

“Not Our Own Doing”  
Ephesians 2:4-10  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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A few years ago, I learned of a woman named Mary-Claire King.

Dr. King is a geneticist who, in 2016, received the National Medal of Science for her work. Among her many outstanding contributions, Dr. King was the first to show that breast cancer in women is inherited in some families as a result of mutations in the gene BRCA1.

Groundbreaking work...before Dr. King became known for this work, she was a young professor at Berkley, hoping to get tenure.

And Dr. King tells the following story:

“The week of April Fools’ Day of 1981 began badly. That Sunday night my husband told me he was leaving me...It was totally unexpected.”

Later that week, King was supposed to fly to Washington, D.C. to the National Institutes of Health, to give a presentation that would hopefully secure funding for her innovative research project. So besides the utter devastation of her marriage collapsing, there was the inconvenient reality that her husband was supposed to watch their 5-year-old daughter, Emily, while Dr. King was away.

And he would not be doing that.

Now King’s mother was supposed to fly into town to help with Emily—this was part of the plan before that weekend. And King’s mother arrives, and she hears what has happened, and does her mother say, “I’m so sorry about all this...”????

No. Her mother says to her:

“I can’t believe you’ve let this family come apart.”

And her mother decides SHE’S going back home the next day.

Well...with no other options, Mary-Claire King decides that she’s simply going to take Emily with her to this conference. She will pick up her daughter’s ticket at the San Francisco airport as she drops off her not-very-helpful mother for her flight.

The next morning, on the way to the airport, they get caught in traffic. They arrive a mere 15 minutes before her mom’s flight is supposed to leave.

King asks her mom if she could make it to her plane on her own. And her mom said...no.

So King says to her daughter, Emily, “I’m going to need to go with Grandmom down to her plane.”

Her mother shrieks, “You can’t leave that child here alone!”

What do you think happens next?  
You will never guess what happens next.

Dr. King says, “this unmistakable voice above and behind me said, ‘Emily and I will be fine.’”

King turned around and says to the man, “Thank you.”

Her mother says, “You can’t leave Emily with a total stranger.”

And King says, “Mom, if you can’t trust Joe DiMaggio, who can you trust?”

It really WAS Joe DiMaggio!

Long story short, Joe DiMaggio watches Emily AND gets Emily’s ticket for her, everyone got to where they needed to go, Dr. King received her grant, and it was that very grant that became the catalyst for Dr. King’s ground-breaking cancer research.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the famous Yankee Clipper saved the day!

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Ah, you think I’m telling that story because baseball season is around the corner, and I’m a Yankees fan.

But that’s not the real reason.

The real reason is our question this morning:

**What does it mean “to be saved”?**

During the season of Lent, our sermon series is called “Back to the Basics,” and we’re exploring different foundational beliefs in the Christian faith.

One of those beliefs is that you and I are “saved.”

But what does that mean?

How many of you here today have ever been approached by someone who asked you, “Have you been saved?”

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<sup>1</sup> This story was told by Mary-Claire King on The Moth, and is found in *All These Wonders: True Stories About Facing the Unknown*, edited by Catherine Burns, New York: Crown, 2017.

And you know what that person is looking for, right?

They're looking for a date and a very specific description of the moment in your life when you "accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior."

And while that understanding of what it means to be saved is very true for any number of Christians, it is NOT a Presbyterian understanding of what salvation is all about.

The next time someone asks you if you've been saved, you are free to reply: "Yes, I was saved 2,000 years ago, on a hill called Golgotha, and 3 days later when the women discovered the empty tomb."

In other words, we do not believe that our salvation has ANYTHING to do with something we can do. If "being saved" is dependent on accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then it's about our own act, our own decision...and in the end, "being saved" ultimately dependent on us.

Which is not what we believe.

Being saved is first and foremost about what God has done and continues to do through us.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes:

"...by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God..."

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All of which is fine and good, but what does that gift look like? When we say that God has saved us, and that it's entirely up to God, what are we being saved...*from*?

For some Christians, it's all about eternity—those who are saved spend eternity with God in heaven, while those who are not saved spend eternity...someplace else!

Let me pause here and say three things.

First, the belief that God saves ALL OF US so that death never gets the final word in our lives—the confidence that salvation is about God's love, and God's triumph over death—this is at the heart of the gospel.

Nothing can separate us, nothing can separate our loved ones, from the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans. It means that being saved by God is, first and foremost, about God's victory over the powers of evil and sin and death.

That's what we're saved from.

Second, the question of WHO gets saved, is there a hell, all that exciting stuff...we'll get to that in our sermon next week...salvation, part two...mark it on your calendars.

At the same time—third point, here—this business of being saved, it's about more, in our Reformed theology, than what happens after we die.

There's a delightful book that was published a little over 20 years ago now, called *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*.

It's a book intended for teenagers as well as adults—a book that outlines basic Presbyterian theology and beliefs in clear and sometimes humorous ways.

It compares and contrasts our beliefs with some of the other theological rivers that are flowing fiercely nearby.

The opening chapter is titled:

“Are you saved, or are you Presbyterian?”

