

JESUS: SAVIOR FROM SINS

Matthew 1:18-25

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series A)

December 18, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The Gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 1, verses 18 through 25. Even though we are still in the season of Advent, we get to hear of the birth of Jesus this Sunday, so it is a very Christmassy Advent Sunday. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 1, beginning at verse 18, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The angel taught Joseph the true meaning of Christmas when he said, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (1:20-21). That's the true meaning of Christmas. "He will save his people from their sins."

You and I need saving. Do you know this? Do you believe this about yourself? If we are going to understand anything about Christianity, if we are going to understand anything about Christmas, and if we are going to understand anything about Jesus, we need to understand this about ourselves: we need saving.

We are not the way we are supposed to be. And we are not the way we think we are. And I mean that for all of us. We do not truly know ourselves. We think we know ourselves, but we don't.

Now, why do I say that? How do I know that we do not truly know ourselves? It's because our Savior showed up to fix something that we didn't really think needed fixing. The angel said to Joseph, "He will save his people from their sins" (1:21). So what do we need saving from? Our sins. But this is not what the Jewish people thought they needed saving from. And it's not really what we think we need saving from. I mean, we might sort of know it, because we look back on these things in hindsight. But it's more like we know that we're supposed to know this.

Or we know that we're supposed to feel contrition over our sins. And sometimes we do feel sorry for the bad things we do. Other times, honestly, we don't. We might get so used to doing something that we feel a little bit less sorry every time. When we have to confess the same sins over and over again, we sometimes start to feel ashamed that we have to confess the same things. But then, after that feeling of shame kind of dissipates, we might just get bored with it. We feel a little bit less sorry every time, and we forget our need for a Savior.

Or we compare ourselves to the people around us, and we might think that we're above average, below average, a little bit good and a little bit bad, or some other mixture that's based on whatever the median human behavior is. So if we feel like our behavior is even a problem, the kind of Savior we think we need isn't that big of a Savior.

We often feel other problems weighing more heavily on us. It could be loneliness, financial insecurity, political distress, depression, illness, or whatever else is right in front of us. We feel these things, and these problems overpower the weight of sin. Now I don't want you to be burdened by the weight of sin. But of all the problems we feel in our lives, our own sins should be the greatest one that we know and feel in our hearts. And we should, at various times—not all the time, but sometimes—feel the weight of our sins. That is a sign of a rightly ordered conscience. But other problems often weigh heavier on our minds.

This leads us to look for different kinds of saviors. We look to other people or other things to be our Saviors. Worst of all, we look to Jesus to be our Savior from these other things, but not to be our Savior from sin. And I say this is actually worse than looking for help outside of Jesus, because this turns Jesus into something else. Perhaps you've noticed that Jesus is very malleable. Not the real Jesus, of course; he is unchanging. But the Jesus of our imaginations is very malleable. What I mean is, whatever problem we think we have, whatever we think our biggest problem is, there's a Jesus for that. We bend and shape our own false Jesus to be our Savior from our felt needs. So we have the relational Jesus, along with T-shirts that say "Jesus is my homeboy," or, "Jesus is my boyfriend." There's a political Jesus, or really two political Jesuses, if you know what I mean. There's the Jesus of the prosperity gospel for those who love money and the healing Jesus for those who are sick.

Now, if you're paying careful attention, you might be scratching your head a little bit. Doesn't the real Jesus care about these things? Shouldn't we look to Jesus for help in these things? Of course. But we should not look for a different kind of Jesus to help us in these things. We should look to the Jesus who is our Savior from our sins to help us in these things. Because all these other problems are part of the problem of sin. All of these problems are little microcosms of death. And death is the consequence of sin. Sin is the real problem in all of this. It is the cause of all this. And I don't mean that if you are sick, lonely, or poor, God is punishing you for your sins. But every evil in the world is a consequence of the common sin that infects us all of us. Death came because of sin. So we look to Jesus for help when we look to him to save us from our sins. And this means that the final answer to these smaller things will not come until the Last Day, when Jesus swallows up sin and death forever. All of these smaller problems should really remind us of the real problem of our sins. So we should look to Jesus, above all, as the Savior from our sins.

Now, even when we do this, we still might not think of him rightly. We might look at our sins and think, *Okay, I should stop doing that. And I've tried to stop doing it, but I can't, so I probably need some assistance.* So we bend and shape Jesus into a morality coach. We look to him to teach us how to overcome sin, or we seek a little extra spiritual juice from him. Or, and this is the common way evangelicals talk about it these days, we look to him for *transformation*.

