

“What Saves Us”
Mark 8:27-38
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
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Scripture Mark 8:27-38

Now Jesus went with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” And they answered, saying, “John the Baptizer and others, Elijha; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you all say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he warned them so they would tell no one about him. Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Woman must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scholars, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he boldly said this thing. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and he said, “Get behind me, Satan! --because the mind is not on that which is God’s, rather on that which is mortal.” And Jesus called the crowd along with his disciples, and said to those women and men, “If any want to follow after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For the one who wants to save their life will lose it, and the one who loses their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose their life? What then can a human being give in return for their life? Indeed, the one who is ashamed of me and of my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Son of Woman will also be ashamed of that one when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

*For the word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us, for the word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.*

There once was a man who lived in a two-story house. The house was near a river and unfortunately the river began to flood.

As the river rose, warnings were given via radio, TV and shortwave. Large jeeps drove through the area to evacuate people. As a jeep drove by the man's house, he was told:

“You are in danger. Your life is at stake. You must evacuate. Get in the Jeep. Let us help you evacuate.”

“No,” the man replied from his doorstep. “I have faith. I will be ok. The flood won’t get me. God will save me.”

The water continued to rise.

Soon the man was on the second floor. A boat was going through the area and arrived at the man's house. Rescuers made every effort to convince the man to take action so that his life would be saved.

“You are in danger. Your life is at stake. You will drown in the flood.”

“No worries,” says the man. “I have faith. Everything is ok. Even though the flood is rising, I will be fine. God will save me.”

The flood continued to rise.

The man went to the roof to avoid the rising water. A helicopter pilot sees him on top of the roof and hovers above the man. Using a megaphone, the pilot tries to convince the man to grab the rope ladder which was dangling above his head.

“You are in danger. The flood is still rising. You will drown if you do not grab the rope ladder. Let us help you.”

“No worries.” says the man. “I will be fine. Yes, the flood is higher but I have faith. God will save me.”

The flood rises. The man drowns.

At the pearly gates, the man says accusatorily to God: “I had faith. You let me die.”

To which God replies: “I sent you a jeep, a boat and a helicopter. What more could I have done for you?”¹

I'm sure most, if not all, of you have heard this story before. Often it is used to poke fun at people who believe in cosmic miracles happening in modern times by people who believe they (we?) are more intelligent and more evolved than to believe in miracles. And though there is much to unpack about that usage of this story, including the supposition that one cannot be intelligent AND believe in miracles, today this story strikes a different chord with me. Today I find myself trying to relate to the man in need of rescue, wondering, “am I taking advantage of that which will save me? Or am I missing the signs of salvation all around me?”

But what does that mean? What saves us, anyway?

A Christian answer is “Jesus saves.”

But how does that happen? What is the mechanism for saving? From what are we saved, and to what are we saved?

These questions have caused generations of people to wonder and think and theologize. These questions have been the ground of many discussions and disputes, have given rise to disagreements that have turned into divisions. These questions are central to what we do together in church, and the implications of their answers have ripples far beyond what we can ever know or imagine.

¹ <https://www.michaelhartzell.com/blog/the-story-about-a-jeep-a-boat-and-a-helicopter>

As we read in this scripture passage, Jesus asks his friends, “who do you say I am?” They report on what they have heard from the people they’ve encountered while doing their ministry...and there’s a lot of different answers! But then Peter says, “you are the Messiah.” Jesus, in a mysterious pattern evident throughout the gospel of Mark, tells them to keep that identity a secret. But as the conversation goes on and Jesus reveals more about his purpose to the disciples, things get a bit more heated. Peter, again hoping to give the right answer, “rebukes” Jesus for prophesying that he will suffer. The Greek word translated to English as “rebuked,” was usually reserved for confronting demons—so Peter in essence was saying that Jesus was not in his right mind, that he was possessed, as he predicted the coming martyrdom. Suffering wasn’t part of a savior’s image! What a horrible thought, that this kind and generous teacher and healer would suffer at the hands of empire!

Then Jesus says those famous words, those harsh words, those challenging words: “get behind me, Satan!” Jesus turns the rebuke back on Peter, who having identified Jesus correctly as “Messiah” completely misses the meaning of that identity as Jesus reveals practically what the consequences of that identity will be. Peter’s faith in Jesus was in the right place, but he was interpreting the signs differently than Jesus intended.

Elisabeth Johnson writes in a commentary on this passage,

“Jesus’ response to Peter is harsh: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mark 8:33). This is one of those moments in Scripture that highlights the vast distance between us and God. Though Jesus is God with us, we cannot tame him or make him over into our image. We would like a savior who is a winner, and one who makes us winners, but Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers. He will allow himself to be judged and condemned as a blasphemer...He will allow himself to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal by the Romans.

And that’s not all. Jesus actually expects his disciples to follow him on this path of suffering and death...Here I think it is important to be clear about what Jesus means by taking up the cross. He is not talking about the suffering that is simply part of life in a broken world — everything from annoying neighbors to serious illness to natural disasters. Neither is he telling us to seek out suffering or martyrdom. Jesus himself did not seek it, but he foresaw that it would be the inevitable outcome of his mission.

