

Luke 2:1-12

“The Rescuer”

After all of our frenzied preparations, secular and sacred, silly and significant, Christmas Eve has finally come. If you are here tonight, it may mean that something in your past or present has called you to spend Christmas Eve in the holiness of a sanctuary, surrounded by others who are seeking the comfort of Emmanuel, God with us. If this is your first time to worship on Christmas Eve, it may be a night of mystery where you can consider what it means that God became flesh. But for whatever reason, we have come to welcome the savior.

Would it surprise you to know then that the word Savior, with regards to Jesus the Christ, is found only two times in all the Gospels? Jesus is called many things throughout Scripture – teacher and Rabbi being the most prevalent. He is also called Son of God, Son of Man, the anointed one, Prince of Peace, Messiah and King of the Jews. But only twice do the Gospel writers refer to him as savior.

Once is in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. After Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman and drinks water from the well, he tells her that those who drink from the water that *he* gives will never be thirsty again. After some discussion about her own life she realizes who she has encountered. John tells us that her life is completely changed, and many Samaritans come to believe because of her testimony. Ultimately, they tell the woman, “It is no longer because of what you believe but because we have heard for ourselves and we know that he is truly the Savior of the world”.

The other time is, of course, here in the second chapter of Luke. In a rare moment of nostalgia, I chose to read from the King James Version because that is how many of us will

always hear it. Do you remember how YOU came to know this story? Perhaps you learned it at the knee of your grandfather, who read it every Christmas Eve. Or you memorized it in Sunday School as a child.

I myself learned it from the “Charlie Brown Christmas Special” as a child of 6 or 7. If my memory serves me correctly, Charlie Brown is very distressed because no one seems to understand the true meaning of Christmas. In the midst of decorating the humble tree, Pig-Pen’s dust raising dancing to Schroeder’s incessant piano playing and Lucy’s general attitude of superiority, Charlie Brown yells at the top of his lungs, “Isn’t there ANYONE who knows what the true meaning of Christmas is all about?”

So, Linus grabs his trusty blanket, turns it into a shepherd’s headdress, and begins the story, “In that region there were shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” And it is during this discourse that the words that are the bedrock of our faith are offered, “For unto us is born this day a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

Only twice is Jesus referred to as Savior in our ancient story. But when we think about a savior, don’t we really mean one who will rescue us from danger? A savior gets the girl out of the tower or hangs on a rope from a helicopter and plucks a drowning child from the turbulent sea. A savior pushes you out of the way of a speeding car or puts pressure on the wound until the ambulance gets there.

And on that first Christmas Eve, God was a rescuer. He came in the midst of political events that forced people to leave their homes and encounter “No vacancy” signs. God arrived in a scary world and to a couple that was frightened and feeling alone. God came in the midst of the most challenging circumstances that any of us can imagine. And God came to a people who had been lost and lived in slavery and Exiled and faced oppression for hundred of years, even

though they were told that they had been chosen. So God came to rescue them from the perils of life and give them safety.

But friends, is that all we want or need? Is a *rescuer* who we came to worship tonight? Do we only want Jesus in our lives when we are in danger and hanging in the balance between life and death?

Well, I for one want Jesus, my savior, to be with me all the time. So I am thankful to have discovered **what** the Greek meaning of the word “savior” really is. It comes from the Latin word “salvos”, which means “being made whole.” In other words, we need a savior all of the time, not just one who swoops in when life is perilous and then leaves us to figure out the rest on our own. So, when God sent our savior, God sent the one who would bring the Biblical vision of well-being and comfort into our lives.

You see, taken a step further, a savior, literally translated is “one who will heal us in this life.” Isn’t that beautiful? For unto us is born the one who will heal us in this life and make us whole. Not just in the end. Not just as a rescuer. God sent a savior who is involved in our every-day lives! Right now! We don’t have to wait!

God sent a savior who celebrates when we memorize John 3:16 or hit our first home run. God sent a savior who steadies our hand the first time we drive the car and who swells with pride at our graduation or when we play the violin solo in church. And while the savior is certainly with us when we suffer and lose someone we love and wrestle with a life-altering decision, don’t we need a savior all the time?

Yes, God sent a savior into the manger and into our hearts. Isn’t that how it should be? God wants to spend time with us I school, in our marriage, on the playground, at the beach, in the park so we will recognize God who sits with us when we hold that hand of a loved one who

is dying. And that is a comfort to each one here who can feel the presence of God through the word made flesh. Not just on Christmas Eve or when we are injured or in danger, but every day.

But God sent us more than just a personal rescuer. The Good News of the Christmas story is that God did not come to the world to remain in a stable in Bethlehem. God did more than send a private savior to you and me. God sent a savior to the whole world.

After all, when the angel first breaks into the silence of the shepherds' night, he or she says, "I bring good news for all the people." God didn't JUST send a savior for the lonely and the depressed and those facing aging and dealing with loss. The savior is for all of humanity, and for all time.

Luke also tells us that the angel of the Lord appeared to shepherds – a whole bunch of them – and not just one! So the savior comes not only to each individual heart but to our collective hearts. This means that the savior comes to bring mercy to the nations and establish peace for the whole world. The savior ensures that justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-lasting stream for ALL people. The savior offers mercy and a plan for healing the whole world in this life. The savior comes to make violence cease and to turn our dreams into reality.

But perhaps the greatest gift of the first Christmas Eve and this night and every one in between is this – the story of Jesus' birth reminds us that God comes to those who are not even looking. Too often, we look for God in the beautiful, in the times and places where we expect to find God. But the angels appearing to the shepherds reminds us that God seeks us too. Think of the way you have found God, when you have seen God move unexpectedly in your life or in the world.

And by the very fact that the world needed a rescuer, a savior like this, and needs one still, we know that God comes to the less than perfect and the less than powerful. God came to the undeserving and the unfaithful and those who had given up all hope that God would keep the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God comes to teenagers who are defying the norm and villages that have no claim to fame and people who are not sure where their next meal will come from or where they will sleep tomorrow night. God comes when we least expect the Savior, the rescuer to show up.

Finally, if Luke's birth narrative teaches us anything, it teaches us that God will save us out of love and not because we deserve it. God didn't choose Mary to bear the Savior because God looked with favor on her virtue but because God looked with favor on her lowliness. (1) God didn't speak to the shepherds because they were faithful and therefore listening but because they were still enough to hear. God doesn't rescue us because we come to church on Christmas Eve or put money in the pot every time we hear a Salvation Army bell ringing or because we will make the whole Christmas dinner perfectly and all by ourselves.

God sent a savior because God knows that we cannot save ourselves. And God loves us too much for even one of us to be lost. So, God rescues us. God makes us whole in this life because we cannot even imagine the beauty and grandeur and grace of the life that is to come. The shepherds were able to find Jesus because the light of God's love was already in the manger, waiting to be found. The heart of God still waits for those who seek it. And will always be available to rescue us and to make us whole.

Silent night, Holy night, all is calm, all is bright. May it be so as we spend time with our rescuer tonight and always. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf, Nazareth Presbyterian Church, Christmas Eve, 2019
(1) Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Just Throwing It Out There" Blog