

Do any of you remember the children's song about Zaccheus and Jesus? It goes like this: *Zaccheus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he! He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. And as the savior passed that way, he looked up in the tree. And he said Zaccheus, you come down, for I'm going to your house today, for I'm going to your house today! Zaccheus was a wee little man, but a happy man was he; for he had seen the Lord that day, and a very happy man was he!*

I take my sermon title this morning from a theology book by Professor Mark Heim, entitled *Salvations* (plural!), implying of course that there is not one kind of salvation in this world. Professor Heim's title *Salvations* (plural) has the obvious implication that the different religions speak of various kinds of salvation. We could say there are many "paths" to salvation, and Zaccheus experienced one very unique path to salvation, and Jesus proclaims: "*Salvation* has come to this house!"

In our other reading, the prophet Habakkuk said to the Israelites: "*Write the vision, and make it plain, so that a runner can read it!*" So I will try to be plain and clear, even though there are so many nuances to a word like "salvation!" How's this for a plain vision: Belleville could write on our signboards out front: "*Many paths to God!*" I think Ghandi said something like that often. It makes a lot of sense; there are many kinds of people and cultures in the world, so it is just logical that God would speak to us all in different ways, and would bring us "salvation" (or well-being) in different ways. Jesus would have spoken to Zaccheus in a way suited to his particular situation as a crooked tax collector working for the Romans.

And yet Christians over the ages have criticized and dismissed the idea of "many paths to God." Out of genuine devotion, and zeal for Jesus Christ, yet with an overly literal reading of a few passages in the Bible, they will insist that Jesus is the "only way" to know God. I love what the New Testament scholar Marcus Borg said, that for those of us who follow Jesus, he is indeed "The Way," the Truth and the Life, but "that Way can be found in other religions." Sure, it's just logical: Jesus' "Way" is truth-telling, peacemaking,

mercy giving, service offering etc.... and those high and divine ideals are found in the other religions of the world!

We were blessed last week with a speaker for Islam and the Muslim community! His sermon will soon be on our website, or email me if you want it forwarded. He quotes verses from the Koran (Qur'an) that speak of the highest ideals, or divine qualities... One such verse is: "I have made you into nations and tribes... *so that you might come to know one another.*" The emphasis is on getting to know those that are "other," getting to know one another. This is a celebration of diversity in the Koran. Those extremists who take some passage out of context in order to kill the other are insanely distorting the intent of Islam, a word which in itself means PEACE. ... Salaam, Shalom, Islam... etc. We know that Christians also had violent terrorists in Holy Wars and Crusades, not to mention more recently the KKK, or Christian nationalists, who think they can maim or kill in the name of Christ.

Back to the story about Zaccheus: If there is a plain message or vision that could be written large, it could be: Zaccheus was "saved," by turning from a cheat to a philanthropist... by making monetary amends and becoming generous... or simply, by repenting and changing his life. The conversations between Jesus and Zaccheus are total speculation. I've read moving sermons like: When Jesus stayed at Zaccheus' house, Zaccheus saw the radiant face of divine love and forgiveness, so that he was saved by receiving Jesus into his life! And things like: Jesus saw the real Zaccheus, and the potential in Zaccheus, so Zaccheus allowed his true self and potential to come forth. But all we really know for sure is that Zaccheus was a despised and crooked collector of taxes who then gave back all he had cheated, plus extra! Salvation for Zaccheus was a total turn around, a total change of life, with actions to prove it! The Zaccheus story proves to me that even in the Christian scriptures there are many paths of salvation.

Perhaps because as a Spanish teacher I visited Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, and Mexico, when I think of "salvation," I really like the synonym "Liberation." Liberation theology has been championed by many Latin American spiritual leaders who speak up for the impoverished and oppressed

in their countries. They insist that salvation is not just something to look forward to after we die, but that salvation, if it is to be real, must be something that starts NOW, in this world! They insist that Jesus was radically and prophetically an advocate for those in poverty. For many Latin Americans, salvation is getting out from under the grip of dictators, getting out from under the cycle of poverty, escaping the violence of gang rule and drug lords. For many, salvation might be encountering a system across the Rio Grande that at least tries to hear their story, their cries for a better life. The one who truly hears their cries might be for them the incarnation of Jesus' spirit... for as Jesus said in the parable of the sheep and the goats, "when you have helped the "least of these" you have helped me."

And of course, many followers of Jesus experience "salvation" in the sense of feeling forgiven and set free from sin (paths of destruction). One Christian psychologist writes about lives of addiction and how the Way of Christ is indeed freeing. He describes how all the families of the Bible have some sort of dysfunction, some painful struggle or hurt. He describes the burden of carrying around "shame," bred from the false idea that spirituality means perfection, having no problems. He shows how Jesus' Way is always compassionate, understanding and freeing, full of Grace that frees us for new life and new starts in life. The most famous song about this, of course, is Amazing Grace, whose composer, John Newton we know was captain of a slave ship. We know that he turned his life around in the stillness of the night saying his prayers and realizing what a "wretch" he was in leading the slave trade. John Newton's experience of Grace is an example of an *inner* salvation, a change of *heart*, that became evident in an *outward* change of *life*. There are many paths of salvation, many salvations, and we who follow Jesus know that he met different people with different modes of salvation.

One thing I want to be clear about: The word "salvation" comes from a Greek root meaning Healing, or Salve. So really, a great synonym for salvation is "Well-being." In that sense, salvation will always look and feel like peace and love. Also I want to underscore that Salvation is a *process*. Some Christians can pinpoint the hour and day that they turned their life around and

turned it over to God, as with John Newton and his Amazing Grace. But for them, and for others who speak of gradual growth in God, salvation as healing and well-being will always be a *process*. So if you are ever asked “Have you been saved?” I think a great answer is, “Sure, and I will always need to be saved.” At different times of our lives, there will be different modes of salvation to bring us to greater well-being, wholeness.

If I had only one billboard in which to write a vision about salvation, and make it “plain and large so that a runner can read it,” I think I would write: MAKING PEACE IN ALL RELATIONSHIPS. (“Blessed are the peacemakers” was a central point in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount!) This means making peace in our interpersonal scuffles, our interreligious misunderstandings, our intercultural differences, and our international relations. This is not limited to Jesus’ followers. The *Judeo-Christian* path that I know is full of repentance and forgiveness. The *Islamic* faith is always speaking of God “the Most Merciful.” And Ghandi, who grew up as a *Hindu*, tells a story from his childhood... how he stole a bit of gold from his bother’s bracelet... and when he confessed this to his father in a heartfelt, transparent manner, with promise never to do it again, he witnessed his father, sit up in his sick bed and break into tears. In Ghandi’s words: *He read the note and pearl-drops trickled down his cheeks, wetting the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought, and then tore up the note. I also cried. I could see my father’s agony. Those pearl-drops of love cleansed my heart, and washed my sin away.* A Hindu family, doing the same thing Jesus talked about in his famous story of the Prodigal Son (a gracious father forgiving a wayward son.) Ghandi learned how to make peace in his childhood, just as he worked to make peace between tribes and religions and British oppressors in his world of India.

Shalom to all. Salaam Alaikum. Dominus Vobiscum. God be with you... as we do our best to put forth more peace and love into this violent world that needs “salvation” more than ever!  
Amen.