

Luke begins his gospel with announcements about two remarkable births - first the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that his barren wife, Elizabeth, will bear a son. Not long after, the angel Gabriel tells Mary that by the Holy Spirit, she will become pregnant and deliver a son who will be the Son of God.

While Mary is known to have responded with a hymn of praise to God, Zechariah is struck dumb until the birth of his son. When John is born and duly named, Zechariah answers questions about who this John will be with a song of praise of his own. These words reminding the people of God's track record of fulfilling promises and relates one more promise - that John is to be the prophet who will prepare the world for the coming savior; as Mary's words are called the magnificat, these words that burst forth from Zechariah's full and joyous heart are called the Benedictus - a blessing sung to God.

John's mission of preparation will include giving knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of their sins. And that salvation will guide their, our, feet into the way of peace

Time passes and the second reading from Luke brings us to the grown John where he affirms his life's purpose of preparation; baptizing for the forgiveness of sins and promising that all flesh shall see the Salvation of God.

Both John and his father Zechariah set salvation at the heart of what Jesus is bringing. And we certainly speak about salvation a lot. I know that when I end a prayer with the words, 'in the name of your son and our savior' it means a lot to me. It is what we are seeking in our relationship with Jesus.

For a lot of my life, Salvation conjured up the concept of going to heaven, of being saved from hell - all through the forgiveness of sins. Which then translated into being a good girl, a good little girl. My mother was the main communicator in our family of what sin was. Much of it had to do with unmade beds and not setting the table. Comical as it may sound, I think my mother

believed some aspect of that kind of sin. She was militant with herself as much as she was with us. Our house was spotless, everything was in its place - except of course in my room. This approach to God seems very far from Salvation; it seems more like a game of 'gotcha' - 'aha, you did something wrong and I caught you' - a game I still indulge in, but not one I'm proud of nor one that leads me any closer to God.

I admire the confident Christian who encounters the concept of Salvation and does not immediately add up their own pluses and minuses. I think many of us try to understand salvation and go into the 'what about me' mode. Like listening to a disembodied voice list off the trains that will not now run due to some mechanical problem ahead, perhaps our hands get damp and we wonder what about me? Relieved when your train is not among the cancelled we can turn, a little ashamed, to see the confusion and distress on the faces of those whose holiday has just been cancelled or derailed.

Whether I'm a confident Christian with my bed made and my heart aimed at heaven or I'm the 'what about me?' Christian - no matter how neat my office is (I hear Will chuckling) or how many socks I gave to Youth Villages neither is experiencing Salvation as John understood it, as Jesus offers us.

The United Church of Christ - this denomination - has a Statement of Faith - maybe you heard it read at Lisa Loughlin's ordination. One of God's deeds testified to is that God "sets before each one of us the ways of life and death. God seeks in holy love to SAVE us from aimlessness and sin"

This is the way I want to understand and try to live in the knowledge of salvation. I don't think it's saying aimlessness is sin but rather that aimlessness leads to sin. We have before us the ways of life and death - which do we take? How do we know which is which? For one thing, just asking the question, just thinking about it, brings you closer to Salvation. Aimlessness -

while not strictly the devil or the spirit of evil - is the path to sin, to ways of death instead of life.

I can be about as aimless as it's humanly possible to be. At 10:00, our television whispers, "over here" and at the same time the refrigerator says, "psst - pizza, ice cream". My bed and my bible are calling me from upstairs, but in an aimless state, the TV and the fridge will drown them out. I'm not saying - TV and junk food is inherently inferior to an early night and a bedtime bible reading - I'm saying that when you don't have clarity about how you want to live, who you want to follow - you are apt to wake up listless and bloated. Your energy and intention may very well sabotage plans, shorten tempers and narrow focus such that the way of life you want to follow seems like just too much. It isn't the made bed that leads to salvation - it is the unobstructed course that allows us to hear the voice of God.

It isn't that the unmade bed or the unpaid bills, the messy desk, lead to the way of death. It is that those, for many, distract from creativity. The aimlessness has led you right off the path. Others can make a goal of neatness - forgetting why it is helpful. Messy or neat, there is no morality attached to it. But if you have to spend a half hour looking for something in a haphazard pile, whether you know it or not, that is the fruit of aimlessness which leads you away from God rather than closer.

God "sets before each one of us the ways of life and death. God seeks in holy love to SAVE us from aimlessness and sin".

Salvation is a plan, fulfilled or not, a plan to choose the way of life. An intention to be looking for the path that leads, that keeps you close to God. G. K. Chesterton defined Salvation this way; "if you ask me what it is I know not; It is a track of feet in the snow; it is a lantern showing a path, it is a door set open."

This Sunday our Advent candle acts as the light that leads to Christ's peace; Aimlessness does not draw us to follow a false path, to open the wrong door - aimlessness is not looking for the

path, or the door, or the footprints in the snow. There could hardly be a time that offers more distraction than the preparation for Christmas. Many of us have stood aimless amongst ornaments, twisted strings of lights, unwrapped presents. But you can stand amongst the exact same Christmas chaos and perceive within it a trail to Christ, a light, an open door. You don't have to make this up or create it - these things - the track, the light, the open door are always there. God "sets before each one of us the ways of life and death. God seeks in holy love to SAVE us from aimlessness and sin".

Through Zechariah's words we know where Salvation leads:

- And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
- for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
- **77**
- to give knowledge of salvation to his people
- by the forgiveness of their sins.
- **78**
- By the tender mercy of our God,
- the dawn from on high will break upon[h] us,
- **79**
- to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
- to guide our feet into the way of peace."

May you find your feet in the way of peace this Advent. Amen

am.

—  
Rev. Judy Arnold  
Sermon 12/05/21