

February 22, 2015 (1st Sunday of Lent)

TEXT: John 4:19–26

TITLE: Saving Salvation – Your God is Too Small

I receive on a pretty regular basis anonymous letters telling me what I should be preaching about. They warn me not to be a false shepherd leading my flock astray. You can imagine how pleased I am to receive such advice. These messages invariably focus on how I am to tell you every Sunday that you must repent of your sins in order to be saved. I know I'm not alone in receiving this advice. I'm quite sure that almost all of you at some point or another have been confronted by someone wanting to know "Are you saved?"

Salvation is a central theme of the Christian faith. The problem is, in our modern evangelical ways of preaching about salvation, we have come close to killing salvation. During the season of Lent, our sermons will focus on "saving salvation." Heather and I will talk as honestly as we can about what scripture teaches about salvation and how it is so much more than just a checklist about who is on the stairway to heaven versus who is in line for the escalator to hell. This topic deserves our Lenten season attention because, frankly, any summary of salvation that can fit on a pamphlet isn't worth the paper it's printed on. So today I begin talking about how to save salvation by planting the first seed I hope bears fruit in your soul—reminding you that your God is too small.

Claudius Ptolemy, among others, taught long ago that the universe revolved around the earth. Nicholas Copernicus, among others, corrected that belief and taught that our solar system revolved around the sun. The book of Genesis has taught for thousands of years that the Creator God is in relationship with all things in the universe—the sun, moon, stars, living creatures on land, in the seas and skies, and human beings created in God's image. Modern Christianity, though, has revised that teaching and reduced God's focus from the entire universe down to the individual soul, suggesting that just as the earth was once thought to be the center of all things now you and I are the center of all things. Hey, if God wants to hand us the Oscar for "Most Important Person in the Universe," who are we to turn down such an award?

I'm being somewhat facetious here, but take a moment to answer these four questions: What do you picture in your mind when you think of church? What race and gender have historically stood in pulpits and told you about God? What languages have predominantly been used to tell the story of Christ? Where do missionaries need to go today to save the world? Over the past few centuries, the answers to those questions have far too often focused on Anglo-Saxon males in cathedrals speaking Latin, English or other European languages, preaching about how we need to go from the global north to convert and save the global south. But the truth is we are not the center of the spiritual universe—certainly not men, certainly not Caucasians, certainly not prosperous First World residents of northern latitudes. Today we are the Christian exceptions, not the rule.

It is estimated that Christianity is professed by about 1/3 of the world's population today – 2 ½ billion out of over 7 billion people. About 1/3 of those Christians are in North and South America—a lot in the United States, but the vast majority in Central and South America. *Mis amigos, el mundo cristiano no todos hablan inglés.* About ¼ of global Christians live in Europe, but the largest number are not in Germany, England and France, but rather in Russia with its Orthodox church. So much for the dominance of Protestantism. Another ¼ of the global church resides in sub-Saharan Africa—Nigeria, Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya. So much for the dominance of First World Caucasians. And there are more Christians in the Asia/Pacific region—Philippines, China, India - then there are in America. So who exactly is the one that should be receiving missionaries?

In a very real way, Christianity is returning to its roots. It was a movement that began in Palestine and moved to North Africa, Greece, Turkey and India. Today it is again a post-Western religion dominated by peoples, cultures, and countries of the global South. The American church, Roman Catholic and Protestant combined, is only about 10% of the global church. Wrap your head around that statistic. If 90% of the church is out there, you may begin to wonder where you fit in God's plans today. You may ask, like the Samaritan woman asked Jesus long ago, where and how is God best worshipped so that we may be saved.

The story in John 4 is a great story. It is worth a whole month of sermons. Jesus surprised this woman from the margins when he spoke to her and asked for water, although men did not address single women in this way. Jesus, a Jew, asked her for water, though Jews and Samaritans avoided all contact with one another. They had strict rules of apartheid, segregation, Jim Crowism, whatever you want to call it. But Jesus talked to this woman and described her life story. And he did so without judgment or anger so that she was prompted to respond, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet."

