



**March 14, 2010      Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot**  
*Salvation: Who Needs It?*

Readings: John 10: 7-10; Galatians 5:1

If we're going to talk about salvation and who does or doesn't need it, the first thing we need to talk about is what it is we need saving from, assuming we need it at all.

The most well known piece of music about salvation in the Christian tradition is the hymn Amazing Grace. I'd be surprised if there were many of us here this morning who are unfamiliar with this piece, but you may not know the circumstances under which it was written.

It's appropriate that I share this story with you during the preaching of a sermon, because apparently the words to the hymn were first penned to serve as a sermon illustration. What few people know is that John Newton, who wrote the words to Amazing Grace in the 1760s, was an ordained minister. What's better known about him is that for many years he was involved in the slave trade and it's in this context that Newton experienced the grace of which the hymn so powerfully speaks.

The story goes that Newton was a non-believer who had very little to do with religious life. In addition to being an "infidel" as he described himself, he was also known for his stubborn insubordination. All that changed the night the slave ship he was guiding home from Africa, came upon a violent storm. Frightened enough to believe his very life was in danger, Newton cried out for mercy and in the moment experienced a spiritual conversion strong enough to eventually lead him out of the business of trading slaves and into the business of saving souls.

As the hymn proclaims, what Newton needed saving from first and foremost was a lack of belief in God. This was his greatest sin by his account. But beyond that he also needed saving from the way he disregarded human life, especially the lives of those slaves he was involved in both buying and selling.

Now, if you are someone who can identify with being a non-believer who now believes; or if you are someone that has sought and found forgiveness for your own disregard for human life – whether it be your own life or the life of someone you love or work with; or if you are someone who knows you need that kind of forgiveness in your life because you know you've really messed things up; then you are someone who can probably relate to John Newton and the experiences that caused him to write Amazing Grace.

Amazing Grace is all about the forgiveness of sins; it's about the saving of someone who considers their self to be a recovering wretch. That's the salvation that some of us really need.

But it's not the salvation that all of us need. That's not to say that the rest of us have never messed up in life, or doubted our faith, it's just to say that having our sins forgiven is not the transformative experience we need most out of our life of faith. Or if we did at one time, it's not what we continue to need.

What some of us need is healing, what some of us need is to have our eyes opened to seeing ourselves, and our world and God differently, what some of us need is reconnection with our sacred selves, what some of us need is to be set free from whatever it is that binds us in life.

In the Christian tradition, salvation is about all of these things, and more. Sometimes in our life we need one kind of salvation and at other times we need something completely different. Sometimes the salvation we need is individual and sometimes the salvation we need is corporate.

I can clearly remember the first time I had a sense of needing corporate salvation, the first time I had a sense of being corporately responsible for something in which I had no personal involvement. The year was 1996 and I was at a provincial level meeting of the United Church. As part of that meeting, a young man named Willie Blackwater came to speak to us. Willie was the first person that I knew of that had gone to an Indian residential school. For an hour or so, Willie told us about the abuse he had suffered at the church-run school he attended. He spared no details. You could have heard a pin drop in the room if it wasn't for the sounds of people quietly reaching for kleenex as we wiped the tears from our eyes. It was the first time I was really exposed to the Indian residential school system and it was the first time I heard about how much money the court cases that were being filed against the church in relationship to those schools were likely going to cost the church.

I knew that as a church, we would never save ourselves by denying our obligation to pay for those claims. I also knew that there were many people who would never find wholeness in their lives unless we as a church took responsibility for what had happened. I knew also that the church would never be whole either.

I knew for the first time, what it meant to be in need of corporate salvation.

For a long, long time, the word salvation has been connected primarily to life after death. For many Christians, to be saved means to be ensured of eternal life. But as most of you know, I'm not big on the kind of Christianity that serves as a ticket into the afterlife. I don't believe in a divine system of rewards and punishments whereby if you confess your sins and belief in Jesus in this life, you go to heaven in the next life.

But if we don't need to get saved to get into heaven, what do we need to get saved for? Do we even need saving at all?

The English word salvation comes from a Latin word that means wholeness or healing. In the broadest sense, salvation means becoming whole and being saved.<sup>1</sup> Wholeness suggesting a movement beyond fragmentation; healing suggesting a movement beyond woundedness.

I don't know about you, but my experience of the world we live in is that it is very fragmented and that the wounds we carry as individuals and as societies are deep indeed. I am frequently taken aback by the degree of pain with which ordinary people like you and me are living in our day and age. Not people who are living on the streets or people who are living in developing

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, HarperCollins, 2003.

countries, privileged people. Fragmentation and woundedness are conditions found in all of us; conditions from which we need healing and wholeness.

Barbara Brown Taylor talks about salvation as a transformed way of life characterized by peace, meaning and freedom.<sup>2</sup> That, to me, is salvation worth seeking after in this broken world. Not something that buys us a ticket to peace, meaning and freedom in a life after this one, but something that brings us to those things in the here and now.

According to Marcus Borg, although the dominant message of salvation in the Christian faith has been one of sin and forgiveness, the bible actually tells at least two other “macro-stories” that address the purpose and the experience of salvation: the story of the Exodus and the Story of the Exile.

The story of the exodus tells how the ancient Hebrews enslaved in Egypt, dominated by Pharaoh found salvation through Moses who God sent to lead them out of Egypt and into the freedom of the promised land. Their condition was bondage and the salvation they found was liberation.

The story of the exile recounts the historic time when Israel was conquered by the Babylonians, and the brightest and best of the Jewish leadership was taken into exile in Babylon where they lived for generations. A people who were cut off from their religious center became a people longing for a pathway home which becomes their salvation..

Even if we cannot literally be able to relate to being in exile, or to living in slavery, metaphorically we can. We all live in bondage to the Pharaohs of this world. We all know that sense from time to time of being alienated from our center of purpose, that sense of living our lives in a foreign land, not knowing how we got where we are.

In our day to day lives we experience economic bondage, political bondage, psychological, spiritual and even religious bondage. We get held captive by racism, sexism, ageism and classism, by homophobia, by jobs that drain the life out of us and by relationships that no longer work. We need to be set free from narrow ways of thinking, from grief and pain, from illness, from the boxes that we let people want to keep us in.

From time to time, we feel estranged, like we are living far away from where we really want to be – from where we’re really meant to be and we wonder how we are going to find our way back home.

Each of these and all of these are conditions from which we need saving in the here and now, and the bottom line is that more often than not we cannot save ourselves.

We need strength and courage beyond our own capacity; we need grace and love beyond our limited imagination; we need support and encouragement beyond our own making.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, Cowley Publications, 2000.

In our scripture readings this morning we heard Jesus say, I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly; for freedom Christ has set us free.

If you are in need of salvation and the salvation that you need is forgiveness for your sins then you might find that salvation in the story of Jesus who prays for forgiveness for those who torture abuse him; you might find it in the way his followers experience his love and peace even after they have betrayed and forsaken him.

If you are in need of returning from exile, in need of the kind of salvation that brings you home to your truest self, then you might find that salvation by following the path of Jesus, the path of justice and compassion and wisdom, the path of dying to your old self that you might be born into someone new.

If you are in need of being set free from whatever it is that enslaves you, you might find that salvation trusting in the truth of the Jesus story, knowing that you are stronger than you think, that you are loved beyond compare, and that even the chains of death cannot overcome the power and life that dwells in the heart of the divine.

Who needs saving? We all do. And the pathways that lead to our salvation are many. Thanks be to God.