

“Big Love”

Is. 61:10-62:3, Gal. 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40
Christmas I, Hope Church, Jan. 1, 2012, Lynn Japinga

So I'm going to do something a little different today. I'm going to start the sermon with an altar call. How many of you have accepted Jesus into your heart as your personal Savior? How many of you know that you are going to heaven? How many of you know that you are saved because you have had a dramatic experience of being born again?

How many of you wonder if the preacher fell and hit her head on the sidewalk?

That's not my usual language, is it? And it isn't language we use very often at Hope Church. It isn't bad language. It isn't inappropriate. Salvation does have an individual component to it. But the lessons for today remind us that there is more to salvation than a guarantee that your soul will go to heaven when you die. Salvation is bigger than the individual.

Listen to the imagery from Isaiah. My whole being shall exalt in my God. God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, like a bridegroom decked with a garland, and like a bride adorned with her jewels. There's that wedding imagery again that Gordon wanted to avoid three weeks ago!

It was a very joyful celebration here yesterday! A very happy bridegroom! And the joy wasn't just theirs. The grace and love evident between them makes a difference for the whole congregation.

Salvation in the Old Testament is a little like that. It is shalom ... peace ... transformation. Not just for individuals, but for the whole people of Israel. The oppressed

people would be freed. The exiled people would return to their land. God would redeem the people and they would find safety and stability.

The people of Israel believed this kind of salvation/shalom would come through a Messiah who would redeem their nation. The Messiah would be powerful enough to stand up to kings, and bring the peace that they were longing for.

So old Simeon and Anna had been waiting a long time for this Messiah ... for salvation. Were they looking for a baby? We don't know. But they knew salvation when they saw it. Finally, they said, consolation and redemption had come to Israel.

But salvation was bigger than Israel. It had come to all peoples. Simeon says explicitly ... Jesus will be a light for revelation to the Gentiles! This was big news. There are certainly hints in the Old Testament of God's intention to be gracious to all people, but that wasn't necessarily the common belief in the first century. The Jews were God's chosen people. And it was startling, even offensive, to consider God's salvation being extended to others who lacked the history and the good behavior and the rituals. But God's salvation was extended to all the nations.

This text shows that Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews who kept the rituals of dedication and purification. Their religious faith meant something to them. And it would mean something to Jesus. Tradition was important. Honoring the laws and practices of the faith was important. But salvation was bigger than that. Jesus would be faithful to the Jewish laws and traditions, but he would also challenge them when they were not life-giving. He healed a woman on the Sabbath even though he was breaking a law, because healing was more important than refraining from work.

Some of us have grown up hearing that salvation was about keeping the rules. Going to church twice on Sunday, not mowing the lawn on Sunday. Salvation is about believing the right things. But salvation is bigger than that.

So at Christmas we celebrate salvation as joy and grace and generosity. The angels sing about good will to all. We exchange gifts and sing carols. And that's all good. But Simeon, after praising God that the baby Jesus has brought light and glory, suggests that salvation is more complicated than that. Jesus will be opposed. He will cause conflict and resistance. And Mary, his mother will experience grief and loss.

Two weeks ago we talked about Mary being favored. Somebody said to me later that she wasn't so sure about the favored part because Mary would also feel a lot of pain.

Salvation doesn't deny our grief and loss. West Wing episode. Christmas first year. Charlie, the president's personal assistant, noticed that Mrs. Landingham, the president's secretary, seemed sad. She said that her two sons had both died in Vietnam around Christmas time, and that it was a hard time of year for her. Meanwhile, Toby Ziegler received a phone call about a homeless man who had died in the cold. He was wearing a coat Toby had donated to Goodwill and he had left his name in the pocket. When Toby learned that the man was a veteran, he set up a military funeral with honors for him. Toby, Mrs. Langdingham, and the homeless man's brother attended his funeral, while at the White House, a children's choir sang The Little Drummer Boy. The camera went back and forth between the funeral and the choir. It was a powerful picture of how joy and grief come together at Christmas. Salvation is big enough to include both.

God's salvation, God's love is much bigger than we expect.

It includes men ... and women. Old and young. Jew and Gentile. Tradition and newness. Souls and bodies. Individuals and the community. Joy and pain. All the aspects of our lives are caught up in the saving, gracious transforming power of God. Thanks be to God for big love. Amen.