

## Salvation John 3:14-21

<sup>14</sup>“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup>“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup>Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

Holy wisdom Holy Word.

Thomas Merton, a famous 20<sup>th</sup> century monk and writer, wasn't always a religious person. It wasn't until he was studying at Columbia University in New York that he became interested in Christianity. Up until then, he indulged in the pleasures of the world. He writes that he “walked out into the world that I thought I was going to ransack and rob of all its pleasures and satisfactions. I had done what I intended, and now I found that it was I who was emptied and robbed and gutted. What a strange thing! In filling myself, I had emptied myself. In grasping things, I had lost everything. In devouring pleasures and joys, I had found distress and anguish and fear.”<sup>1</sup> Eventually he found his salvation in Christ, and he became a famous writer and religious figure.

Perhaps the most famous salvation or conversion story is of Saul, who became the apostle Paul, after Jesus appeared to him on his way to Damascus where he was going to persecute some early Christians (Acts 9:1-9). As Saul was on his way to Damascus, “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ <sup>5</sup> He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’” Paul went on to become a great evangelist.

Merton was saved by God from an empty life of solely feeding his appetites and desires, but not having much of a purpose. Saul was saved by Jesus from a life of violence and hurting innocent people. Their lives were saved and transformed for good. Some of us here have had similar experiences, where we were saved from a life of sin and despair and meaninglessness.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Books, 1948 reprint 1951) 163-164.

Salvation is the major theme that runs through the scripture readings this morning. First, let's look at the Old Testament lesson from Numbers. It is part of the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. They're tired. The food is lousy. There's no bread or water. They cry out, Moses, you led us out of Egypt, we escaped, but now, look at what's going on. There's a lot of complaining to Moses and God. The people are afraid. They've been saved from slavery, but now, it looks like they're all going to die in the wilderness. They think that God has abandoned them.

So, in response to the harsh words against Moses and God, God sends snakes out against the people, and they start biting the Israelites and they start to die. The Israelites realize things are going bad and they ask Moses to intervene on their behalf with God. Moses does, and God tells Moses to make a serpent figure and mount it on a standard. If anyone who is bitten looks at it, they will recover. The people who do this are saved.

The Lord intervenes and saves the Israelites from the punishment they were experiencing because they expressed remorse and sorrow for what they had said against God and Moses. They repented, and God saved them.

How many times have we been spared from danger in our lives? How many times have we been saved from ourselves? Our selfish desires? Saved from making mistakes? Or after making a mistake, or sinning, have we repented and been saved, picked up out of the mess we made for ourselves, and been lifted to safety? To reunion with people around us and God after expressing our remorse? How often have we experienced salvation?

And in the famous reading from John, we hear about gaining salvation into eternal life. Jesus is talking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a wise man, and follower of the Mosaic law. Nicodemus comes to meet Jesus at night, perhaps to avoid being seen by other Pharisees and getting in trouble with them. Nicodemus wants to learn more about Jesus, because as Nicodemus said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person" (John 3:1-2).

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is the son of God and if you believe in me, you will have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). It's clear what Jesus is saying here to Nicodemus.

Jesus goes on to say that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

Here, God shows God's love for the world, the Lord shows the divine love God has for us. Jesus did not come to the earth to condemn it and us, but to save us. God incarnate, coming to earth for us, provides an opportunity for us to be saved. Think about Merton, or Paul, because God came to earth through Jesus, the son of God, they

had the chance to be saved. They were saved. Some in this sanctuary were saved in a similar way.

Eternal life, that ultimate salvation, is something that I do not spend a lot of time thinking about. I trust in Jesus, my loving Lord, who is also my judge. It is out of my hands. I trust in God and trust that God has my best interests and my salvation in his hands.

What I get more concerned about is salvation here on earth. Am I putting that same trust in God here on Earth that I do put it for my eternal salvation? Am I giving my life up to God here, today? Am I embracing the daily salvation that a life in Jesus provides to me? Am I embracing the life that Christ modeled for me? Or am I following the call of the world and the endless escapism it provides?

Heidi Gaul writes that when she was a child and she got scared or anxious, she held her breath until she got dizzy or until someone told her to breathe. Later in her life she struggled with unpaid bills, health woes and conflicts that lay unresolved that they quashed her dreams. And she writes that when she found Jesus “he alone rescued me, breathing life into my empty existence.”<sup>2</sup>

It is the same thing that happened to Thomas Merton, he was saved from his empty existence. Paul was saved too. Heidi Gaul. Perhaps your name could be placed in this list too. What is your salvation story? Perhaps you’d be willing to share it with the congregation sometime. I’ve got a good Sunday in mind for that to happen. Perhaps you have a story of repentance and salvation here in this life. Where the Lord turned your life completely around.

Let us all be grateful for the salvation stories we have. Let us be grateful for the salvation stories that are unfolding among us and are not yet finished. Let us be grateful for the opportunity to come today before the Lord and the opportunity to say, I want to know you better my God. I want to be closer to you, I want to know you better than I’ve ever known you. Help me God. Save me Lord, to give myself completely to you, so I may enjoy the peace and comfort of your care and love for me. May it be so for all of us. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Heidi Gaul, “breath,” *Pray A Word A Day, olume 2* (Danbury, Conn.: Guideposts Books & Inspirational Media, 2023) day 40.