In that chapter, the authors note that the Greek word for salvation “carries the meaning of ‘being made whole or complete.’”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, being saved isn’t just about the next life.

It’s also about this life.

It’s about the ways in which God comes to us, entering our lives to rescue us from our brokenness, and to help us grow into the children of God we were created to be.

A colleague of mine, a fellow Presbyterian pastor, once told me about a man his church tried to help. This fellow lived next door to the church, although perhaps some at the church wished it wasn’t so.

His yard was a disgrace: broken down car, dead washing machine on the front porch...rumor had it that he mistreated his wife and kids.

So the church tried. Invited his wife to a women’s group, paid for the kids to go to church camp.

And...NOTHING.

All those good efforts went for naught.

But then, a year or so later, members of the church noticed that the yard next door had changed. It was neat. It was clean. No major appliances out front anymore.

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<sup>2</sup> Ted V. Foote, Jr. & P. Alex Thornburg, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*, Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000.

The man came by the church office one day, but my colleague almost didn't recognize him.

"Tom, is that you?"

"I've been saved," he said.

"From what?"

"From hell," he announced. "The hell of my life, the hell I'd put my family in. Born again. Fire baptized. No more alcohol. No more meanness. Owe it all to that church."

Then he named the church.

It was one of those unattached, free-lance, fundamentalist churches...

My colleague was astonished!

"Gosh, Tom. I wish our church could have helped. That church is, well, a bit narrow."

Tom smiled. "Don't feel bad, preacher. No nice church would have had me. You Presbyterian folks offered me some aspirin. But I needed massive chemotherapy."<sup>3</sup>

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Now don't misunderstand.

I'm not suggesting that all we have to offer at Westminster are a couple of aspirin.

Look through the Harbinger, and there are all sorts of good things that our church is doing, to serve our neighbors and spread God's love.

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story.

But please remember...the order of events makes all the difference.

It's not our acts of service that influence God,  
 or make a good impression on God,  
 or give us a good report card with God,  
 and therefore God saves us.

Our good works spring from awareness of what God, out of God's great love and freedom, has already done. And even that awareness, that gratitude, is God's gift to us.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is purported to have once remarked, "I would believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."

I've never been able to find the source of that quote.  
 Maybe Nietzsche never said it.

But if he did say it, I wish he could have met the Christians of the early church in ancient Turkey.

In Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*, there is a description of "how Christians in ancient Turkey would react when their town was struck by plague. The rich, the well-to-do...would gather up family and possessions and leave town. They would flee to the hills, to fresher and less polluted air, or to friends or family in towns some distance away.

"But the Christians, often among the poorest, and many of them slaves, would stay and nurse people, *including those who were neither Christians, nor their own family members, nor in any other way obviously related to them.*



Sometimes such people got well again...  
 Sometimes Christians would themselves catch the disease and die from it.

But the point was made, graphically and unmistakably: this was a different way to be human. Nobody had ever thought of living like that before.”<sup>4</sup>

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Does that mean that those early Christians were somehow better people, more saintly people than everyone else?

Of course not.

The point that Paul makes in Ephesians is that what they were doing was not their own doing.

It was God at work in them.  
 Just like God is at work in each of us.

You see, being saved doesn't just mean saved from something.  
 You're saved **FOR something**...

As our text from Ephesians puts it:

“...we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

I wish Friedrich Nietzsche had met the people of Le Chambon. As Philip Hallie recalls in his book *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*:

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<sup>4</sup> This summary and quote is taken from N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, New York: HarperCollins, 2010. It is a summary of a description in Rodney Stark's book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996.

“During the Nazi occupation of France,  
citizens of the small Huguenot community of Le Chambon  
saved the lives of many Jews by hiding them  
from their persecutors.

When pressed to say WHY--  
they courageously risked their own lives for others  
or when praised for their moral greatness,  
they were genuinely puzzled.

‘How can you call us ‘good’?’ they responded to Hallie.

‘We were doing what had to be done... You must understand that it  
was the most natural thing in the world to help these people.’<sup>5</sup>

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The most natural thing in the world...to risk one’s life for someone  
else?

It depends whose nature we’re talking about.  
Paul would say it wasn’t HUMAN NATURE.

Paul would say *it was the nature and character of God,*  
the saving hand of God at work in that community’s life.

Just like the saving hand of God is at work in this community’s  
life.

You see, when I look out at this congregation on a Sunday  
morning, I see people who know they’re **not** just saved from something.

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon, and How Goodness Happened There*, New York: HarperCollins, 1979. I was made aware of this quote in Miroslav Volf’s book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

I see people who know that they're saved FOR something.

Something very important.

What do you think that something might be?

Well, I heard that Jesus is looking to fill a few spots.

He needs a grateful person to love an enemy or two.

He needs a joyful person to extend forgiveness to someone who has wounded you.

He needs a generous person to find a neighbor who is suffering, and who will pick up that neighbor's cross, and help that neighbor carry her cross all the way through.

Are there any volunteers to fill those spots here today?

Not a rhetorical question.

Good, good.

See, I'm looking at this group, and I'm thinking...

I wish ol' Friedrich Nietzsche had had the chance to meet  
all of you...

Amen.