

Personal Salvation

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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1 Peter 1:3-9

God be praised! the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who, because of his great mercy and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, caused us to be born all over again into a living hope, into an undying, undefiled, unfading inheritance, preserved in heaven for you who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

You are overjoyed because of this, even if you've had to be saddened for a little while now by various trials, trials designed to prove the genuineness of your faith – genuine faith is of greater value than perishable gold, which itself is proved genuine by fire – for praise and glory and honor when Christ is revealed, whom you love, though you haven't seen him, in whom you have faith, for now without seeing, and an inexpressible, glorious joy over receiving the goal of your faith, which is your own salvation.

Children's Story

Sammy the squirrel was missing. He hadn't been home for two and a half days. His mother was beside herself with worry.

But she didn't stay home. No, she did what any mother would do. She went looking for a missing squirrel.

She looked high, and she looked low. She looked from one end of the Great Forest to the other, looked for a missing squirrel.

She found four of them. She also found five missing chipmunks, seventeen missing crickets, and one missing skunk. (She was good at finding, Mrs. Squirrel was.) She put them all in her missing animal bag.

When she looked in the bag at the end of the day, she was happy to find Sammy there with the other missing animals.

Wait a minute.

That story's not right!

Sammy's mother wouldn't know that she had found Sammy? She would be surprised when she looked into her missing animal bag?

I don't think so.

If Sammy were missing, she would go all through the Great Forest, calling him by name. She would keep calling his name until she found him. And she would know when she found him. And she would throw her short squirrel arms around Sammy and take him home, singing happy songs all the way.

Maybe Mrs. Squirrel would find some other missing animals, too. But with Sammy missing, no one would matter as much as him, the one she would be calling by name.

Sermon

Most every week I prepare a translation of the Bible text I'll be preaching on. Some weeks, the translation work is easy: the forms and meanings of the Hebrew or Greek words are familiar; the grammatical structure is straightforward; the sentences and paragraphs and even the whole text are not too long. Some weeks, though, for all the opposite reasons, the translation work is difficult.

This week's translation was difficult for an additional reason: a troublesome word, a word that made me uncomfortable. I'm preaching 1 Peter today because of that troublesome word. (When a Bible text makes me uncomfortable, I know that's the one I ought to preach.)

Actually, I was uncomfortable with 1 Peter before I even opened my Greek New Testament. That troublesome word! In nearly every English translation, it's the last word in the text. That troublesome word! In nearly every English translation, it's translated the same way: *souls*. *Souls*, with all that word suggests about *individual, immaterial salvation*. Notions of *individual, immaterial salvation* make me uncomfortable. So I knew what I needed to preach on today. First Peter was calling to me!

The English word *soul* is very suggestive. When I hear *soul*, I think *body and soul*. *Body and soul* is the whole person. *Body and soul* is the whole me, as in "I belong *body and soul* to my faithful Savior" (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, A1). My body is, obviously, the physical, material part of me. The part that sees and is seen. The part that touches and is touched. The part that smells and . . . smells. The part that eats and sleeps. The part that breathes. The part that dies. That's my *body*.

My *soul*, on the other hand, is the immaterial, spiritual part of me. The part only God can see. The part only God can touch. The part whose life and breath is the Spirit of God. To say *soul* is to suggest all that *body and soul* stuff – and more!

All those Bible translations, then, are very suggestive. In their telling, Peter says that "the outcome of your faith [is] the salvation of your souls." That the end and goal of your faith, what your faith is aiming at from beginning to end, is your *soul's* rescue. So that the part of you that doesn't breathe, the part of you that doesn't die, somehow winds up with God.

I think it's past time for us to use a different word than *soul*. The Greek word *ψυχή*, the word usually translated *soul*, has deeper and broader associations than the word *soul* carries. In essence, I would want to put it this way: the *ψυχή* is not a *soul*, not in the sense of an immaterial component of a person, something that goes along with a body (and maybe along with a spirit, too). The *ψυχή* is the person, in the fullest sense, the person who is material and immaterial, physical and spiritual.

So, when Peter speaks of the salvation of your *ψυχή*, it's not part of you that is saved, some weightless, immaterial essence. It's you who are saved, you the person, the fullness of who you are. You are gathered into the family of God, given a place in God's kingdom – you, not just your *soul*.

So much, for now, for the *immaterial salvation* part. But I'm not out of trouble yet.

As I said, I'm uncomfortable with talk of *individual salvation*. It's not that I don't believe in *individual salvation*. It's not that I don't cherish my own salvation. I do! And I cherish the salvation of so many individual people I know and love. It's a just a reaction, I suppose, to an exaggerated emphasis on *individual salvation*.

- There's the talk of Jesus as a *personal Savior* (or *personal Lord and Savior*). That talk makes no sense to me. Jesus is the Savior of the world, which is so much more than me!
- There's the Heidelberg Catechism, even. Some people have called it "warm and personal." But it could be called excessively individualistic. Is my "only comfort" really only about me and about my state and my fate? That's how Question & Answer 1 reads, all about me!

I have been taught, however, and in Scripture I have seen that salvation is much bigger!

God made a covenant with Abraham – very particular – to bless all the families of the earth. God made a covenant with Israel – very particular – so that all nations would know the he is the LORD. God sent his only Son Jesus – very particular – to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, to rescue his whole flock, to reconcile all things to God.

I am saved, you are saved, as part of that much bigger salvation – a salvation, I might add, that is more than mere rescue. It's the restoration and renewal of all things. It's the flowering of justice and peace. As I said last week: it's light breaking into darkness; it's prison doors torn off their hinges; it's the lame walking, the deaf hearing, the blind seeing; it's the poor having good news announced to them; it's the meek inheriting the earth; it's hospital beds emptied out; it's battlefields reduced to dim memories. And it's all through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which is the dawning of a brand new

sun over a brand new world. To say it again, you are saved and I am saved as part of that much bigger salvation.

But I'm afraid I need to get over my discomfort with *individual* – even individualistic – salvation; Peter has no such discomfort. God's salvation is big. God's salvation is comprehensive. It is cosmic. God's concern and compassion stretch beyond my comprehension. God's intentions outstrip my imagination. But God's salvation is very particular.

God did not send a generic son to the world, a placeholder to fill the category of "son" and to accomplish a vague, non-specific mission. No, God sent the Son he knew and loved. And Jesus Christ does not save the world in general. He does not save his flock in general – as if individual people are placeholders, mere ciphers in the cosmic equation, who merely go along for the ride as Jesus accomplishes his general mission.

No, Jesus knows us by name. Jesus loves us by name. Jesus calls us by name. Jesus saves us by name. You were baptized by name into the family of God. Your face is in a picture frame that hangs on the wall in God's family room. God is saving the world by saving you and you and me and all his children – saving us individually, saving us by name.

The saving of individuals is not the whole story of salvation – which is big, comprehensive, cosmic – not by a longshot. But the story of salvation is not fully told without telling this chapter, the chapter Peter has in mind when he writes of your "inexpressible, glorious joy over receiving the goal of your faith, which is your own salvation."

Jesus Christ be praised! the one who saves us personally.