

LENT 2C 2025
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
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In seminary and elsewhere, I've often engaged in conversations around a couple of questions basic to our faith. Actually, it's one question, with two related aspects. The question is about salvation. The two aspects? From what? For what?

We try to focus our discussion of salvation in positive rather than negative terms. Most of those I speak with grew into faith by hearing that we were saved from eternal punishment, the same as I did. And while that can be comforting, it begs the question that wonders what we do in the meantime while we're alive here to keep us from doing something worthy of that punishment. Then we realize we're talking about a transactional faith, which begins another discussion.

In the first century, the idea of eternal or everlasting life was relatively new, at least from a Christian perspective. Egyptian and Greek traditions held that life did continue. We have evidence of that in Egyptian tombs where provisions for the next life were interred along with the embalmed body. Greek thought focused on realms of the dead, ruled by Hades, and Elysian fields of peace and delight for those who deserved it.

Those places were mostly reserved for those of higher rank or heroic deeds. Before their time in Egypt and later in Babylonian exile, Jewish thought was that life continued through descendants who would carry on your name as new generations were born. This teaching continued into Jesus' time, the Sadducees being those who resisted any mention of life after death except through one's offspring.

This is the case with Abram. He and his wife, Sarai, are way beyond their child-bearing years. They should be sitting in rocking chairs while their grandchildren tend to their own offspring playing around the yard. But that's not their reality. Abram raises the question with God, and hears a promise the aging couple find difficult to believe. We're told Sarai laughed. I imagine Abram had a bit of difficulty keeping a straight face, too. But, then, I don't think Sarai laughed as much at the promise as she did that she and Abram were going to become a new parents.

But the promise came true. And with that, Abram and Sarai became witnesses to the salvation of God. No, they didn't talk about eternal life or heaven or any of that. But they did know and experience salvation, for one basic reason.

They became the vessels for the fulfillment of a truth that even they must have doubted. And along with that, they got the middle of the night feedings, the diaper changes, teething, the "terrible twos," and everything else that comes with raising a child, along with a very real sign of what can happen when God promises something and seals it with a covenant. And it was only one child born to the two of them. It's

going to take a while before his descendants become as numerous as the stars in the night sky. Salvation is a work in progress and not yet complete. And with that, we have to remember that Isaac's half-brother Ishmael was also a beneficiary of a similar promise.

When Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, he composed his most joyous letter. It's rather brief, yet Paul packs his words with hope and assurance as he continues his relationship with a community of believers, although from a distance. But life is not always joyful, as there are others who deny the full effect of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and its meaning for all humanity and creation. Paul calls them "enemies of the cross of Christ." They are those who continue to misunderstand or deny this new relationship with God that includes everyone—Jew and Gentile.

The church, and by that I mean the institution as opposed to what Paul calls the Body of Christ, has debated some of these same issues over the centuries. While the Philippian church faces questions around Jewish law and ritual, especially the requirement for circumcision, the institutional church continues to debate issues of baptism and its requirement to be part of the community of the faithful. As recently as last year at General Convention, the decision was made to continue to require Holy Baptism to receive Holy Communion.

So my seminary debate continues, and just when we think we might have an answer, a corollary raises up and says, "look over here." At the heart of our debates, though, seems to be our acceptance of an answer to "who is saved?" The from and for angles might just fall into place when we accept the truth of the answer given to us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. A more lengthy debate centers around whether it's because of something we do, or whether what we do is really in response to what God has already done. Stay tuned.

I say all that to prepare for what I believe is the answer, and its corollaries that arise. I believe the greatest aspect of salvation is that we are saved, not just from hell, or for heaven, not from punishment or for eternal bliss, not even from physical death. We are saved from the fear of all those things, or the fear of not obtaining them.

You might ask "how are we saved?" A colleague who is of the Quaker faith posed the question one evening. "How does the cross save you?" he liked to ask. I smiled, and wondered aloud what kind of answer he had received up to that moment, trying to delay the fact that I wasn't sure whether I had a good one to give. He said he hadn't really gotten one yet. That remained the case for the rest of the evening.

I'm not one who likes to be left in the position of not having answers, so I worked on it over the next ten years or so. The cross of Jesus saves us because Jesus died on it, not to take our place or to rescue us from a cross of our own. Jesus' death is not a bargaining chip between God and Satan. He suffered the ultimate penalty, one that scripture says makes him an abomination, to show us that we are not alone when suffering comes our way.

Jesus entered into the realm of death so that those who had died might know the promise that Jesus offers to each of us from the cross. His words at the end of Matthew's gospel, "I will be with you always," are not just about the good times. He joins us in death, because entering into ministry by joining others where they are is how true transformation takes place, including resurrection from the many death-dealing ways of our world. Jesus joins us in the worst possible moments of our lives, and journeys with us through them and into new life.

There are those who teach that life in Christ is supposed to always be happy and prosperous. When Paul tells the Philippians to "rejoice always," he doesn't mean they are to live in blissful ignorance. They can rejoice because they are not alone. Christ joins them in times of confusion and suffering, a reminder that God's promises remain true, just as they were with Abraham.

That is the promise of salvation. In times of suffering, when we feel most alone, God continues the promise by showing up and reminding us. We are saved *from* fear, and saved *for* life abundant—more *life*, not more *things*. And the lives we live now, between the time of hearing the promise and its ultimate fulfillment, reveal whether we are friends of the suffering One whose cross shows us just how far that promise extends.

Does this mean we invite suffering? "By no means," to quote a polite Apostle Paul. It also means we don't inflict it on others, nor do we encourage those who do, but, instead, offer the flourishing life of salvation to all those for whom Jesus died. Here's a hint: that's everyone. Today's enemies of the cross of Christ don't want us to believe that the promise is to those who aren't just like us.