

## **Jesus Saves**

A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
Edmonton, Alberta  
February 22, 2015  
by Carol Penner  
Texts: Mark 8:27-37; Psalm 27:1

This story about Jesus begins with a question. Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” I preached on this passage earlier this year. Remember we learned that Jesus is asking this question in the Roman city of Caesarea Philippi...a city which was famous as a worship destination because of its shrines to Caesar, Zeus, Nemesis, Pan. Thousands of people thronged there every day to be saved, to get one of the Roman and Greek gods to save them. There, in a place where many gods are worshiped, Peter says, “You are the Christ.”

It is in exactly this place that Jesus uses the word “save”. It is one of the few places in the gospel of Mark that he uses it. “For those who want to save their life with lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

These words were entirely mysterious to the disciples. Jesus knew in his bones that a cross awaited him. The disciples did not know this, and even when Jesus tried to tell them, it was incomprehensible to them. This statement, “those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, [or good news] will save it,” is found in every gospel. It was only after Jesus died and was risen that his followers started to unpack what this meant. Who needed to be saved, and why? And how did it happen? The disciples tried to unpack that, the early church unpacked it, the Catholic and Orthodox churches unpacked it, the Protestant Reformation and the Anabaptists tried to unpack it and we are trying to unpack it today. I think in 1000 years people will still be trying to unpack how Jesus saves us, and the way the church in 3015 talks about Jesus might sound very strange to us here today if we had a chance to hear it.

What was Jesus exactly thinking? Our “song of the month” for March will be “Who has known the mind of Jesus?” I think it’s a good song for us to sing as we think about how Jesus saves us. It reminds us to be humble. We do not know exactly what Jesus was thinking. We have Jesus’ words, but sometimes what he said was quite mysterious. We have his actions, as they were remembered by those who journeyed with him, and we have the stories written down in scripture. The church over time has interpreted these words and stories in different ways. Sort of like unpacking Mary Poppins’ suitcase, we stick our hands in and draw out things that are sometimes surprisingly different from each other. Perhaps that is the Holy Spirit working, we find what we need in scripture, in order to help us be faithful in our time, in our place.

What all Christians agree on, is that Jesus did not just arrive out of nowhere with a message of salvation. We don’t know exactly what Jesus was thinking, but we know that he was thinking in a Jewish way, because he was born into the Jewish faith. Jesus did not invent the idea that God wants to save us. This was one of the basic

themes of the Hebrew Scriptures, we heard that in the voice of the psalmist today in our call to worship, “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” In Hebrew thought there was a basic understanding that there is a rift between God and humanity, and that God continually reaches out to humans, calling them back. Various covenants, laws, prophets were all part of working on this reconciliation. Jesus learned this and we learn this when we read the Hebrew Bible. The coming of the Messiah, as Peter named Jesus, was a continuation and a fulfillment of this saving work.

Jesus talked about God saving people in Caesarea Philippi, the exact place where there were a lot of saving options being offered. Today we read these saving words of Jesus. We read them in a context that is pretty different from first century Judaism. But now, just like then, there are a lot of powers surrounding us who offer to save us. We can be saved if we stay young, if we are financially secure, if we eat this way not that way, if we vote for this party, if we join this way of thinking or that way of thinking...so many forces claiming the power to save.

And the voice of Jesus is still heard, and his offer still stands. I personally still hear people talking about Jesus saving us. As a minister, people talk to me about their lives. Here are some of the voices I’ve heard, people telling me about how Jesus has saved them.

A young man faces a load of guilt over a past action. He doesn’t know how to go on with this guilt. He confesses this sin to me, and we pray, and we talk about how to make restitution to the person he hurt. He later tells me that now he knows in his bones that Jesus really forgave him. He can start again.

A woman is on her way to buy drugs to feed her addiction. Passing by a store, she sees the word “Jesus” written in the window. She stops and looks at that word and she suddenly realizes that Jesus can save her. She does not have to go and buy drugs. This woman tells me, “Jesus saved me.”

