

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
"I Myself Have Seen"
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, January 19, 2020

Psalm 40:1-11

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the Lord.*

*Happy are those who make
the Lord their trust,
who do not turn to the proud,
to those who go astray after false gods.
You have multiplied, O Lord my God,
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us;
none can compare with you.
Were I to proclaim and tell of them,
they would be more than can be counted.*

*Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
but you have given me an open ear:
Burnt-offering and sin-offering
you have not required.
Then I said, 'Here I am;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart.'*

*I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O Lord.
I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.*

*Do not, O Lord, withhold
your mercy from me;
let your steadfast love and your faithfulness
keep me safe for ever.*

John 1:29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of the Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that we have offered today from the reading, the words that we sing in song and offer in prayer, the words that you've laid upon my heart, and the words that each of us bring to this time of worship. By the power of your Spirit, transform all of these words into the word of Christ, the word of life, your word spoken to each of us as we have need; a word of comfort and strength, a word of guidance or challenge, a word of peace and love and mercy. Let it be your word that is proclaimed this day. It is in the name of Christ that we pray. Amen.

The psalmist says that while he or she's in the pit, in the well, stuck, bogged down, mired in that dark, cold place of despair, they screamed out to God and God heard that prayer and lowered down and raised that person up, freeing them from this stuck place; out of the miry bog, as it says. And instead of screaming, a new song was put in that person's voice; a song of praise to God, a song of hope, and really, a song of happiness that they were rescued. Many will see and hear and put their trust in God because of this person's story, that when they were stuck in this place of utter despair, they cried out to God, God heard them and rescued them. This is one of our main understandings of what it means to be saved; that when we were lost in the darkness of our sin, when we were in that place of utter despair, as we cry out to God and God alone, "Please help me." God immediately comes down, snatches us and takes us right into heaven and seats us with Jesus, at the right hand of God, the father. We're saved; we're fine. Everything's great and if only it felt that way and were true. This is how we understand salvation. But what I've been wondering about all week is, is this the only way for us to understand what salvation means, or might there be another way. Because in the Gospel of John, we hear John the Baptist proclaim that, "There's Jesus, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." He's watching Jesus, the person, walk down the street, either towards him or near him. He points Him out to everyone and said, "He's the one. He's the Son of God." In the Gospel of John, the whole movement of God, like in the Old Testament, is of God coming down and being among the people; not God up above the people, rescuing them, but God among us, among them, at work in our lives, in the midst of the craziness that we find ourselves in all too often. And so I've been wondering what might this type of salvation look like. A salvation that's based on the prayer that we pray all the time. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." A prayer of Jesus with us instead of Jesus over us. And instead of being rescued, what might didn't mean that this lamb of God that we believe in takes away our sin now and forever.

Some years ago, I had a vision that came to me while I was in prayer about sitting with someone on a curb on a busy street with a lot of chaos going on, but that street was walled off all around with these big stone walls. There was no way to get out of the craziness and the chaos. As we sat there on the curb, behind us, people were building a ladder to get out over the wall. They wanted to get to the other side to salvation and to freedom and to love, but as they climbed up, other people were climbing up over them and on the underside of the ladder. It was just crazy. People falling left and right. No one ultimately climbing the ladder of salvation and getting over the wall. As we sat there talking and thinking, there's got to be another way, my attention was drawn to the left where the big stones were laid one upon the other and there's ground in between them. And on one of the stones, we could barely make out this little tiny cross. And when we noticed the cross, we talked about it and said, "Let's go over there." And we go over and notice that there was a little faint outline in some of the stones, different than all the others and we got right to where that was under the cross and we just kind of lean on those stones and they swung open and this door appeared and we walked out through the gate of Christ as we named it, and we got out of there. We weren't rescued, we weren't hooked by the collar and reeled up out of the pit, but instead, we walked out. We were still living in our reality but salvation came to us in a

different way. God was at work among us and we didn't have to fight each other to get that peace that God offered to each of us. I don't know what happened to the others in that vision, if they continued to try to build or to get up that ladder and get over the wall. But there was another way, a calmer way, a more peaceful way. A way to honor life as it is and to continue to move through it knowing that God is with us guiding us towards salvation.

I think of salvation as not being rescued but as being forgiven, being liberated from bondage. It's the image that comes to us when we think about the exodus and what God does with the people of Israel as they find themselves stuck working for Pharaoh in Egypt. God comes and leads them out. God doesn't pluck them out, doesn't rescue them and put them immediately in the heavenly places, but instead leads them out of that situation that they're in. And as they journey through the wilderness, God is there with them and encouraging them to find the promised land. Again, not an immediate rescue but a sense of liberation and journeying onwards and trusting that God is with us. How many of us would live our lives differently if we fully embrace the fact that we're forgiven, that all of our mistakes, all of our words of hurt, all of those situations that have caused harm to ourselves or others, all of those things are forgiven now? We know that when we're forgiven now, we're not immediately lifted to heaven. We're still here, we're still working. We're still journeying through life, but maybe we're supposed to trust in that free freedom and liberation that comes to all people through Jesus Christ, and to live our lives knowing that we're set free, truly set free.

