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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

August 4, 2024

Proper 13, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a](#)

[Psalm 51:1-13](#)

[Ephesians 4:1-16](#)

[John 6:24-35](#)

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Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; *
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness *
and cleanse me from my sin.

We prayed that psalm a few minutes ago and we pray it at every Ash Wednesday liturgy as our way into the season of Lent. It's basically the Bible's classic psalm of penitence. It's unrelenting in its admission of guilt. It makes no excuses, laments the wrong that has been done, and humbly asks God for forgiveness.

This is the psalm David is said to have written right after the confrontation we just heard about in our first reading: after he has used his royal power to sleep with Bathsheba and have her husband murdered, and after the prophet Nathan's parable about the rich man and the poor man and the little ewe lamb strikes David to the heart. "You are the man," says Nathan; and David repents.

And rightly so: because what he has done is monstrous. And when we are the one to blame, when there are no excuses and nowhere else to point the finger, there is exactly one appropriate thing to do, the only thing that will not make things worse and might, no guarantees, but just might in some way start to make things a little better. Name it. Acknowledge the reality, and the wrongness, of what we have done. These are the basic ingredients of remorse: Humility. Acknowledgment of guilt. Contrition. And a conversion of heart and of behavior, amends made where that is possible, with a firm intention to do differently in the future.

This is what salvation looks like for David. And it's what salvation can look like for us, too—because all of us come up against Psalm 51 moments in our lives, moments when we know that we have done wrong; we've sinned; and we need to acknowledge and lament that and turn back to God. This is what salvation can look like.

And yet. I wonder whether there is more to the story. Is that the only thing salvation can look like? Many of us have experienced Christian traditions that strongly emphasize this kind of individual sin and forgiveness as the heart of the gospel. Jesus died for your sins. Accept Jesus and be forgiven. I believe those things are true. But what if there's more to the gospel than that? What if the problem plaguing us isn't only our own individual sins? What if there are other things we need to be saved from?

To put it another way: if history is often written from the point of view of the victors, it's also true that scripture is sometimes written from the point of view of the prominent and powerful. So what would salvation look like for some of the other characters in this story—say, for Bathsheba? We know so little about her: in this whole story she's never depicted as having any agency.¹ She's treated as a pawn or a possession by men. Last week we heard the story of how David preys upon her, then has her husband murdered, and finally brings her to be one of his own wives. Even when Nathan comes to rebuke David, his parable portrays her as a powerless little ewe lamb. What would salvation look like for this woman who's been forced into the innermost circles of power, yet is accorded no power of her own?

Or: what would salvation look like for Uriah the Hittite? He's a racial minority: he is a Hittite, one of the "people of the land" who survived the Israelite conquest. It seems he's been assimilated into Israel; he serves in David's army. But his assimilation isn't complete; they call him "Uriah the Hittite" for a reason. His origins are part of his identity, part of the way he's named. We know a little more about Uriah's character than Bathsheba's. When David tries to get him to take a furlough to go sleep with his wife, thus conveniently covering up David's paternity, Uriah refuses. He sticks to his soldier's code of ethics. And that noble loyalty ends up getting him killed. What would salvation look like for Uriah? How could God speak a word of good news into Uriah's life, this side of the grave or beyond it, that would redeem this story of devastating loss and tragedy?

¹ Bathsheba does play a more active part later, as David is dying, in assuring the succession for her son Solomon. See 1 Kings 1-2. But in this episode she has no speaking roles and we learn nothing about her own hopes or motivations.

In our gospel story today Jesus calls himself “the bread of life,” “the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Salvation is about *life*—abundant life, the life we were created to have that only God can give. And that can mean more than one thing. How often was Jesus’ message to the poor and the outcasts one of freedom, abundance, and healing, while to the rich and the comfortable, he preached challenge, humility, and self-denial. Sometimes in order to live God’s abundant life we need to be humbled and penitent, like David in Psalm 51. But at other times salvation can mean being vindicated and raised up. For a king like David, salvation sounds like Psalm 51. But maybe for Bathsheba or Uriah, salvation sounds more like the Magnificat, the song of Jesus’ mother Mary: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, who has looked with favor on me, a lowly servant, who has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly and meek.”

There’s an Episcopal priest named Eric Law who has devoted much of his ministry to issues of multicultural reconciliation. Eric Law has written that in his experience, salvation is a cyclical process: it’s an invitation into a life shaped like the death and resurrection of Jesus. To those who hold power, the message of Jesus is an invitation to embrace the cross: to humble themselves, to take the role of a servant. Meanwhile, to those on the margins, the gospel is the message of the empty tomb: it’s affirmation and liberation to claim God’s blessing. All of us need to experience both those sides of the gospel—but there are differences in where we need to start. Too often the Bible has been used to preach the cross to those on the margins and the resurrection to those in power. That’s the opposite of what salvation looks like according to Jesus.

One of the ways we're drawn into that gospel cycle is through community. Because it's impossible to experience salvation as a solitary individual. Rather, we're saved into a church, the Body of Christ. Life in community with one another forces us to practice giving power away and taking it up. We wash each other's feet. We eat together. We serve each other. If we take life in the Christian community seriously, it'll put us into that cycle. You better believe it.

In our epistle reading today Paul writes that the church is one body, each part held to the others by ligaments. And he makes a pun. He refers to the fact that he's a prisoner, and the Greek word for prisoner is based on the word for "chain"—he's a "chained one." Then in the next line he calls the church "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And that word for "bond" is the same word meaning "chain." Paul may be imprisoned as an individual, separated from his community by chains of iron. But in Christ, he's held tight to them by chains stronger than iron.

We are the church in this place. We're bound together by chains of love. We come to this table, and each of us gets fed, abundance for all, no one more than anyone else. To Bathsheba and Uriah; to the poor, the sick, and the oppressed, Jesus says: This is the meal that will heal you and satisfy you and fill you with power. To David; to the rich and the comfortable, Jesus says: this is the meal that will kill you, but kill you into new life by saving you into bonds of love with others, so that your healing is tied up with theirs.