved from your worries about money, your desire for more power or status? We all need to be saved FROM something.

Later in worship, when we receive new members, we will recite the UCC statement of faith which includes this sentence: God seeks to save us from aimlessness - from an endless lost wandering, not a pleasant wandering, or an exploring - but an endless lost wandering - a life without meaning or purpose. And sin - another old-fashioned word which means "anything that separates us from God." So laziness can be a sin, but so can ambition. Wealth can be a sin if it separates us from God, but so can bragging about how poor you are. We all need to be saved from aimlessness and sin.

In Kyle's message two weeks ago, he talked about how gratitude can save us, and last week, Tim talked about how the work of saving the planet can save us spiritually.

Salvation is our first word, and the second is Transformation. If salvation is a look back at what we want to be rid of, transformation is the promise of hope and new life in the future. We are saved from the old ways and transformed into new beings. The biblical story of transformation is seen when Abram is given a new name, a new family and a new homeland.

Many churches on this day are reading the story of the transfiguration in the New Testament, when Jesus goes up on top of a mountain with Peter, James and John and suddenly his appearance changes as he is bathed in a bright light; it's a story that symbolizes God's ability to change us when we are in God's presence.

In the book of Acts, a man is transformed from a persecutor named Saul into a church-builder, a discipleship coach named Paul.

The resurrection is the preeminent story of transformation, but it is a theme throughout the entire biblical narrative. God is found in the midst of change; God brings about change, transforming people from lives of aimlessness and sin to lives of meaning, purpose and joy.

The first word is salvation, the second word is transformation, and the third word is justice. Everywhere in the Bible, one thing is made clear: those who have are called to share. Those who have time are called to share it with those who don't. Those who have money are called to share it with those who don't. Those who have experienced love are called to share it with those who haven't yet. And if you have power, or access to power, you are called to advocate on behalf of those who don't. No one's success is complete if it doesn't also involve the process of helping to raise up the lives of others.

Salvation and transformation are only real, only meaningful, when they are shared. There is no individual, personal salvation; it is always and only communal. God doesn't save or change people simply for the sake of their personal happiness; it necessarily involves the common good.

Throughout the Old Testament, you read that the people of Israel are reminded, time and time again, to care for the widows and orphans in their midst. There is no wholeness, no wellness, no shalom if whole groups of people are abandoned, alone and suffering. Either the whole community is rising together, or the whole community will fall.

In the passage we heard this morning from Exodus, Moses is running away from Egypt. He is in a time of transition, in need of both salvation and transformation. In a strange place, he sees people more vulnerable even than he is - seven women who are being harassed by shepherds. Moses comes to the women's defense, even though he doesn't know them. He is in a position of power and influence, because of his gender, and he uses it for good. It's a small story, one frankly I wasn't familiar with before. As a result of his actions, Moses comes to receive a new family, a new place in the world.

We live in a world where access to justice is far from equitable. There are few people I admire more than those attorneys who spend their lifetimes advocating for those people who are wrongly imprisoned. One of my college friends is involved in what is called The Innocence Project. It is shocking how many people in this country are sentenced, even to death, on little evidence. Most of them are people who could not afford the best legal representation. I highly recommend the book Just Mercy by Bryan

Stevenson who has argued in front of the Supreme Court, on behalf of – among others – children and those who are mentally ill who are sentenced to death. He gave a TED talk that has been viewed 5 million times, in which he says this: “We will ultimately not be judged by our technology, we won’t be judged by our design, we won’t be judged by our intellect and reason. Ultimately, you judge the character of a society . . . by how they treat the poor, the condemned, the incarcerated.” We who have power and influence are called to use it for the good of those who don’t. As we fight for the powerless, we will find that we, too, will benefit, for when we are working for justice we will find ourselves closer to God, saved from that aimless wandering, saved for a purpose.

Can you see how this is all seamless? We are saved FROM that which we need to be rid of - we cast off our old life and embrace the newness of transformation and change - and out of gratitude for our new beginning, for the chance to walk in close harmony with God and with each other, we naturally want to share with those around us. We naturally want to be more generous, we naturally want to work to protect the environment. We put our ideals into action. It’s what it means to BE the church.