

Year A, September 10, 2017
14 Pentecost (Proper 18)
Christ Church, Mexia

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul writes: "For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers." My initial thought was that St. Paul may have been thinking that the second coming of Jesus was imminent. After all, in the last line of our gospel reading this past Sunday, Jesus purportedly said: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." And frankly, that seemed a little confusing to me, especially knowing it has been almost 2,000 years since then, and the "end times" to which this passage apparently refers hasn't occurred. So, what are we to make of it? And why did Jesus say many times that the Kingdom of God is near? And my reflection on these scriptures and questions led me to consider my concept of salvation.

What does salvation mean to you? I know that for most of my life, it has been about going to heaven when I died. That was the way it was understood and presented to me by ministers and lay people during my early years in the church and even recently. Indeed, Bishop N.T. Wright notes in his book, *Surprised by Hope*, that "almost all Western Christians (as opposed to Eastern Orthodox) assume that you mean going to heaven when you die" when salvation is mentioned.

And so, for most of my life, salvation was kind of out there in the future. And once the notion that I had to work for it, live a certain way, in order to obtain it was replaced by the concept of grace, it didn't seem to have much bearing on my present life.

Therefore, I didn't give much thought to what salvation meant *per se*. I had the vague notion that it meant being saved, or rescued, but I didn't really think about what I was being saved from or for what. What little thought I gave to it, I suppose, made me think I was being saved from death as an ending – I would have eternal life with God, whatever that meant. And I didn't really think there was any reason to challenge my "understanding" of salvation, or for that matter, that the mission of the church was to "save souls" so that they could also have life after death. And if salvation is about life after death, what does that mean for life now, life before death so to speak – if anything?

At this point, let me share with you a story told by Charles Swindoll: "Dick Russell had a Bible study group. An unsaved man, at the urging of his wife, joined the group and discovered that he really liked the acceptance he found there and especially the prayer time." While he was a member of the group though, he encountered several problems. His son was shot in the eye with a pellet gun that resulted in retina damage. Returning home from the operation on his son, which was successful by the way, he found his home had been burglarized and things were in turmoil. Shortly thereafter, it was revealed that his daughter was addicted to heroin and was out of control, destroying furniture, etc. in the house; the man had to help physically subdue her while the police put handcuffs on her and take her away. Then the drug crowd with whom she associated began harassing the family with obscene phone calls, visits from motorcycle gangs and damage to the home. There was one person to whom he had felt close during this time, his mother-in-law, and she had a heart attack and died. Throughout these ordeals he and Dick had prayed together. But one evening "(h)e came home from work, went upstairs to his room without a word, and closed the door. His wife, downstairs fixing supper, heard a noise, heard words. She went up and listened. She heard this man, broken, weeping, just dumping out to the Lord every ugly sin of his life and saying, 'I'm spiritually bankrupt, I ask you now, (God), through Jesus Christ, to come into my life.' And the wife, on the other side of the door, also wept, rejoicing at what God had done in this strange set of circumstances that broke the man to the place of submission and salvation (-) (a)n answer to her own prayers for his salvation."

Now it is easy to view or interpret this story in the usual sense of a soul being saved and salvation being going to heaven after he dies. But I want you to place your focus on his words to God, the moment his life was **transformed**. Because as Marcus Borg states in his book, *Convictions*, "Perhaps the best contemporary synonym for salvation is 'transformation' – to be saved from one way of life to another." And Borg cites many examples from the Bible to support his supposition that I will not repeat today. Just let me tell you that salvation is about now; salvation is about being saved, rescued, from the things of this world that keep us from true and close relationship with God. And it has implications for how we live our lives, how we view the world and what we are to do as a church.

According to Bishop Wright: "-the work of salvation, in its full sense, is (1) about whole human beings, not merely souls; (2) about the present, not simply the future; and (3) about what God does *through*

us, not merely what God does *in and for* us. ... This ... is what the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit are all about. They are designed not to take us away from this earth but rather to make us agents of the transformation of this earth..."

Marcus Borg agrees, of course. He puts it this way: "-Christianity and salvation – is about transformation this side of death. The natural effect of growing up, beginning in childhood, is that we fall into bondage to cultural messages and convictions; experience separation and exile from the one in whom we live and move and have our being; become blinded by habituated ways of seeing (politically, economically, scientifically, etc.) and (we) live in the dark, even dead in the midst of life; and (yet we) hunger and thirst for something more. Salvation is about liberation, reconnection, seeing anew, acceptance, and the satisfaction of our deepest yearnings. Christianity at its best – like all the enduring religions of the world at their best – is a path of transformation."

I urge you then, if you perceive salvation as being "dying and going to heaven," to adjust your concept of salvation, as I have now, and to focus on living a *transformed* life - a life now where you invite God into your life and think about **everything** in this world in relation to Jesus and what he taught us. The joy and freedom you will receive in living such a transformed life defies description, and you can experience it now. You can have salvation now! The Kingdom of God is nearer than you think.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.