Jesus speaks of losing our lives for his sake, and for the sake of the gospel. Taking up our cross means being willing to suffer the consequences of following Jesus faithfully, whatever those consequences might be. It means putting Jesus’ priorities and purposes ahead of our own comfort or security. It means being willing to lose our lives by spending them for others — using our time, resources, gifts, and energy so that others might experience God’s love made known in Jesus Christ.”²

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-mark-827-38-3>

Losing is winning, dying is living, spending our lives loving others is saving our own lives. The gospel of Jesus the Christ is one that upends what we know, turns our understandings of the world on their heads and flips them inside out, not just reversing the power dynamics of human societies but exploding them all together in order to create a new way of being.

All this for the sake of saving us from...what? Ourselves? Our basest instincts? The temptation all-too-familiar within human community to create hierarchies of worthiness, to decide who's "in" and who's "out," to exclude and isolate and ostracize? Are we saved from some cosmic demonic force that looks and acts like it's out of an episode of Dr. Who? Or are we to be saved from sin—that is, anything that distances us from knowing God and loving ourselves, each other, and the world? Or is it all of these things?

The mechanism of how saving happens is a bit foggy still. I think of it as "risking something big for something good," as my favorite benediction says. Realizing that humanity is not the be-all-and-end-all of what is good and loving in this world. Recognizing that we need help in order to build a community where all can flourish. We recognize these truths, we commit ourselves to risking, we are saved when we humbly acknowledge our need for that Great Love, that Mysterious Unknown, to help empower us and hold us.

But this is hard. Following the Way of Jesus is hard. Committing to Christlike love is hard. Extending grace is hard. Acknowledging the pain and suffering in our world, and believing there is something we can do about it—is hard! Our self-preservation instincts get in the way—we get in the way of ourselves. We think we do not have the time or energy or knowledge or heart-space to dedicate to the work of justice. We think every action that makes a difference is a big, dramatic thing that creates widespread lasting change—we forget that impacting even one person's life with kindness, generosity, and understanding is worth it—and it can cause an earthquake of effects.

Poet Adrienne Rich wrote,

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.”

According to the place and time he was born into, Jesus had no extraordinary power. He was a poor Jewish Palestinian living under Roman occupation. He had dubious parentage. He was a carpenter, and then an itinerant teacher, preacher, exorcist, healer.

But he knew another world was possible. Another way of living was possible for him and for his followers and for his community—a way of living outside of the empire, a way characterized by liberation for all and leadership from those on the margins. Jesus knew, in his miraculous human/divine/flesh/spirit bones that humanity could be saved from destruction, by love. He knew God was moving in the cosmos and in him and in you and in me to reconstitute the world.

And it's hard to believe, and scary, and confusing. C. Clifton Black writes about this passage, "In what ways do we pretend that Jesus didn't mean this, or try to be our own messiahs and save ourselves? On what do we stake our lives? In what do we ultimately place our trust? Our bank accounts? (Luke 12:16–20.) Achievements? (See Matthew 7:21–23.) Prestige? (Mark 12:38–40.) Politicians? (Mark 12:13–17) Guns? (Matthew 26:51–52.) Run down the entire list of familiar evasions and remember how Jesus locks every escape hatch. Doctrinal confusion is not the Christian's fundamental problem. Instead, it is disobedience: our refusal to accept Christ's authority over our lives."³

But the Holy is sending a Jeep. And a boat. And a helicopter. Are we noticing them?

Beloveds, we are saved each time we trust in God over our own understanding, each time we look reflectively at our own lives and repent of our mistakes and wrongdoings and try again, each time we remember Jesus' inclusion of those excluded by society, each time we notice resurrection happening in a dozen different ways around us.

Hear this poem: *Gate A-4* by Naomi Shihab Nye

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning
my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement:
"If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate
immediately."

Well—one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just
like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. "Help,"
said the flight agent. "Talk to her. What is her problem? We
told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly.
"Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?" The minute
she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the
flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment
the next day. I said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let's
call him."

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would
stay with his mother till we got on the plane and ride next to
her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just
for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and
found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-2/commentary-on-mark-827-38-5>

not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling of her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade *mamool* cookies—little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—from her bag—and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

And then the airline broke out free apple juice from huge coolers and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost. ⁴

What saves us is the wind in the trees and a new bud on a flower and a child slipping their small hand into our large one and the wrinkled hands of elders clapping in joy and people taking down fences and birds building nests and plant shoots popping through the cracks in a sidewalk and cookies shared in an airport terminal. What saves us is love shared, grace extended, forgiveness granted, compassion changing us inside-out.

What saves us is these small graces each day that point us to the Holy. What saves us is love shared without measure, as Jesus showed us: love shared without measure for each of us, for all.

May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Naomi Shihab Nye, "Gate A-4" from *Honeybee*. Copyright © 2008 by Naomi Shihab Nye.