

“What Is Saving Your Life?”

Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16

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A number of years ago, the pastor Scott Black Johnston was leading a Sunday School class for 7th graders. He was a guest participant, and the topic was something like “Ask the pastor any question you want”.

So one of the teenagers asked:
“Is Jesus the only way to salvation?”

Scott said he would give them his answer to that question. But first, he wanted to ask them a different question.

“What do you think Jesus wants to save you from?” he asked the class.

One of the 7th graders said, “Hell.”

And Scott says that while he believes the answer was honest, he was also a bit suspicious. Like that was the kind of answer that he imagined a 7th grader THOUGHT the pastor of the church was expecting...better give the “correct” answer, saved from hell, that’s what God does.

So Scott reframed the question:

“If God was on the ball, what would God save you from?”

Like...right now?

Suddenly, Scott says, the conversation got VERY interesting.

One young man offered up that God could really help by saving him from an upcoming math test.

Then another classmate said, “Pressure.”
And another said, “My parents’ expectations.”

Then another member of the class, a shy kid, said—almost in a whisper: “Fear. I want God to save me from my fears.”¹

If you had been in that class, how would you have answered the question?

Our Psalmist for today writes:

“In you, O Lord, I seek refuge...
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me...”

Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.”

Save me...it’s a recurring request through the book of Psalms.

Some might hear those words, and think “save me” means going to heaven and being with God after we die. For others, “save me” might mean following Christ and trusting that in his death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven.

¹ As told by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston in his sermon, “Save Us,” April 5, 2009, found at https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002720/save_us.

I have no argument with either of those definitions of God’s salvation. But sometimes, especially in church circles, those kind of answers can feel a bit like we’re trying to give the “right answer” too.

Not that they’re wrong.
But the Bible offers us even more.

So let me invite you to think of that word—save, or SAVE ME—in the way that those 7th graders started imagining that word.

You see, Psalm 31 is talking about a tangible, bare-knuckled RESCUE *in this life*.

Verse 2 says: “Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily...”

There is, in other words, an IMMEDIATE and EARTHY quality to the saving that the Psalms talk about. A way in which God comes into the mess and muck and mire of present circumstances, not simply to promise eternal joy after death, but to rearrange the quality and character of the Psalmist’s current life!

All of which got me thinking:

What does the saving power of God look like for you in the time of COVID-19?

What is saving your life these days?²

As you consider that question, let me offer three THEOLOGICAL LENSES, if you will, through which we can think about our answer.

² I am indebted to Jen Hatmaker’s podcast for this question. Jen Hatmaker credits the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor for prompting her to use this question in her podcast.

One response I hear from time to time, when people are going through a difficult situation one, is the comment: “I don’t know why this is happening, but I do know God has a plan.”

In other words, the belief that God has a plan is saving your life. This is a complex statement.

On the one hand, we affirm the sovereignty of God’s love and God’s grace, which means, quite literally, that God PLANS to give us more love and more grace than we can possibly imagine or ever give ourselves.

Does God have a plan to be more generous with us than we can ever hope to comprehend?

You bet!

On the other hand, putting the words “plan” and “God” in the same sentence can be a bit dangerous. For example, I can’t conceive of a loving God who would have “planned” the coronavirus.

Or who planned for so many people to lose their jobs.

Or who planned for so many people in poverty to have no access to medical help these days.

Instead of “plan,” a word that I prefer to use is “providential.”

To say that God’s grace and love is Providential does not insist that everything that happens in this life happens for a mysterious theological reason.

Some events are arbitrary and random and it’s just the way life is.

To say that we live under God’s providence is to say that all our gifts come from God. It says that God’s love and grace are the literal ground on which we stand, and the boundaries from which we cannot escape.

God’s Providence allows for a world in which random, or cruel, or evil events happen, but none of them will not get the last word. God’s faithfulness and grace will get the last word.

So when I ask, “What is saving your life these days?”—
what I’m really asking is not so much about a divine plan.

It’s about a divine PRESENCE...lens #2.
Where in your life is God showing up for you?

I recall Anne Lamott telling the story of how a friend once took her then 2-year-old son to Lake Tahoe where they stayed in a condominium.

One afternoon this friend put her toddler in a pitch-dark room in his playpen so he could sleep, and she went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room.

She got up, knowing he’d crawled out of the playpen. But when she got to the door, she discovered...to her horror...that he had somehow managed to lock it ***FROM THE INSIDE***.

The little button on the knob—he had pushed it in.

He was calling, “Mommy, mommy.”
She was saying, “Jiggle the knob, darling,” but she knew full well that he had no idea what she was talking about.