An old woman talks about leaving a war-torn country. She doesn’t know how she survived. She tells me, “God delivered me, we prayed every step of the way and Jesus walked with us.”

A middle-aged person in palliative care tells me, “I’m not scared to die, I know I will see Jesus when I die.”

Someone tells me how they were in the pit of despair, but that learning about Jesus and following him has made all the difference, “I now have a purpose of life.”

A woman is trying so hard to be a good person, but finds herself continually yelling at her family, treating them horribly. She turns her life over to Jesus, and there is a dramatic change in how she lives her life. She tells me, “Jesus saved my marriage.”

I have also met people who believed in Jesus yet who live with overwhelming guilt and who were unsuccessful at fighting an addiction. Faithful Christians who did not manage to escape the war-torn country, who continually wonder what happens after death, who live with despair every day, and who face marriage breakdowns. Jesus saves, but that saving is experienced and described differently by different people.

There is such variety in the stories I have heard about the saving power of Jesus. Growing up in a Mennonite church, in Sunday school I was taught a very basic message about how Jesus could save me. That was the first thing I learned. Then I went to Bible College where I learned about salvation history, I learned about a salvation trajectory in Hebrew scripture, I studied the Greek word “sozo” “to save, to keep safe and sound, to rescue from destruction”. I read Jesus’ words and Paul’s words.

As I studied more, I heard from the early Church fathers about how Jesus saves them, I’ve read words from Anabaptist martyrs. I observed that my Catholic friends talk about the saving work of God differently than my Mennonite friends, and the people in the African Independent churches I met in Kenya had another different understanding of Jesus’ power. I can’t help being stuck by the big variety in the way we talk about Jesus saving us.

The specific words “Jesus saves” have a deep history in the evangelical tradition. I hear evangelical mission organizations talking about needing to plant “Christ-centred churches”. Reading between the lines, it becomes apparent that they want to plant churches that talk about Jesus in an evangelical way, using “Jesus saves” language of the evangelical tradition. They don’t think Christ is at the centre of other Christian traditions. Yet I think, by definition, all churches believe that Jesus saves. If you go to mass in a Catholic church, I assure you, you could not get more Christ-centred than that, because they believe that Jesus is physically present with them whenever they celebrate mass, which they do at every service.

I wonder whether evangelicals have ironically not yet fully understood how Jesus might save us from the sin of pride in our dealings with other parts of the body of Christ. Historically, Catholics have condemned evangelicals for similar reasons, although I think that is slowly changing. I pray for more unity and grace in our dealings with each other.

We are starting a sermon series where we will try to unpack how Jesus saves us. We are a Christian church, we come here and read stories about Jesus, we pray to Jesus, we sing songs of praise to Jesus...what does this mean? Particularly as we head into the Good Friday and Easter season, we wonder, what did Jesus’ death on the cross have to do with it? How does Jesus save us? How might Jesus save us?

There are as many ways to talk about being saved as there are Christians, but theologians have observed that our thinking falls into certain categories. There are word pictures or metaphors we use to describe the mystery of how God saves us, many of which are drawn from scripture. Certain metaphors have tended to be popular in certain denominations or in certain time periods.

It wasn't till after we had decided on this sermon series that I realized the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference had a national conference in 2009 on the topic of atonement, which is a fancy theological word for describing how Jesus saves us. But something happened at that conference involving a Mennonite professor named Mark Baker, and public apologies needed to be said. I read one blog post about that conference that was titled, "The 1000 pound Mennonite gorilla named atonement". It sounded like a lot of people were very hot under the collar over the issue of how Jesus saves us, and that some people were talking about it in ways that made them uncomfortable.

Perhaps I would not have been so quick to rush into this sermon series if I had known how controversial this was in the Mennonite Brethren church. But I, and all of the speakers in this sermon series, are not here to tell you how to think. What we want to do is talk about the rich and varied ways the Christian church has talked about how Jesus saves us. A sermon is not a lecture, it's a vehicle for bringing good news.

