

Graffiti



The words that define our faith have the potential to embody the beauty and mystery of our faith. But all too often, they instead become boundary markers, marking who is welcome and who is not. In this series, we seek to recover the beauty of these words, and through them, the beauty and power of the faith into which God has invited us.

Salvation

Of all the words we've talked about in this series, this word may be the most used (or abused). In fact, of all the words we're exploring in Graffiti, "Salvation" might most fully embody this concept. No other word should sound as beautiful to those who are enslaved to death. And yet this word has become a wall between the Church and the world - evangelists infamous for 'fire and brimstone', threatening people with hellfire if they're not 'saved' and promising that Jesus will save us all from the wrath of an angry God have come to represent all believers in the minds of many in our culture.

Especially Evangelicals have been known for telling people they need to "get saved". And the surprising truth about salvation is that our conception of it isn't very far off. The core truth of the Christian confession concerning 'salvation' is hasn't really changed that much. The essence of the concept is that we are in danger of some sort and need to be rescued, saved from it.

What we'll see today is that the problem with our picture of 'salvation', the reason it's become such an ugly word to most of the world, is that our picture is too small. Our understanding is too narrow. What is Salvation? What are we saved FROM? And HOW are we saved?

As we talked about last week, all humanity has sold ourselves into slavery to Sin and Death. And Jesus died in our place, as our Passover Lamb, to rescue us, redeem us, set us free from that slavery. He saves us from Death. All of these things are true.

But that's not the whole picture. Our problem is that we've reduced salvation just to that point, that moment when we pass from death to life, the singular moment when we are liberated. We ask people when they 'got saved'. We treat Salvation as this moment that happened once, in the past.

The problem is, our lives don't prove this limited picture of salvation. Far too often, Salvation is presented as a magic pill that fixes your life. Marriage in trouble? Jesus will save it. Your kids messed up? Jesus can fix them! Trying to find a job? Forget Monster.com; Jesus will get you one! Have an addiction? Why not get addicted to Jesus instead! Having money problems? Just come to Jesus and he'll make you rich!

And then of course there's the problem that Christians still sin after we're saved. In fact, in most polls, the lives of Christians don't look particularly different from the lives of anyone else. It doesn't look like we've been 'saved' from much of anything.

Why is that? We talk a pretty big game - last week we claimed the stakes were life and death!

I want to suggest this morning that our problem is not that we're telling the wrong story. It's not that we're singing the wrong song. Rather, our problem is that we're not looking at the whole story. We're only singing one verse. Our picture of salvation is incomplete.

As we read the Scriptures, we get a strong sense that Salvation is more than a single point in time.

In Philippians 2, Paul tells Christians - a group of people who has already been freed from death - to

"work out your salvation with fear and trembling." -- Philippians 2:12

Work out our salvation? If it's a single moment in time, we can't 'work it out'. For Paul, Salvation seems to be more of a process than an event. Similarly, the author of Hebrews reaches back into the story of Israel's escape from Egypt (the Passover we looked at last week) and their journey away from Egypt to the Promised Land to echo Paul. Again, writing to a group of Christians, he delivers this strong warning:

Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works 10 for forty years... Who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years?

Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ...Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. -- Hebrews 3:8-4:1

Again, we get the sense that salvation is much more than a one-time event. This scripture is especially provocative in that it leads us back into the story of the Israelites. According to Hebrews, Passover was not the end of the Israelites' journey. Their time wandering in the wilderness was part of their Salvation as well. He suggests that this story helps us understand our salvation better, that some characteristic of the forty years in the wilderness is important for us. So let's take a look:

Israel in the Wilderness

Last week we looked at Passover - the decisive moment when the Israelites were freed from slavery. They left Egypt, the land of slavery and went to Mt. Sinai, where they entered into a covenant with God and became the Nation of Israel. This was their moment of freedom. They left Egypt a bunch of slaves, but they left Sinai a nation. They had a God and Law. And they left Sinai headed for the Promised Land. This was the place that God had promised to give to Abraham's descendants, and so here they came, ready to take it.

God tells Moses to choose 12 men from the 12 tribes - 12 leaders from among the people - and send them into the Promised Land to spy it out, to get a feel for it. So they head into the Land and spend 40 days checking the whole thing out, and when they returned, they gave their report to all the people.

The 12 spies, the 12 leaders of Israel, that travel into the Promised Land come back and say, 'It's just as good as God promised - there're huge and plentiful fruit, it's simply beautiful. But the people who live there will destroy us. This so-called Promised Land will devour us.' They paint a picture of a beautiful land filled with peoples and dangers from which the Israelites will be defenseless. They are prophets of death and destruction.

