

## The Inclusive Shepherd – Matt Zahniser

Readings: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; and John 10:11-18.

Text: Acts 4:12: There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” NRSV.

Early in my first college semester I responded to the invitation of an evangelist to surrender my life to Jesus, who took the long and painful walk to the cross for me. I made the rather painless walk to the front of La Due chapel, and received him as Lord and savior. Some time afterwards, I was given a packet of cards with memory verses to guide me in my new adventure. My text for today was on one of those cards:

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). I cannot now remember all the verses in the packet I was given, although I did memorize all or most of them. I can remember some of them; but I am certain of some that were not in the packet.

For example, Amos 9:7 was not in that packet:

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,  
O people of Israel? says the LORD.  
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,  
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

And thus it only later occurred to me that God was in the story of nations other than Israel and in the story of people other than Christians who follow Jesus!

I do not know when I first heard about the experience of Cornelius. But there were no verses from his story in my packet. Before he had heard about Jesus God sent him an angel who announced to him,

“Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4).

It was several years before the incident challenged my assumption that all who did not know Jesus were somehow empty people.

I doubt I had ever truly attended to Peter’s exclamation when he discovered how God was active in the life of Cornelius, a Gentile,

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34).

Only recently I read John Wesley’s comment on this passage. The founder of Methodism, concluded that among those who have not heard the gospel, an individual will be accepted of

God who “according to the light he hath—and here he quotes from verse 35—‘feareth God and worketh righteousness (AV)” (Works [Jackson], Q 77; 8.337).

Turning now to our text from the inclusiveness of God’s salvation that Peter discovered at Caesarea, we are struck by its exclusiveness: “there is no other name under heaven given among mortals,” it insists, “by which we must be saved”?

It turns out we need a better understanding of the meaning of salvation than I could have derived from my packet of key verses:

First-century salvation on the lips of Peter goes beyond the individual transaction: I owe God a death; I am too sinful to pay it; therefore Jesus died for me and paid my debt. Now mind you I am not saying Jesus did not die for me—only that “a death for a death” is not the salvation mentioned in this apparently exclusive text. It is not the whole-story salvation that Rev. Ben Wayman showed us some weeks ago that the resurrection of Jesus implies.

The context of the apparently exclusive Acts 4:12 is a defense of the healing of a lame man. This in itself offers a hint of what salvation meant to Peter and his contemporaries. Healing is part of the salvation in question here. Salvation is the long awaited coming of the Messiah, the comprehensive salvation of all things that promises to extend even to the healing of creation (Romans 8:18-25). Consider the following passage from the prophet Zephaniah:

I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.  
At that time I will bring you home,  
at the time when I gather you;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes, says the LORD (3:16-20).

When servants of the Lord such as Peter and later Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus as fulfillment of “the scriptures,” they did not have in mind simply proof texts from the Hebrew scriptures predicting that a man named Jesus would rise from the dead. Rather, they were referring to the salvation that would come with the establishment of the New Covenant—a salvation of which the resurrection of Jesus was a sign, a salvation like that referred to in the climax of the book of Zephaniah just quoted, or like the following passage from Isaiah, referring to the suffering servant who Peter now understood to be Jesus (N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* [267, 300, 400]):

God . . . says,

“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the survivors of Israel;

I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6).

Acts 4:12 is not exclusively an exclusive text; it is also an inclusive text. It is both a fulfillment of the hope of Israel and an affirmation of the faith of Cornelius, a Roman pagan who feared God and worked righteousness: “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”

But what do we make of the obvious exclusiveness of the name of Jesus in our text: “There is no other name under heaven, given among mortals by which we must be saved”? Let me reiterate: It does not mean that the prayers and alms of people like Cornelius who are outside of the sphere of the Gospel proclamation are excluded from salvation because they have not heard or believed in Jesus. We do not have to tell believers in Jesus from a new people group that all their ancestors are in Hell!! Please! Does this text allow us as a church to have a theology of mission and evangelism that is congruent with the theology we announce or assume at funerals?

If the salvation in the name of Jesus referred to here is the restoration of all things, the coming of the kingdom of heaven, then Jesus pointed to that salvation when a delegation of the imprisoned John the Baptist came asking if Jesus was the awaited one or not.

Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them”(Luke 7:22-23).

It is this salvation that is a light to the Gentiles. It is this salvation that is both inclusive and exclusive. For example:

One year at a Faculty Fall Fellowship for Asbury Theological Seminary, one of the professors shared very movingly a dream he had during his recent sabbatical.

He dreamt he had a pinto bean in his hand while looking over a game board with nine squares like the nine squares in one of the sections of a Sudoku table. Each square listed one of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In the dream he was charged with placing his little bean on the appropriate square.

But he did not know which one to choose as he felt deficient in every category: love: I’m not sure I measure up; joy: well, I don’t know; peace: I can’t really put the bean there, can I? and so forth. Finally, in frustration he cried to the Lord, “I’m having trouble finding an appropriate place to put my pinto bean. Do you have another game board?” Swiftly the answer came—“In the Kingdom of Heaven, this is the only game we play.” This is very much like the exclusiveness of salvation in the name of Jesus.

This brings us to the Good Shepherd of our gospel reading, John 10:11-18.

I am the good shepherd, Jesus says, recalling Psalm 23. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Do we have to put our little bean on this vulnerable love for others? It appears we do. Is there any other game in the salvation Jesus brought us? No.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. Do we have to put our little bean on the attention needed to know others and to know the Father? Is there any other game in the kingdom of heaven?

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock and one shepherd. Do we have to put our little bean on this generosity without limits, this inclusiveness that has no bounds? Is any other game in the salvation of Jesus?

For this reason the Father loves me, Jesus says, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father. Do we have to put our bean on this unbounded and voluntary self-control? Is there no other game in the kingdom of heaven?

If the answer eludes us, our reading from 1 John encourages us:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. . . . Little children, let us love, not in word and speech, but in truth and action. . . . (3:16-18).

There were three men from Estonia in the Soviet prison camp where Alexander Solzhenitsyn was incarcerated, the Russian writer who later became a Nobel Prize winner. The Estonian Christians never talked about God, they just lived their faith. They were the hardest workers; they went out of their way to befriend everybody. One day when Solzhenitsyn was ready to commit suicide, one of them came up and drew the picture of a cross and walked away. Solzhenitsyn said, “I realized for the first time: that was the . . . place where real freedom was to be found.”

The way of the cross leads home; there's no other game. Amen.