After a moment, it became clear to this toddler that his mother **COULD NOT** open the door, and panic set in. He began sobbing. His mother ran around like crazy, trying to get the door to work, calling the rental agency to leave a message, calling the manager to leave another message, running back to talk to her son...

And there, in the dark, was this terrified little child.

Finally, she did the only thing she could, which was to slide her fingers underneath the door, where there was a bit of space. She kept telling her boy to bend down and find her fingers, and somehow he did.

So they stayed like that a really long time...
 him holding her fingers in the dark...
 the panic starting to disappear...
 as he felt her presence, and knew her love...³

I wonder if that's what the saving power of God is like sometimes for us as well...a few fingers,
 under a door,
 and we're clinging to them...

But holding onto that hand makes all the difference.

Because that hand is there,
 we know a presence that will stay with us,
 we know a providence that surrounds us...
 and we have hope for new possibilities.

Our faith rests on the belief that the saving power of God includes a divine imagination is so much greater than our own. That God can

³ Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 1993.

picture and create what we cannot, even when things go according to nobody's plan.

How should I describe this?

How about IMPROVISATION?

That's the third way I would describe God's saving power:

Providence.

Presence.

Improvisation.

God's ability to take a mess, and improvise in our lives, so that God's loving purposes will be made known.

When I think about the word "improvise," I recall a movie that came out a few years ago now.

The movie is called "Batkid Begins".

It's not a Marvel movie.

It's a documentary.

Back in November of 2013, a then-five-year old boy named Miles Scott, a cancer survivor, received a gift from Make-a-Wish.

What was his wish?

He wanted to be Batman for a day.

So in one of the most elaborate wishes ever created by this organization, Miles got to be Batkid, helping "Batman" save the city of Gotham—which was really San Francisco.

It was incredible.

City blocks were sectioned off.

A Lamborghini was turned into the Batmobile, and Miles got to ride around in it.

Along the way, the chief of police of San Francisco asked Miles to save a damsel in distress, capture the Riddler, and rescue the San Francisco Giants' mascot, Lou Seal, from the clutches of the Penguin.

For a kid who likes superheroes, it was a 5-year-old's dream.

What made the event so stunning, though, was that so much fell outside the scope of what Make-a-Wish originally planned.

Make-a-Wish was hoping that they could get 200-300 "extras," people who would line the streets and cheer Batkid on. But as they were preparing for the event, the story went viral.

It wasn't just a few hundred people who showed up to see Batkid. Thousands upon thousands of people showed up.

People were actually flying in from other parts of the country to be a part of this event.

And every time Batkid made his appearance or defeated a villain, the crowds went wild.

In fact, people didn't just cheer.

They held up signs.

Signs that said, "We love you, Batkid!"

Signs that said, "Thank you, Batkid!"

What really caught one reporter's attention were the signs that said: "Save us, Batkid!"

Now on the one hand, those signs were just pretend, right?

Part of the whole imaginary story.... “Save us, Batkid!”
As if a five-year-old boy could really save a city.

But this reporter wasn’t so sure it was all pretend.

After all, what happened that day in San Francisco?

Well, thousands of strangers came together to cheer a child who had survived a life-threatening illness! And in that act...there was a previously unseen spirit of KINDNESS that permeated the streets:

- Police reported that whenever they needed to scoot the crowds back, people in the crowd would start HELPING them instead of being DIFFICULT with them.
- Strangers were giving their time and spending money not for themselves, but for a child and a family that they would never meet.
- Even the cost of the event—over \$100,000—ended up being paid for by a San Francisco couple who was extremely moved by everything that took place.

Save us, Batkid?

In a very real way, something like that happened that day.

Selfishness decreased, generosity increased, and people felt connected to one another in ways they had never felt connected before.

Now I realize that most of us, in our lifetimes, will not have a crowd of thousands upon thousands of people cheering for us, holding up signs for us.

But I do think we each know someone—or many people,
who help our selfishness decrease,
who help our kindness and generosity increase...

I want you to do something.

I want you to find a picture—maybe on your iPhone, or a
photograph in the house—a picture of someone who is very important to
you, who has been very important. Or multiple pictures. Photos of the
people through whom God's love has been real and tangible for you.

I realize we're in the middle of worship, so if you don't have time
to do it at this moment, just find the picture after worship is over.

Sometime today, find an important photo, and stop and think.

Are you responsible for that person's presence in your life?
Did you earn that person?
Or is that person...God's gift to you?

Is that person someone who,
through the providence and presence of God's love,
has brought more possibility into your life
than you ever could have imagined or created on your own?

If you want to see the saving power of God at work in your life,
maybe that photo...
is a good place to begin.

Amen.