



**Matthew 1:20b-21**

*The angel said, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The baby in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”*

**Luke 2:8-12**

*8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, watching their flock during the night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 Then the angel told them, “Stop being afraid! Listen! I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. 11 Today your Savior, the Lord Messiah, was born in the City of David. 12 And this will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough.”*

**The Word of Life.**

**Thanks be to God.**

We are in the second week of our Advent series, *Incarnation*, when God came to us in the flesh. It started with his birth. We exploring the questions of what was, what is, the purpose of the Incarnation? Why would God come to us in the person of Jesus? How are we to respond to this act of God in our own lives today? A main way that we are doing that is by looking at the names and titles that people used to describe Jesus in the Bible. Last week, we looked at the title of King and Anointed. Basically, how Jesus was selected and set apart by God to be the ultimate King, over any earthly king or ruler we may have. This week we look at the word "Savior" and consider our need for one.

I have a question for you to consider. Have you ever had a situation where someone saved you? It doesn't have to involve saving your life. It could be a friend letting you borrow something in an emergency. A stranger offering a few dollars when you came up short. Maybe someone to stand beside you when you were threatened by a bully. Maybe someone to sit beside you and just listen when you were completely overwhelmed by something going on in your life.

I remember a time when I was driving between two cities in the middle of the desert of West Texas, and I got a flat tire. The cities weren't particularly far apart, but there was no one around. Now, I have changed many tires in my life, especially when I didn't have much money, and I couldn't afford to buy new tires. I'm actually rather good at it, but this day I was having some trouble. It was starting to get dark, and there weren't any street lights there. I needed to get this done and on my way.

There's a couple things that you need to know about West Texas. It's flat, especially where I lived, and they have all kinds of material for asphalt with the byproducts of drilling for oil. That means that there is pavement everywhere. I was on a four lane divided highway that NEVER had anything that could be described as "traffic." They needed a four lane divided highway there about as much as they need the "congested" sign down in Imnaha.

So, I'm trying to figure out this weird car jack to get my tire changed, and there's a truck coming the other way. It passes by, and the next thing I knew, it's turning around driving right through the median. He's pulling up behind me and jumping out of his truck. He pulls his *own* car jack out of the back of his truck. Before I knew it, he had the tire changed, jumped back in his truck saying that he didn't want to be late for work. I barely had time to thank him. It couldn't have taken more than five minutes. The funny thing is that I think his name was Gabriel. In a manner of speaking. You could say that he saved me.

What do you think of when you hear the phrase "Jesus saves"? This could include things we are saved from, things we are saved for, and ways we think of or claim salvation.

I mentioned last week that Jesus' name in Hebrew is *Yeshua* or more formally *Yhoshua*. That sounds like the name Joshua, the guy that took over from Moses leading the Israelites. You can hear how similar they sound *Yhoshua* and Joshua. This name is derived from **Yahweh**, the Israelites' personal name for God, and *yasha*, meaning to save, *Yhoshua*. Jesus means "God saves." Saving, or salvation, is an important part of who Jesus is and what he came to do.

In Matthew 1:21, the angel says to Joseph, "You are to give him the name **Jesus**, because he will **save his people** from their sins." According to the angel, what will Jesus do? "Save his people from their sins."

What is sin? Sin is another of those words that you'll only hear in religious circles these days, not just in Christianity. The words translated from Hebrew and Greek literally mean to miss the mark or stray from the path. Truth be told, I try to avoid using the word sin. When you hear me talk about missing the mark, this is what I'm talking about. If we can miss the mark, that means that there is a mark, a standard that we are meant to meet, a path to follow.

Think of a goal you might have. It might be going on a Mediterranean Cruise, getting your cholesterol down, or reading through the Bible in a year. Have you seen the movie *Julie & Julia*? Julie is a contemporary modern woman who loves to cook, and she is a great admirer of Julia Child. Her goal was to complete every recipe in Child's cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in one year, all 524 recipes.

Think of making a list of steps on the path toward success in reaching your goal. In Julie's case, it might be making sure to have the right ingredients on hand. Figuring out simpler recipes where two or three could be done in the same day. You'd have to be organized and keep to a schedule or you'd never make it. This would not be the year to go on that Mediterranean cruise.

But then there is a second list, diversions. What are those things that could divert you *off* the path? You certainly couldn't miss too many days, or you would never complete all those recipes. You couldn't eat out all the time. There would be no weekends. There wouldn't be a lot of time for TV, movies, or other hobbies, at least not if you had a full time job too.