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Watch for that word: transformation. Now, it is a Bible word, so we should not dismiss it, and we should use it rightly. But if you hear someone use it more than a few times, it's probably an indication that their priorities are out of balance. The idea is that Jesus transforms our hearts so that we can overcome sin, and loneliness, and depression, and anxiety, and all those little microcosms of death. It is, ironically, a very Roman Catholic idea. Rome looks to Jesus for grace, but it's not the same definition of "grace" that we use. They talk of a substance or a power God gives us to change our hearts so that we can love him more and overcome temptation and sin in our lives. But our real problem with sin is not something we can do anything about. It's not like we can do a little bit, and it's not like Jesus infuses us with the power to handle our sin. We think we can, and we feel like we can, but if we could, we would not need a Savior.

What we learn from all this is that we do not truly know ourselves. If we think we can rise above the sin in our lives, or if we think these other problems are the real problem in our lives, we do not really know ourselves. We don't really begin to know ourselves until we see who Jesus really is, and until we see what kind of Savior he really is.

It's when Jesus is nailed to the cross, it's when darkness comes over the whole land in the middle of the day, it's when he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" it's when he dies that we finally see what kind of Savior he is. And when we see what kind of Savior he is, then we can finally begin to see what kind of problem we really have. Because it's not a problem that can be solved with coaching. It can't be solved with money. It can't be solved by quality time together. It could only be solved by the bloody and agonizing death of the Son of God. When we see the solution, then maybe we start to see what the problem was.

It's like if you take your car in for an oil change, and they pull the whole engine out. Or you go to the doctor for a physical, and he preps the OR and cuts a hole in your chest. Those are moments when we might start to see what the real problem was. So we go to Jesus because we are sick, lonely, anxious, or poor. And his answer is to get nailed to a cross and die. That's when we might begin to realize that our problem is bigger than we really know or feel in our hearts. This is how we begin to see ourselves rightly.

So the cross of Jesus is painful, not just for him, but it's also a little bit of a painful experience for us. And this is why we sometimes, kind of shield our eyes from it. If that's what Jesus had to pay, then I must really be a poor and miserable sinner. And this is true. And this is painful. But this is also the most gracious way to come to this realization, because the answer, the healing, the forgiveness is already in hand. Jesus' sacrificial death for us invites us to come with confidence in his mercy to confess our sins. It's not like God says, "Tell me what you did, and then we'll see what my answer is." No, God preaches through the cross, "I know what you did. I know what you are. And I already paid for it. So come and confess these sins that I have already forgiven."

This is really what Christmas is all about. We see this when the angel announces Jesus' birth to Joseph, the man who would take Mary as his wife and adopt Jesus as his own child. The angel said, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Whenever an angel tells you to give your child a certain name, you can bet there's a good reason for the name. The name "Jesus" means "The LORD," or "Yahweh, Is Salvation." ... So when the angel appears to Joseph in a dream, he says something like, "She will bear a son, and

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you shall call his name ‘Yahweh Is Salvation,’ for he will save his people from their sins” (1:20-21).

That is the meaning of Christmas. Our sin is the reason God became man. You’ve probably heard the phrase, “Jesus is the reason for the season.” This reminds us that all the commercialism, which Charlie Brown loathed so much, isn’t really what Christmas is all about. Nor is it cookies, lefse, Santa Claus, snowmen, or even family. Christmas is about Jesus.” Jesus is the reason for the season.

But let’s take it a step further. What was Jesus’ reason? This is the really important question. Why did he come? The answer is your sin. When you consider the image of this little baby Jesus, know that the reason for this is the filthiness of your heart.

It might not be what we want. It might not be what we think we need. But it is what God knew we needed. So that is what he did. He came to save us from our sins, and we must never forget it. The reason for the season is our sinful and miserable hearts. Christmas is all about God’s love in response to our rebellion.

So whenever you hear that little phrase, “Jesus is the reason for the season,” say to yourself, “Yes, and what was Jesus’ reason? Oh, yes; my sin.” That is why he has the name “Jesus,” “For he will save his people from their sins.”

And so, more than anything, Christmas is about the cross. From the moment of his birth, even from the moment of his conception, the purpose of his human life was to suffer and die for the sins of the world. This child was born under the curse of the law in order to redeem us who are under that curse (Gal. 4:4).

The most appropriate symbol of Christmas is not really a manger, although the manger is a beautiful sign of Jesus’ humility. It’s also not a star or a candy cane or a Christmas tree. It’s a crucifix. It’s a cross, and not merely an empty cross, but an ugly cross with a bleeding and dying Jesus on it, because that is where this is going. That is where this was always intended to go, and God is pleased with this.

This is why Jesus is named “Jesus.” That is, “Yahweh Is Salvation, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.