

The Power of Christ

Luke 1:67-75

December 11, 2011

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I first discovered the purpose of a savior watching old movies on Saturday afternoon when I was a boy. Fairly quickly I learned not to fear when the bank was robbed and the bad guys looked like they were going to get away. When ruffians rode in and took the old farmer's land and mistreated his beautiful daughter, I soon figured out all I had to do was wait. As the fire engulfed the school where all the children huddled helplessly inside, I calmed myself with the foreknowledge of what was about to happen. And happen it always did, right on time, without a minute to spare. Roy Rogers and Dale Evans would ride in along with whatever posse they had been able to recruit and arrest the bank robbers, return the land to the old farmer and his beautiful daughter, knock down the door of the schoolhouse and escort the children to safety. Every time, they would save the day.

As I grew up, I saw this pattern repeated endlessly in books, on T.V. and at the movies. The savior changed from Roy and Dale to Batman, John Wayne, Luke Skywalker, Sheera and He Man, John Shaft (shut your mouth), the A-Team, Wonder Woman, Clint Eastwood, Crockett and Tubs, Jackie Chan, Xena: Warrior Princess, Indiana Jones, Rambo, all the way up to those blue creatures that preserved all creation in Avatar. Although the details differed slightly, the overall concept was the same. People in danger were rescued, liberated, avenged, protected by saviors who rode in, flew in, stormed in, dropped in, drove in and both heroically saved the imperiled and shot, hung, light sabered, bombed, arrested or otherwise hastened the demise of the bad folks.

In the first chapter of Luke, we find an announcement that a savior is on the way. The man proclaiming this good news is just the kind of person we'd expect to need a savior. He's an old man named Zachariah who is a priest in a nation of people who are being oppressed by the Roman Empire. As our story opens, Zachariah's people are virtually helpless in the face of the superior forces of Rome. When the imperial armies take their land, rob their treasury, mistreat the women of the land, humiliate the men, slander their God, tax them mercilessly and deny their children bread, they have no recourse. Zachariah certainly can't do anything. When we meet him, the old man can neither speak nor hear. He needs a Savior as much as anyone else.

The only reason Zachariah is in this story is because he has been chosen by God to father a prophet who is going to prepare the way for the Savior the nation so badly needs. He has been struck deaf and dumb by the angel Gabriel who was angered by Zechariah's initial skepticism that he could father a child at such an advanced age. But father he did and when the baby was born, the whole town thought Zechariah's wife Elizabeth would name the little tyke Zechariah after his father or some other name prominent in the family. Instead, however, she named him John, which means God's gracious gift, and when friends and neighbors protested, Zechariah took a plank covered in wax and used a wooden stylus to write, "his name is John." In response, God restored the old man's ability to hear and speak.

When he found his voice, Zechariah sang a song of joy for his son and more importantly, for the Savior his son would usher into leadership. He sang, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David." Later in the song, Zechariah added "God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, he has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear."

Yippee, a savior is on the way to rescue the people of Israel from the hands of their enemies. Play that Star Wars theme, put the bat signal in the sky, get em, round em up, blow em away, show em whose boss and then we'll all sing "Happy Trails To You."

But that is where the problem comes in. Nothing like that happened for the people in Israel during Jesus' lifetime. He didn't shoot anyone, he didn't blast em to smithereens, he didn't attack, the only time he rode into town was the day he came in unarmed on the back of a donkey. On that day, he simply looked around town and left. He didn't round up the bad guys and hang em, he was rounded up, nailed to a Roman cross and crucified. What kind of savior is that? If Jesus was supposed to save the people of Israel from the oppressive domination of the Roman Empire, he was a total failure.

Of course if that would have been Jesus' mission, he would have had no significance to you and me even had he liberated his people through some triumphant defeat of the soldiers under Caesar's command. Maybe someone would have made an inspiring movie about it like Braveheart or Rob Roy, but really what would it have mattered to you if a Jewish man from Nazareth had led a successful war of retribution over the Roman armies 2000 years ago? Do you think congregations in Jerusalem much less College Park would gather once a week to celebrate that victory?

Jesus was a savior, who was sent to rescue people from their enemies, but the enemies Jesus was sent to save us from are not national ones. What are they? Who are they?

Every time I go through the Atlanta airport, I witness the same behavior at exactly the same place in the terminal. After I take my shoes, coat, belt, wallet, watch, cell phone, laptop, loose change and all other metallic objects off and put them on the conveyor belt and after I go through whichever scanner or reader I am asked to enter, and after I put all the stuff back on, I sit down to watch a scene unfold that slightly amuses me every time. After travelers pass through security, a row of escalators rises up before them. Above each escalator is the name of a gate: Gate A, Gate B, Gate C, Gate D and Gate T (I never understand their alphabet). It is at that point that I can always spot the first time travelers. The last time I was there, it happened, like it always does. A family approached the escalators and the father headed for one conveyance while a teenager drifted toward another and the mother, who was the only one reading a boarding pass, hollered, "no, we're going to Gate B, your escalator will take you to Gate C and yours is going to Gate D. Get over here quickly." At which point all the errant family members awakened to the reality of their plight and started pushing people out of the way to get to the correct escalator. I find this maneuver kind of funny because I know something that they don't yet know; namely that all those escalators go to the very same landing. Why they label them by gates, I don't know. If you get on any of those escalators, you are going to the same platform as everyone else.