How do you think the people responded? Remember, they've just been set free from the most powerful Empire in the world. God crushed them with 10 plagues, parted the Red Sea and led the Israelites across (but drowned the Egyptian armies), and led them to and from Sinai while

providing them food. God brought them out of Egypt, across the desert to this place. They're here, ready to enter into their reward, and here's how they respond to the spies' report:

All the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt." -- Numbers 14:1-4

The people are terrified; they start blaming God, questioning his motives, blaming him for taking them out of Egypt. They even go so far as to abandon the whole endeavor. They hatch a plan to go *back to Egypt* and sell themselves back into slavery! Here's what God does:

"As I live," says the LORD, "I will do to you the very things I heard you say: your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me, not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. But your little ones, who you said would become booty, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised. But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness.." -- Numbers 14:28-32

For their disbelief, God declares that Israel will now spend the next 40 years in the wilderness, until everyone who's 20 years old or older dies.

And that's exactly what happens - for the next 40 years, the Israelites live like nomads in the desert, wandering from camp to camp, relying solely on God to give them food and water.

By the time they're ready to go back into the Promised Land, every single person over 20 who was a part of this meeting was dead, except for Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who had full confidence in God (Hebrews!).

Wilderness as Romance

Does that seem like a harsh punishment? As though God overreacts maybe a tiny bit? What's fascinating is that the prophets, and later the rabbis didn't view the wilderness as a punishment. They believed that God had different motives for spending 40 years in the wilderness with Israel, and looked back on Israel's time in the wilderness with an almost shocking fondness and longing. Listen to what God told Jeremiah about Israel:

"I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness." -- Jeremiah 2:2

Jeremiah describes the wilderness in romantic terms; like a honeymoon! And he's not alone. Listen to what God tells Israel through the prophet Hosea:

"I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her." -- Hosea 2:14

Some translations read, "Bring her into the wilderness and woo her again". God is going to take Israel into the wilderness to sweet-talk her.

How do we reconcile this? Clearly God is angry in the text in Numbers, and even the writer of Hebrews says that God is angry in the wilderness. But yet the Scriptures themselves interpret the wilderness more as romance than punishment. And that actually fits much better with the picture of God we're receiving in this series from the Scriptures. A God who is known mainly by his Love, not his wrath. For his romance (in the best sense of that word) rather than his punishment.

The ancient rabbis made a fascinating observation about the Israelites who rejected God at the edge of the Promised Land: these were people who had lived their entire lives as slaves. They were slaves who'd been raised by slaves. They thought like slaves, ate like slaves, lived like slaves. So it shouldn't be that surprising to us that they got to the edge of the Promised Land, heard that the people they were going up against were not just going to roll over and give it to them, and freaked out. What else would a slave do?

They were so scared, in fact, so certain that they would fail, that they glamorized their former slave-owners to the point that they were seriously considering mounting a coup and going back to slavery. They had been freed in body, but not in mind or soul. They were legally free, but not free where it counts.

Perhaps you've heard of prisoners becoming institutionalized. It's a fairly common phenomenon in our prison system - a person will become so used to having no rights or freedoms that when they're freed, released back into society, they can't function. Many former-inmates will actually break the law again just so they can be re-incarcerated.

We humans are creatures of habit; we're shockingly adaptable and will eventually grow accustomed to nearly any situation. And once we're comfortable, we don't like change. That goes as much for slavery as anything else. We can get so used to living in filth that we don't even notice how damaging and painful our lives have become (like hoarders - find pictures of hoarder homes?)

If this is true, brothers and sisters, then this complicates our understanding of Salvation. We can be set free, released, rescued in body, but not in mind and soul. We can be legally released from the consequence of Sin, but still live as though Death rules our lives.

And doesn't that sound like us? Isn't that why so many of us still feel trapped or lost sometimes? Why this story of wandering around in the wilderness resonates so well?

If Salvation is only that Passover change, only that point at which we're released, then we're in a lot of trouble. Fortunately, we have the wilderness. We have that space between Passover and the Promised Land. Between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Between Sin and Sanctification.

The rabbis saw that the Israelites still lived like slaves, that they were unfit to enter the Promised Land. That, in fact, if they tried to enter then, they'd be devoured because they still thought and lived like slaves. They needed a cleansing.