My wife and I lately have been watching, binge-watching Nurse Jackie on Netflix. I don't know if you've seen this show, but it's about an ER nurse who's really good, the best in her department. She works at a third rate hospital called All Saints in New York City. There's all kinds of characters around her, but the whole essence of the show is that this amazing nurse is living a really bizarre and messed up life. She's not being faithful to her husband, her kid's lives are a mess. And all throughout the show, you notice that she's addicted to drugs. She spent so much energy taking medicines that are not prescribed to her and she eats them like candy. You'll see her at the beginning of a shift grab a handful of white pills, put them in our mouth and just crunch them down. And what I've really loved about this show was watching my wife watch the show because it-- as you begin watching it, and we're now I said, in the midst of season six, you really start to pull for Jackie to get better. You want her to be rescued, to be saved. And there are times where you think, "Oh, she's going to get there." There's a time where she spends a year in sobriety, doing all she can to be clean, to live her life differently. She goes to meetings, she has her friends that are helping her, she invites everyone to our one-year celebration, where she's going to get her pin. She gives the big talk, that we are allowed a cake, it has one candle on it, she blows it out. And the next scene is her sitting on the stairs, taking a pill and swallowing it. And what's fun is watching my wife, "Oh, yes, yes, Jackie, she's going to make it," and then, "Oh." A season or so later, she spends three days detoxing, again with friends around her. She's at home they have medicines to help her stomach and to ease her. They've got an IV to hydrate her. She gets sick and feverish and-- but finally gets better. She makes it through those first rough days. Everyone's happy. Everything's going good. You're kind of like, Yay, she made it." She puts on her nurse's uniform, heads to work, and what's the first thing she does? She goes to the bathroom, put her hands in her pockets, swallow some pills. And again, Jenny's like, "Yay, she-- oh." You want her to get better. It's sort of human nature. You see this situation, and we're all like, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, don't do that." You want to just reach into the TV and pluck her out of that situation and go, "Don't do it, you're better." We want to save her, and yet in her situation, that saving is hard because, for some reason, she's still stuck in the pit. She's still trapped in her addiction. And she makes attempts, again and again, to get out but so far, she hasn't completely made it. But that's what we want for her. We want her to be over this and to be done with it. And to be honest, at times the show's hard to watch because she so far hasn't made it, but that desire is there to be saved.

This morning, someone came into my office, stopped at the door and pitched a Reader's Digest onto one of my chairs with a sticky note that said, "Read this." So before the service I decided to read it. And it's a great story that fits into this idea. There's a woman named Pam Bales, who went on a hike of Mount Washington in New Hampshire. During a pretty horrible day in October, she was an experienced mountaineer, she was on part of their search and rescue team. She had packed tons of layers and warming packets and hot cocoa. And decided that she was going to make a loop from the parking lot, up one part, across and then back down a different way. She figured her hike would take four hours. She left her itinerary in the car and she had told two friends that if they didn't hear from her by that evening that they needed to get help. She set off on her track the temperature was horrible. The wind was blowing 50, 60 miles an hour. But she was experienced. She knew what she was doing. She just kept plotting up and then started to make her way across. She was making good progress. As she got up to that section and started to move across she noticed in the snow a set of footprints in front of her. But she realized next was that those were footprints made by someone wearing tennis shoes. And she thought to herself this person's in trouble. She kept going. The weather got worse. She thought about turning around, but something in her kept negging her, keep going, look for this person. So she blew her rescue whistle, kept walking where two stones were kind of near each other, came in between them and found a man sitting there completely out of it. He was awake, but not making sense. She spoke to him and he didn't respond. He was dressed in shorts,

tennis shoes and a light shirt. She thought, "If I don't get him out of there, he's going to die." Instead of figuring out a way for a helicopter to come in and hook him up and drag him out of there she did what she could. She got him out of the wet clothes. Got him dressed in what she had. Wrapped a tent around him. Put warming packets on his feet, his armpits, and around his neck and jammed hot cocoa down him. She repeatedly asked his name and he didn't respond so she started calling him John.

She knew the time was getting bad. So she just finally said, "John, you need to get up, stick with me and we need to get moving now." John begrudgingly got up and after four hours of hiking they eventually made their way back to the car. When they got to the car, she turned and looked at him and basically said, "What were you thinking?" John was so stunned and he couldn't believe it that he just simply got in his car and drove away. The woman thought about it and was just shaking her head, "How can someone be so stupid to not be prepared?" A couple of weeks later after she had shared this story with her group of volunteer search and rescue people, a letter showed up at the director's house. And the letter said simply, "Thank you. Thank you and your group for the work that you do and especially thanks to the woman named Pam. She came and found me on my darkest day and helped me find the way back to my car. What she didn't know at the time is that I had decided to end my life and that's why I was unprepared. But for some reason when she firmly asked me to get up and to stick close and to follow her, I just did it. She didn't know that I wanted to end my life and now these weeks later, I am grateful for her intervention. Enclosed, please find a small check in appreciation for the work that she did and the work that you do." And then it was signed, anonymous.

In a sense, Pam offered this guy the salvation that I'm talking about. Instead of pulling John out of the situation, she walked with him through it in order to get him to a place where he had a chance to reevaluate it and to live his life now in a new way. I think that when John the Baptist says, "Look, Jesus, the son of God, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world." That's what he's inviting us to realize. That we are forgiven and liberated now, on Earth. And that our place in heaven will take care of itself. And our work right now is to embrace our freedom and liberation and to work for the freedom and liberation of others. Amen.