This woman at the well lived in a world where two dominant religious groups, Jews and Samaritans, were bitter enemies yet worshiped the same God. She had no power or authority in either faith tradition, and yet she longed to do whatever was necessary to be right with God her Lord and Creator. So she asked Jesus, "*Do I worship God in Jerusalem, at the Jewish temple, or on Mt. Gerizim at the Samaritan temple?*" Jesus answered her and the next four sentences are a critical piece of our Lenten goal for saving salvation. Listen.

Jesus first said, "*Woman, believe me.*" Jesus addressed this outcast Samaritan with respect. Two chapters earlier, when Jesus was at a wedding in Cana, he'd addressed his mother with the title "woman" and now he used the same word for the Samaritan at the well. Looking her in the eyes so she knew that he truly saw her and cared for her, Jesus said: "*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.*" The old definitions of faith that limited her should not define how she was to worship God. Jesus affirmed that any faith that treats someone as a second-class citizen is a

false faith. Or as theologian Paul Tillich has written, “Where reverence of God is purchased with the degradation of the human, there in truth is God’s name disgraced.”

Secondly, Jesus, the Galilean rabbi, said, “*You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation comes from the Jews.*” What? Salvation doesn’t come from Presbyterians, from Anglo-Saxon North Americans? No. It comes from the Jews—the foundational truth captured in Judaism about a creator God, who made a covenant with a marginalized people, who cared for them steadfastly even when they responded with rejection, who is known in Christ and continues to be revealed in countless ways through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Next, Jesus named this spiritual foundation but then immediately went further: “*But the hour is coming and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.*” Hear again that critical phrase: *the Father seeks these*. God, like the father of the Prodigal goes running out to welcome the son home. God, like a mother hen calls and spreads her feathers to shelter the vulnerable chicks under her wings. Salvation is initiated by God, by grace, not earned by us. God comes to us. God came in the beginning to create us, came in the fullness of time in Christ to heal and redeem us, comes new each morning to hold us, guide us, and lead us safely home. We are not the center of the universe, but by grace we are welcomed into the embrace of the One who is.

Fourth, Jesus repeated his thesis: *God is spirit and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth*. Must worship in cathedrals or favela shanty-towns? Must worship in English or Chichewa? Must worship as Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Orthodox? Jesus doesn’t say. Let the record show: We are always more focused on religious tribalism and orthodoxy than Jesus is. Jesus tells us to worship God in spirit and truth. This spirit comes from God, not from our own understanding. This spirit lifts us up, never beats us down. This spirit unites, never divides. This spirit brings peace and sets us free. This saving spirit, Jesus’ spirit, is the way, truth and the life. Why would we ever try to restrict it—to confine God to our own limited experiences instead of worshiping the almighty God who made and redeemed this wonderful, wide world?

Ptolemy taught that the universe circled around the earth. Copernicus argued that the sun was the center of our solar system. A 16th century monk named Giordano Bruno believed Copernicus’ new theory and began to preach that we revolve around the sun. And that the planets were heavenly bodies like the earth, and the stars were like the sun, with planets and perhaps life of their own. When his ideas were heard by his superiors, Bruno was censured, stripped of his position, and charged with heresy. At his trial, Bruno was questioned about his theory and its conflict with church doctrine. He replied, “Your God is too small.” Bruno was burned at the stake; his books and papers were destroyed. Yet ten

years later, Galileo would look through a telescope and see the moons of Jupiter and eventually vindicate much of Bruno's teachings.

Christ saves—we do not save ourselves or win salvation through right preaching or manipulative, coerced prayers. Christ saves the world—so salvation has to make sense for all the world, not just for our latitude or biased attitudes. Christ saves the world out of love—a love that crosses boundaries, focuses on the people of the margins, tears down every wall that divides whether erected by pastors or politicians. So let your little God go. Let God be the God who so loves the world. Worship this great God, known in Christ, in spirit and in sincere, humble truth and you will be at peace.

AMEN