So God took them to the wilderness. He didn't send them to their room, so to speak; he led them there. There was no, "Well, see you guys later! Meet me back here in 40 years!" Even in the wilderness, God was in front of them, always with them.

For the next 40 years, they lived wholly on God's provision. If God didn't give them food, they didn't eat. If God didn't lead them to water, they didn't drink. If God didn't protect them, enemies overran them. This was their story for 40 years in the desert.

How do you think that time changed them? Is it any wonder that 40 years later, a whole different Nation of Israel came back to that same place? Is it any wonder that Joshua (who was leading them by now) could barely hold them back?

These were a people who were *ready* live in freedom. Who weren't afraid to reach out and take it. Who had learned so fully to rely on God that they were completely unafraid of what the future had in store for them. Even though they didn't know what was coming, they were far from uncertain.

This, too is Salvation. Too often we treat that singular point, that moment when we're freed from Death as the end of our journey. But if that really is our Passover, then it's only the beginning. If Salvation is a journey, then we are in a wilderness even now.

Jesus as the True Spy

Could you imagine that our world is caught in a tension between two eras? That the old world defined by Sin and Death, by the Economy of Exchange we've talked about, is on its way out, and God's new world is on its way in? That we are living between the Cross and the Empty Tomb, between Death and Life? Between the Slavery of Egypt and the Freedom of God's Promised Land?

And too often, we continue to live like slaves to Sin, motivated not by God's exciting promises, but by our fear of Death. We look at the world God invites us into, the radically different economy of Grace, and we get scared.

We don't forgive our enemies because they don't deserve it, or they'd just walk all over me or whatever. We know the way that person is treating us is wrong, but deep down we think we don't really deserve any better. We have no idea where all our money goes and our debt is out of control but we're slaves to our desires. We feel dissatisfied and discontent because of choices we've made, but we continue to blame everyone around us. And so on, and so on and so on.

We can learn to live as the freed people we really are. We have been freed from Sin, and we don't have to let it define us anymore. That's what it means to 'work out our Salvation'. Here's what Paul said just before those words:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. -- Philippians 2:5-13

Because he died to set us free, we can follow the example Jesus set for us with his life. We can learn to live as God's children, free from Sin and Death. We can work out our own salvation.

And we're not doing it alone! God is working in us, leading us just like he led the Israelites in the wilderness! And more than that, we are surrounded by other people on the same journey, all traveling and growing together.

We have a whole history of people who have been faithful to God, who have taken this journey as well, to whom we can look for inspiration and encouragement as well! In fact, the author of Hebrews uses that very fact to encourage us:

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the one who started and will complete our faith." -- Hebrews 12:1-2

We can learn to follow Jesus. We can run after him, chase after our freedom. Learn to run unchained by the sin that shackled us in the past.

Because we are saved, and so we are wandering the wilderness of this life with God, allowing ourselves to be wooed by the author of Life, by the one who rescued us from Death.

We stand at the edge of the Promised Land, and we see Jesus. This is God, who has come down to us and become one of us. In fact, 'Jesus' is the Greek form of a Hebrew name that means 'He Saves'. Jesus is our salvation. He's not just our Passover Lamb, who frees us from Sin, he is our True Spy. Jesus himself said that

No one has ascended into heaven but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. -- John 3:13

Jesus is our true spy. He comes from God's Promised Land to us and invites us to come back with him. To step bravely into what God promises. He leads us in the wilderness of this life, showing us how to live as a free person, what it looks like to live in God's perfect freedom. Jesus' name in Hebrew is 'Joshua'. Jesus is our new Joshua, who leads us into God's new reality.

What does it mean to be Saved? It means that we are rescued from Death and have been set free for Life. But Salvation is not a singular event. It's the whole rest of our lives. We have been saved, and we are even now being saved.

Communion

In the wilderness, while God was romancing his people, he provided bread called manna for the Israelites to eat; it's what kept them alive from day to day. It was proof of God's love and promise of freedom.

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." -- John 6:47-51

Manna was a daily reminder for the Israelites that God had not abandoned them, that in fact the wilderness was where he was wooing them, teaching them how to live in his freedom rather than their slavery. This meal we share together is our reminder.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." -- John 6:53-58

Prayer of Consecration

This is the Lamb of God, our true spy who came to us from God's Promised Land and who leads us, teaches us, woos us now in our wilderness. I don't know where you are in your journey, but if you want to learn to live in God's freedom instead of your slavery, please come and share in God's life-giving meal.