

Sermon Series Church Doctrine – Part 7
Soteriology/The Doctrine of Salvation
August 19, Rev. Joylynn Graham

You probably remember me talking in previous sermons about my continuing education experience last year... When I went to San Antonio and it felt more like a fancy preacher's convention than anything else...???

Well this year I wanted to make up for that and take something that I was sure would be educational. So I signed up for a course called "Rising Strong in Church Leadership"

That sounds really educational doesn't it? I mean for a pastor? It sounds perfect right?

This class took place at Luther Seminary, and seminaries all seem to have this thing going on where you go in thinking things are going to be pretty straight-forward, but then they always throw you some kind of a curve-ball.

And you come out of it a jibbering mess.

Or questioning everything...

Whatever it is, somehow you always seem to walk out of a seminary different than when you went in. And I had forgotten all about that.

So I got a lot of bang for my buck this year...

The very first thing we learned on the very first day is that we, meaning all of us humans, are wired for story.

Whenever something happens to us – anything – from something small and insignificant to something life-changing – whenever something happens to us the first thing our brain does is get to work writing a story to wrap around the event; so that we can make sense of it.

So let's say I see someone I know at the store, and I wave, but they don't wave back. I'm pretty sure they saw me, so why didn't they wave back? My feelings

are a little hurt; I want an explanation, but I'm not going to ask them to give me an explanation, because I don't want to risk any further damage to my feelings.

So my brain kicks in to give me a story – something to explain what happened. The story could be that maybe they really didn't see me, or, maybe they have something on their mind, or even that they must not really like me after all...

My brain is in overdrive seeking to provide me with a story just as quickly as possible, and it is laying out all kinds of options...

Because I need some sort of an explanation for what just happened...

Because my emotions are running a little amok...

But the problem is, my brain doesn't really care if the story is a good one or not.

My brain doesn't even care if it's true or not.

My brain is just looking to sell me the first plausible scenario I'm willing to buy.

Because that's its job – to get me running smoothly again – whatever it takes.

So that's a human trait. Whenever something happens that we don't understand, we make up stories to explain it – to get ourselves running smoothly again.

And it's not just us as individuals that do it, but US as whole societies and cultures.

When we don't understand something, it's like some kind of consensual mega-brain is summoned forth to start manufacturing stories – just trying to come up with something that enough people are willing to latch on to so that the situation becomes normalized and predictable.

And since there are a lot of things in life that we don't understand – there are all sorts of stories to choose from.

But it would seem that the things that get the *most* attention, the things that get the *most* elaborate stories, are the fundamentally *negative* things in life; like suffering, evil, and sin.

Last week we talked about sin, and some of our Christian stories that provide explanations for it such as the story of Adam and Eve disobeying God in the garden.

One of the first stories ever told by humans as they attempted to make sense of sin and suffering...

And that, quite naturally, leads us to the question of salvation – or rescue from our sin and suffering – which is probably the most urgent existential question humans will ever ask, and therefore the question that comes with the most story-baggage.

Salvation is biblical, and it is the fundamental perspective from which all the different aspects of our church doctrine are interpreted, but it's one of those concepts where the meaning is pretty fuzzy...

The encyclopedia Britannica describes salvation as “the deliverance of humankind from fundamentally negative or disabling conditions such as suffering, evil, finitude, and death.”

And probably the most common understanding of salvation in our culture, is forgiveness of our sins and rescue from the consequences.

But there are many ways of perceiving salvation –

To the prisoner, salvation means liberation from bondage.

To the poor, salvation means economic freedom.

To the despised, salvation means finding a place where you are truly accepted for who you are.

Salvation might represent movement from sickness to health – from fear to trust – or, on a more macro level, it could be movement from injustice to justice, or from violence to peace.

And, yes, for some, salvation represents that Heavenly reward that is yet to come.

There is no one way of perceiving salvation.

Yet if you notice, the one thing all of these understanding have in common, is the element of freedom or liberation from something oppressive – which leads me to believe that the reason we can't pin down the meaning of salvation is because we all experience different kinds of bondage.

And it is my belief that God responds to all of the different kinds of bondage in the way that is most appropriate to the need.