When I watched that take place recently, I wondered about religion. What if those escalators had been marked Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. I suppose all the adherents of each faith would have been tussling to get on the right escalator, pushing and shoving and calling out to one another, "no you're getting on the wrong religion, that one is going to take you to nirvana, that one is on its way to recycle you through reincarnation, that one is going straight to hell." After all that panic, what if everyone found out that they were all heading to the same place. Then I realized, that in truth, everyone thinks that's the way it is going to happen. From the most ardent fundamentalist of every religion to the most liberal disciple of each faith, everyone believes that regardless of how we get there, we are all going to reach the same place. That is, we're all going to stand before God. Where we differ is in how God is going to respond to each one of us when we arrive.

I personally find this truth reassuring for several reasons. One is that when people suggest that I'm heading straight for hell (and some people do) I can console myself with the knowledge that God will make that call, not my accuser. Also, this truth helps me respond to folks who ask "will Gandhi go to hell because he didn't believe in

Jesus?" "Will Moses be in heaven?" "What about someone who's never heard of Jesus, will she make it to heaven?" "What about people who live wickedly all their life and then make a deathbed confession? Will God let them in heaven and send a person who has been good all his life but never been baptized to hell?" To all those questions, I can reply, "Those decisions are in God's hands, not mine and not yours. God will do the right thing at the right time for every one. This call is God's and God will make it perfectly."

This metaphor does bring up a topic, however, that I feel competent to make a statement concerning. Some believers in each faith teach that God is angry with the world for our disobedience and is waiting on that platform to punish folks in hell for their wickedness. Such folks proclaim that our only hope is to show up with the right savior on that platform so that God will soften and say "alright, you can get on the train to heaven." Christians who follow this type of thinking say that Christ saved us from our enemy who was a holy God determined to send our wicked hides to the devil until Jesus stepped in with wondrous love and said, "they're with me now" and God honored Jesus' intercession and let us in to paradise.

I look at this a little differently, because I think the totality of Scripture teaches a different message. I think we encounter God many times in life, not just once at the end. I think we cross that platform numerous times with whomever or whatever has our loyalty and adoration at the time. It may be another religion or philosophy, but more than likely it is some group of friends, love of money, addiction to power, laziness, obsession with career, attachment to some drug or most likely of all, self-adoration. In a spiritual sense, there are trains for people who cling to all those things and the vast majority take them to emptiness and destruction. I believe God stands there on that metaphorical platform, pleading with everyone to turn away from all those other loyalties and follow Jesus, for Jesus can give us abundant life. God is never our enemy, God is the lover of our souls, the best friend we ever had, the One who has done everything divinely possible to give us abundant life through Jesus Christ. With a broken heart, God sent Jesus to die because God knew it would take that kind of love to open our eyes, spark our faith and get us to walk away from the allegiances that will destroy us in this life and the next. So our Good and Faithful Lord stands there for everyone calling out, "please take Jesus as your Savior and follow him, for he knows the way to abundant life in this world and the next."

Our enemies are the sins that threaten to wreck our lives, ruin our relationships, diminish our joy, derail our purpose and rob us of our eternal communion with God. Our Creator, out of limitless love for us, sent Jesus, God's beloved companion in heaven, to demonstrate the power of God's love in the flesh in order to turn us from our sins and thereby save us from our enemies.

That is the victory Zechariah is really singing about, God's victory over our sins and over our primary enemy death. But that is not all that is causing this old man's heart to rejoice. Zechariah ends his song by saying that it was because of the tender mercy and faithfulness of our savior that our lives can be set free from the hands of our enemies **to serve** God in holiness and righteousness all our days. In other words, we are not merely saved from something, namely our sins, we are saved for something, namely, to serve God in joy and gratitude for the rest of our lives.

Last week my sister Cathy was talking with my cousin Connie about the future. Specifically they were discussion where my mother might be most comfortable to live out the remainder of her life. My sister said, "In some ways, I think Mom would be happier staying in Shreveport where her friends, church, sisters and extended family live. The only downside is that none of her children live there. To my sister's surprise, my cousin replied, "Cathy my sister, brother and I have made a vow. Our parents and our aunts have loved us our entire lives. Because of that love, we've decided to spend the rest of the time God gives us on this earth, taking care of the people who have loved us so. Never worry about your mother's care. If she decides this is the best place for her, we will be devoted to her for the rest of her life. And Cathy, the care we give will not be an imposition, obligation or burden, it will be our joy."

When we fully see what our Savior has done for us, serving Him is no longer an obligation, imposition or act of drudgery. We come to Jesus like my cousin saying, Lord, if it had not been for your love, I don't know where I'd be, but because you loved me, I will serve you the rest of my life. And in no way will it be a burden, it will be our joy. Amen.