

Sermon Preached January 26, 2014
Year A, Epiphany 3
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

A young woman went to her doctor complaining of pain. “Where are you hurting?” asked the doctor. “You have to help me, I hurt all over,” said the woman. “What do you mean, all over?” asked the doctor, “be a little more specific.” The woman touched her right knee with her index finger and yelled, “Ow, that hurts.” Then she touched her left cheek and again yelled, “Ouch! That hurts, too.” Then she touched her right earlobe, “Ow, even THAT hurts,” she cried. The doctor checked her thoughtfully for a moment and told her his diagnosis, “You have a broken finger.”¹

¹ <http://www.workjoke.com/doctors-jokes.html>

Today's lessons are about healing. Healing? You might ask? They talk more about light in the darkness and calling of disciples than healing. So let me explain my thinking.

We will start with the question: why did Jesus come to earth? Why did God decide to take on human form and enter into the creation? Most Christians would answer "to save us." In the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians he writes, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." So, Jesus died on the cross to save us. Many Christians would say "Jesus came to earth to die for our sins." And the definition of salvation means "going to heaven when we die." I would say that while neither of these statements is technically wrong, they are only a small part of a much larger story. And by omitting the larger story, those bits and pieces are understood incorrectly, and get distorted. A careful reading of today's scripture will give us a sense of this larger story and point us more closely to the truth.

Just to give you a brief sweep of the context of today's passage. We are at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. John the Baptist has been proclaiming "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" and baptizing people in the Jordan River. Jesus himself came to be baptized by John, was then tempted in the wilderness, and now today learns that John had been arrested. So Jesus travels to Capernaum where he begins to proclaim, the exact message that John did, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus then calls some disciples after which he traveled throughout Galilee "teaching... and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." There is a lot of talk about the Kingdom in these couple of chapters, (both John and Jesus are proclaiming it) and Jesus doesn't seem to be rushing to Jerusalem to get crucified. So maybe Jesus' mission is not simply dying on a cross, but includes proclaiming the kingdom.

If we glance through the rest of the gospel of Matthew we seem to get more of the same. Lots of talk about the Kingdom of Heaven. Lots of teaching. Lots of healing. Lots of mercy and forgiveness. In fact, the vast majority of the Jesus story seems to be concerned with these things.

So let's define some of our terms. "Kingdom of Heaven". This one can be confusing. The term "Kingdom of Heaven" is found only in the gospel of Matthew. In the other gospels it is referred to as the "Kingdom of God." It makes it sound as if there are two different places, and in this case Jesus is talking about Heaven, the place we go when we die.

Actually, the gospel of Matthew was written for Christians of Jewish descent. Among Jewish people there are restrictions for using the word for "God" too frequently. So Matthew changes the phrase "Kingdom of God" to "Kingdom of Heaven" to make it more palatable to his audience. The two are exactly the same thing. But Jesus is not talking about the place we go when we die. When he proclaims the Kingdom of Heaven, he is talking about God's reign which starts in this life.

It is the place where peace and justice prevail, where all of creation is made whole.

Sin. I've talked about this one before and I bring it up a lot because it has so much baggage with it and is often misunderstood. I'd like to reclaim it because it is such a useful word! "Sin is treating any part of God's good creation as less valuable than it really is." Sin isn't about being a bad person. Sin means not recognizing the value of all that God has made: that includes all people, no matter how unpleasant. That includes all creation, including plants, animals, and the earth. That includes ourselves. Pollution, animal abuse, racism, shaming yourself are therefore all various forms of sin.

Salvation. And this is the heart of the matter. Salvation from what? And how does Jesus accomplish that? As was noted earlier, some would say that what we are being saved from is hell in the next life. And some would point to his death on the cross as the only saving act he ever did.

As though the rest of Jesus' life was just an insignificant prelude to the main act.

But if we look at what Jesus actually does throughout the gospels and how the word "saved" is used in scripture, we see a very different picture emerging. While his work on the cross is also important, Jesus spends most of his earthly existence teaching, healing, forgiving, and proclaiming. He teaches people about right living. How to live together in peace and justice with mercy and forgiveness. He heals the sick. He teaches people about the true nature of God. He proclaims the coming Kingdom of God. The great commandment is to love God and love neighbor. Creating right relationships. Forgiveness involves healing relationships. Throughout his human existence, Jesus heals people body, mind, and spirit. Then his death on the cross is to take away our sin, our disharmony with God and creation, that we may be healed and become fully who it we were created to be. He takes sin on himself that they may die with him. The terrible things we do to ourselves or others, intentionally or unintentionally. Wars, lies, disease, poverty, injustice.

They die with him and are transformed. His resurrection shows that there is no evil or death which cannot be healed by God, and that we too can partake of this healing and restoration.

One other key thing to note when discussing the word “salvation” is that the word in Greek is “sozo.” It is often usually translated as “saved.” But, it has other meanings including “healed,” “made well,” “made whole,” “to be delivered from,” and sometimes even “forgiven.” Just a couple of chapters prior to our reading the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear a son, and then says, “he will save his people from their sins.” But it could just as legitimately be translated, “he will heal his people from their sins.” In Greek, the word for “save” and the word for “heal” are the same word.

There once was a cartoon where an elderly woman is standing at the church door talking to the pastor. Her remark, as she hands a thick manila folder to him, is: “My doctor copied my chart, complete with medicines and prognosis...just copy it into the prayer list, please.”² Yes, Christian healing includes physical healing, but it is about much, much more.

Dying on the cross, resurrection, healing, restoration, reconsolidation, being made whole, forgiveness are all forms of healing. The Kingdom of God is simply the world healed. The world as it was created to be.

So to sum up: Yes, Jesus died on the cross for our sins that we can go to heaven. But a more accurate way to articulate it is “The whole

² <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/humorous-illustrations-about-healing.asp>

package, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, are all part of his saving work. And that salvation means we are to be healed from our pain and suffering found in body, mind, and spirit, so that the Kingdom of God may be realized 'on earth as it is in heaven.'"

In Exodus 15:26 God says, "I am the Lord who heals you."

"This is his salvation--healing all the wounds of sin, curing the sickness of evil, and restoring us [and all creation] once more into full [physical, psychological, social, emotional] and spiritual health. ... Salvation is healing."³

Amen.

³ <http://www.pineknoll.org/jonathan/salvheal.html>