But we struggle with this kind of ambiguity –

We want a one-size-fits-all explanation for salvation so that it will lay flat and we can manage salvation on our own terms.

So we tell stories and invent doctrine, and then we mistake our stories and doctrines for reality itself.

And to make matters worse, our emotions get first crack at everything, which can lead to all kinds of problems and misunderstandings on a personal level, but when it comes to church doctrine – well that starts to look a lot like bondage –

Which is the very thing we want to be saved from!

So in the class I took, we talked about how Rising Strong is actually a Hero's Journey in examining our stories.

In the journey, we walk into our stories and we get curious about them and our feelings about them, and how all of that connects with how we think and behave.

Then we get honest about our stories, and we challenge them and we test them for truth.

And it occurred to me that this Hero's Journey could actually be a journey of salvation from salvation.

Last week I talked about my experiences with confirmation and memorizing the catechism. And then I read to you the part about original sin and I'm pretty sure everyone in the room shuddered at least once, because nearly every word I read indicted humans as being nothing but a bunch of worthless sinners –

Just what every 12 year old needs to hear, right?

But that was the story at the time. That was what everyone accepted as reality.

And I believed it same as everyone else, because who would lie about a thing like that?

It never even dawned on me to challenge it – it never even dawned on me that I could challenge it, or that I was even being held prisoner by it – at least not until many years later.

So it makes me wonder; how many Christians still have this and other unchallenged stories lurking around in the back of their minds? How many Christians are still being held prisoner by these unchallenged stories? And how does it all connect with how we think and behave?

The biblical writers speak of salvation as

- a reality — in this life or the next — that is at once spiritual and physical;
- something that happens on the inside, but something that can be seen outwardly as well;
- something historically “placed” and eternally significant.

That leaves a lot of room for a lot of different kinds of stories...

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term for salvation is *yasa* which basically means "bringing into a spacious environment."¹ It carries a metaphorical sense of "freedom from limitation;" or deliverance from factors which constrain and confine.

In the New Testament, Jesus' birth is announced as the advent of a Savior. And his healings — the blind regaining their sight or the lame being able to walk — are also examples of salvation. Even his teaching and his preaching — all point toward salvation.

Rescue, help, deliver, restore, set free...

And contained within these physical metaphors, is always the implication of a spiritual transformation which Paul zeros in on when he writes about redemption, reconciliation, justification, and sacrifice...

And then finally, there is the eschatological dimension of salvation where salvation still lies in the future.

¹ (cf., Pss. 18:36; 66:12). The Indian Journal of Theology. Article titled: Salvation Today; Some Reflections on the Christian Doctrine of Salvation. By REV. JOHN PERUMBALATH p.82-87

So biblically speaking, salvation isn't only – or even primarily something that happens after we die or when Jesus comes back. Nor is it an ultimate one-time, forever, and ever conversion.

In the church we have a great many unchallenged stories and doctrines; we have a ton of baggage that we have been hauling around since day one.

But when we challenge these stories, what we find hiding at the core is an appeal to God that originates in the most vulnerable place inside of the human heart.

Do I matter? Am I worth saving?

And sometimes it bubbles out, almost beyond our control, to the surface screaming "Save me!" Please, God, take all the shattered pieces of my life, and make them whole.

Because I just cannot do it myself.

You've been there, haven't you?

In so deep that all you can do is whimper and beg God to save you?

To me, that is salvation. When I have let go of all my stories and confabulations, when I have discarded all of my cover-ups and schemes and just simply begged for God's compassion and mercy, that is when the shackles fall and I am once again able to taste the sweet freedom of God's love for me.

And it seems to me that this is what this this faith journey is about. Learning to relinquish all of that baggage, and just trust that God is always there, meeting us at our point of greatest need.

The Hero's Journey can be a pretty painful process of discovery. It can mean discovering and sacrificing a lot of sacred cows, but it can also mean a new ending to our story – a salvation that actually looks like salvation.

And is there any more faithful way to embark on this sacred journey than to ask God, out of the deep, honest places inside of us, to "Save us... please, save us"?

May it be with you all according to God's word...Amen

