

Personal Transformation +  
August 23, 2015  
Acts 16:25-34

This morning's Bible reading begins in the twenty-fifth verse of the sixteenth chapter of Acts. In the earlier part of this chapter Paul has been on an extended ministry road trip. Just before our reading begins he and Silas get arrested, flogged and thrown in prison for casting a spirit out of a slave girl.

Listen for a story of transformation – a story that begins for some in churches and for others in jail cells.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.

He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words, and let us pray. God of jail houses, houses of worship, and the houses which each of us call home, open us now to the power of your presence and to stories of salvation. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Are you saved?

Maybe that is a question you have not heard in a long time. Maybe it is one you have heard far too often.

Are you saved?

Earlier this week when a group gathered for a Topical Tuesday conversation about salvation we had more stories to tell than time allowed. One participant remembered a time when as a young mother she had allowed a stranger into her home simply because she craved interaction and conversation with another adult only to learn the guest was there for her salvation. Her guest was so focused on that goal that just getting her out of the house was a real challenge!

Are you saved?

Perhaps you have seen the signs. They are everywhere. They come in friendly forms like the John 3:16 signs at sporting events. They come in comic book form like the tracts some folks like to hand out to everyone they encounter. They come in more aggressive forms on vehicles and billboards telling all who read that the end is near, repentance is required, and that only Jesus can save.

Are you saved?

By now some of you are tiring of the question. At least a few of you are ready to explode if I ask it just a few more times. Others of you, are all too familiar with a method of evangelism created by the long-time Florida minister D. James Kennedy called Evangelism Explosion. This technique calls upon practitioners to strike up a conversation with others and to then guide that conversation so that they can ask two very specific questions. The first question is "Have you come to the place in your spiritual life where you can say you know for certain that if you were to die today you would go to heaven?"<sup>1</sup>

Are you saved? / Has anyone ever tried to scare the hell out of you?

There is a very frightening approach to doing just that. Hell Houses have popped up all around the country in recent years as so-called Christian alternatives to Haunted Houses. The trend started after the original Hell House in Dallas, Texas boasted of its great successes with

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<sup>1</sup> "Evangelism Explosion." Wikipedia. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism\\_Explosion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelism_Explosion)>

fear based evangelism. Unfortunately, I have been to that Hell House and my experience was so disturbing and disgusting that I cannot repeat the gory details within the context of a Christian worship service. For now, let me simply say groups travel from scene to more graphic scene until they reach the final scene and are encouraged to commit to Christ in order to be saved from hell.<sup>2</sup>

Are you saved? / Have you purchased your fire insurance?

While none of these approaches actually uses that language, the idea is clear. You need to be saved so that when this life ends you do not end up burning in the lake of fire called hell, but instead can enjoy eternity in heaven. The focus of salvation as found in the examples I have shared seems to be exclusively about what happens after this life ends.

Are you saved? / Have you taken time to read the Bible?

It turns out that the word "salvation" and similar words like "saved" appear around 500 times in our English translation of the Bible. And, "salvation in the Bible is seldom about an afterlife."<sup>3</sup>

Roughly two-thirds of the uses of the word are in the First Testament, addressed to a people who did not even believe in an afterlife.<sup>4</sup> The word appears more in the book of Psalms than in any other book of the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

So when these people heard of salvation they were clearly thinking of the one and only life they knew about: this life.

Salvation in the First Testament – the Hebrew Scriptures - has many meanings, including

- liberation from bondage,
- return from exile, and
- rescue from peril.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2011/10/27/halloween-at-the-hell-house/>>

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (HaperOne, 2011), p.38-39.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.44.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.39-45.

Salvation is therefore all about “deliverance and transformation.”<sup>7</sup>

Think about the ways salvation is used in the Second Testament – the Christian Scriptures . . . Salvation beckons us to move

- from blindness to seeing again,
- from death to life,
- from infirmity to well-being, and
- from fear to trust.

These are more than definitions of salvation, they are illustrations of the many ways the term is used in our Scriptures to speak of deliverance and transformation on a personal level.

When we think of salvation or of being saved, we must not stop with ourselves. The concept of salvation includes us, our households, and the whole world. Salvation is political; it calls creation to move forward

- from injustice to justice, and
- from violence to peace.<sup>8</sup>

Are you saved? / Maybe it is time we move on from that question . . .

How are you saved? / How does personal transformation begin?

Did you listen to this morning’s Bible reading from the book of Acts? It offers one of many answers to how it can begin in a person’s life.

The jailer in the midst of his shock that his prisoners have not run away asks what he must do to be saved. The answer is frighteningly simple: believe. Just believe in Jesus and you can be saved – not just you, but your whole household.

Belief has been used as a litmus test for far too long. There are congregations all across the world and right here in our city that require prospective members to sign lengthy statements of belief in order to join the church. Each person is required to believe each and every item.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.45.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.48-51.

This, however, misses the mark. Marcus Borg claims:

Christianity is not about “right beliefs.” It is about a change of heart. It is about the transformation of ourselves at that deep level that shapes our vision (how we see), our commitment (our loyalty, allegiance), and our values (how we live).<sup>9</sup>

The common contemporary usage of “believe” began with the Enlightenment. It presumes a certain sort of empirical evidence offers the ability to see something as true.

The biblical use of the term “believe” is rather different. A better rendering might well be “put your entire trust in.”<sup>10</sup> Or, another way to have our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears hear the word more like 1<sup>st</sup> century ears would have we might substitute the word “belove.”<sup>11</sup>

And the early church uses of the word “believe” is similar. The two creeds most commonly used today in Christian worship across all denominations – stay tuned as we will explore the word creed in a few weeks – begin with the words “I believe.” This, however, comes from the Latin “credo” which is better translated “I give my heart to.” Credo is not about giving one’s intellectual ascent to remarks by affirming their literal truth.<sup>12</sup>

How was the jailer saved? His salvation began with trusting, loving, and giving his heart to Jesus.

How is our world saved? The transformation of our world is all about our work of making God’s Dream a reality by furthering the causes of justice and peace.<sup>13</sup>

Let me get back to the basic question of the day: Are you saved?

Have you said yes to the ongoing work of personal transformation + the transformation of the world?

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Marcus Borg. “What is a Christian?” <<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/11/what-is-a-christian/>>

<sup>10</sup> This is the language Eugene Peterson uses in the Message (Acts 16:31).

<sup>11</sup> Borg. “What.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Borg. “Speaking,” p.52 citing God’s Dream as language often associated with Verna Dozer and Desmond Tutu.