As I've read Mennonite Brethren discussions of Jesus saving us, they often use the metaphor of the diamond to describe this discussion. A diamond has many facets, each sparkle in their own way and reflect light at a slightly different angle. In a similar way, different ways of talking about Jesus show us a different aspect of the diamond that is salvation.

Scot McKnight, in his book *A Community called Atonement*, uses another, more homely, metaphor for talking about all the different ways Jesus saves us. He uses the game of golf. In golf, you use different clubs in different conditions depending on how you want to interact with the ball. We talk about Jesus saving us in different ways, each way is like a club, useful for different situations. McKnight tells of a friend he knows who plays golf with only one club. He asked his friend, "Why do you play with only one club?" His friend replied, "I'm too lazy to carry around a bag of clubs." McKnight observed, "You can guess that he wasn't a very good golfer...." You can play the game of golf with one club, but it limits you. McKnight suggests that scripture provides us with a wide array of images and ideas around how Jesus saves us: a big bag of clubs, a variety of ways to talk about the work of Jesus. We tend to use only a few clubs. Maybe there are clubs we haven't thought we would need, but may come in handy in the future.

We need all those clubs or images as we talk about Jesus' saving power in our context here in Edmonton. Katrina told me that she saw a United Church in Edmonton with the words "Jesus saves" on their sign. Across the street, the grocery store had a sign, "Loblaws saves you more." Does Jesus save us in Edmonton? How does Jesus save us? Like Caesarea Philippi, there are many competing voices here offering to save us from something or for something. In this context, who do we say Jesus is?

What do we here at Lendrum mean when we say or sing "Jesus saves"? If we use these religious words, they need to be unpacked, or else we are just mouthing platitudes. That's also why I am interested not just in theories of salvation, but what this means or doesn't mean in the practical ways you live out your life. I hope that in the coming weeks, we'll help you think about how Jesus saves you, how Jesus saves us.

I am still listening to the question that Jesus asked so long ago, "Who do you say that I am?" I believe Jesus is my Saviour, is our Saviour. I belong to a group of people, the church, that has perfectly and imperfectly tried to follow Jesus who is the Prince of Peace, the Bread of Life, the son of man, the son of God, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Word, the Lamb, the Good Shepherd, the Door, the Root, the Branch, the Vine, the Light, the Mediator. We belong to a community that is trying to unpack those names and that life in order to live our lives modeled on his.

I know that Jesus has saved me, Jesus continues to save me, and I trust Jesus will save me in the future. I have agonized through very despairing times, Jesus saved me from despair and gave me hope and a direction when I thought things were hopeless. When I have been wrapped up in my own failings, Jesus saved me from self-preoccupation and offered me a new direction and a new day. When I have been transfixed by death, Jesus showed me the way to life, ironically straight through death, even death on a cross. This gives me courage to face my own death, and I trust that I will see Jesus when I die. And I understand all that in a community of people that is mysteriously the body of Christ, which inspires me and gives me courage as I make decisions every day. I am so thankful for all that Jesus has done for me. He is my Saviour.

Maybe you wouldn't talk about your faith that way. That's ok...we are not all the same. I think that our inability to be totally united on how Jesus saves us, is par for the course, (continuing on with that golfing metaphor!). We are playing at different holes in different conditions. The course is mysterious and beyond human understanding. I like the hymn we sang before the sermon, "I know not why God's wondrous grace to me he hath made known." (Daniel Whittle, 1883) We went on to sing about how we don't know how faith comes to us, or the Spirit is given. But we sing about it together. In spite of all the unknowns, we trust together in Jesus, our Saviour.

As a community, we come to the Lord's Supper with many different thoughts in our head. Who has known the mind of Lendrum? We may think a lot of different things, but we are mysteriously united in the person of Jesus Christ, whose love saves us. That love flows through us to everyone we meet. And, to me, that is the best news I have ever heard.