As followers of Christ, **our goal is to be like Jesus**. There are lots of ways that we work toward this goal. We pray, read and study scripture, participate in worship, perform acts of kindness and justice, and so forth. No matter how devoted we are to this goal, we all wander off the path. **One way to understand sin is to identify it as *anything* that deters us from this path.**

We all struggle with this. It is part of the human condition. We have a tendency to drift, to be drawn away. Instead of keeping our eyes on the goal, other things, activities, ideas that draw our gaze, and we are diverted. We are drawn off the path. We miss the mark, and that separates us from God. Thankfully, one way that Jesus *saves us* is through forgiveness. That allows our relationship to be restored. That's the way that it should be with people too.

Have you thought about what it means to forgive someone? Maybe, if our goal is to be like Jesus, we should look at how God defines it. In The VOICE translation, Psalm 103:12 reads like this,

*You see, God takes all our crimes—our seemingly inexhaustible sins—and removes them. As far as east is from the west, He removes them from us."*

I love the vividness of the language here. When God forgives us, this is what it's like from God's side. It really is forgive and forget. When I think of how hard that is for *me* to do. Wow! It is something that I strive to do, but it can be tough, *especially* when I am trying to forgive *myself*. Over and over, I will beat myself up for things I've done wrong in the past. I have to remind myself, *I have been forgiven*. If God has forgiven me, who am I not to do so.

And, I am not making light of people who have been traumatized through injury and abuse. If that describes part of your life, those things were wrong, and they should not have happened. But, there will come a point in your healing process, if you are not able to let it go, it will only inflict more damage on you.

Scripture tells us that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins. This does not mean that our mistakes will not have consequences. The Bible is FULL of descriptions of the real life consequences that people endured due to their sins, against God and against other people, especially in the Older Testament. It does, however, mean that our sins will not be held against us forever, and that we have an opportunity to change and grow in our relationship with Christ.

The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:7-8.

*7 We have been ransomed [rescued, saved] through his Son's blood, and we have forgiveness for our failures based on his overflowing grace, 8 which he poured over us with wisdom and understanding.*

Jesus did this freely because *you matter to God*. **You are loved.** Jesus's birth was an act of love. The last song for our worship today is "Love Came Down at Christmas." God came to earth in the person of Jesus to live as a human being and to be in relationship with humanity. In the person of Jesus, out of love, God made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf. God wants us to know that we are loved. But not everyone knows or feels this love.

There are all kinds of reasons that people may not know or understand God's love for them. They may be going through a tough time. They don't feel that God is with them, or they may even abandoned by God. They or a loved one may be suffering from illness. Financial issues. Broken relationships with family or friends. They may have strayed FAR off the path and don't feel worthy of forgiveness. (For the record, none of us are *worthy* of forgiveness. That's part of what makes it so special that God gives it to us as a free gift.) I know people though that won't even ask for forgiveness because they feel that what they did was so terrible. I've been there myself. Whether you ARE that person or know someone that feels that way. You are loved by God. They are loved by God.

Think of something specific that you could do to show love in the next seven days to someone who feels unlovable. It could be a kind word and a smile. It could be providing a meal. Listening to them, or offering help. It really depends on the situation, but keep your eyes open. God provides us opportunities to show love, but often we don't see because we're not looking.

There is another way that Jesus saves us. The Gospel of John talks about it in chapter 11. My Bible titles this section "Jesus Comforts the Sisters of Lazarus." It starts like this ...

*17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.*

*21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."*

*23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."*

*24 Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

*25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

*27 "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."*

In these verses, Jesus's friend Lazarus has died. After this conversation with Martha, and then later Mary, Jesus brings Lazarus back to life. Lazarus, like other people that Jesus brought back to life in the Gospels, would eventually die again, as all humans do. The "resurrection" Jesus was talking about was something different, something more.

Death is the one thing that we cannot escape. At some point, this life here will end. With all of the things that Jesus did, the ultimate may be that he defeated death. When we believe this, it changes how we look at death. I knew a family who faced two significant losses in the same year, a daughter and a grandmother. The adult daughter's funeral was as you might expect a very sad affair. The tragedy of someone with so much potential whose life was cut short.

Then, several months later the matriarch of the family passed. There was no question that God was an important part of her life. Not only was she a kind and welcoming person, her love of the Lord, her Savior, flowed through her life. As I picture her in my mind, I have to smile. She didn't have a funeral. She had a full blown Celebration of Life. People were sad that she was gone. After all, they loved her to pieces, but they were also happy for her. They not only celebrated the life she lived here. They celebrated the life she is living today.

I ask you, do we need a Savior? I know that I certainly do. Jesus saves us from things like despair and hopelessness, the consequence of missing the mark. But, Jesus also saves us for

things like new, full, and abundant life, both here and now, and into life everlasting. That is why his is our Savior.

Amen!