

The Savior Present

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December 18, 2016 (Advent 4, Year A [Matthew 1:18-25])

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My great-uncle Sal died this past fall. He was a great man, who lived a long life — and though he wasn't actually a blood relative, he loved me about as well as I can imagine any great-uncle who I only saw a handful of times a decade could have.

But I came not to praise Sal, nor to bury him. I bring him up because Sal, who was of Italian heritage, is the only person I've ever known personally whose full name was Salvatore. In Italian, Salvatore means "savior." I was thinking about Uncle Sal because I was trying to imagine what it must have felt like for Joseph to hear the angel's command: "She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus." Jesus is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew "Jeshua," itself an updated and shortened form of the name "Joshua" (in English, Joshua). The Hebrew, or to be precise, at the time of Jesus the Aramaic, means something like "Yahweh is salvation." Because Joseph spoke Aramaic, the angel's instruction would have sounded something like, "She will bear a son and you shall call his name Savior."

We don't name people Savior in English; which is why my mind turned to Uncle Sal, Uncle Savior. But we do name people Mercy. And I have a cousin named Grace... though her parents aren't real big on church. When it came time to "say grace" at the dinner table one time, her younger sister said, "Why? She's sitting right here!"

Since we don't name people Savior, 'Grace' is probably the closest thing to a parallel usage in our own native tongue. Like Grace, Jesus was a name — and it can, and was, generally used without reference to its meaning. When my aunt used to say, "Grace, do you need to go potty?", I'm certain she was not having a single theological thought at that moment. I'm sure the same was true with Jesus; most people on a day-to-day basis addressed him without thinking about soteriology or the forgiveness of sins.

By itself, Jesus wasn't an extraordinary name. God didn't invent it just for his only son. It wasn't even a creative choice. In fact, so far as we can tell, God chose number #6 on the list of top ten baby names in ancient Israel. Stephanie and I took a long time trying to find the perfect names for our unique little bundles of joy; God, I guess, was pretty sure that his Son was going to be unique enough no matter what he was named.

And yet for the angel explaining things to Joseph, and certainly for us as readers of the Gospel and followers of Jesus, the meaning of the name matters. Literally, as I mentioned, in terms of the Hebrew words that comprise the name, Jesus means, “Yahweh is salvation.” But the angel, when he explains the name, says this: “for he will save his people from their sins.”¹

Now look at how remarkable this is. If you took that last clause out of the angel’s explanation and dropped it into the Old Testament, the obvious implied subject, the antecedent of those pronouns, would be God himself. God is going to save his people. And indeed, that’s what the word Jesus means, “Yahweh is salvation.”

But in the context of the angel’s words to Joseph, the “he” and “his” is clearly the child in Mary’s womb, the boy to be named Jesus.

If God is salvation and if the people are God’s, and yet at the same time it’s true that Jesus is going to save Jesus’ own people, then this leaves only one conclusion: Jesus is God. We know that, but we know know the rest of the story; Joseph is just having a dream about how the woman he planned to marry had turned up pregnant. And what he hears in the dream is that this baby is God; and that God is up to something.

And the thing that God is up to is saving us from our sins. I know we’re a week out from Christmas, and that tonight actually we’ll have our first Christmas pageant and sing Silent Night with candles, but today is, in fact, the fourth Sunday of Advent. And one of the things we’re called to remember in Advent is our own sinfulness, our own need of saving.

I hear sometimes, especially from other clergy, about how back in the “good old days,” before the church gave into the surrounding culture, Advent really was a penitential season that felt a lot like Lent. The sermons were austere and serious; there were no Christmas decorations; and everyone was made to feel properly bad about themselves.

I have my doubts. Those of you who have come to our Wednesday night series know that I have been watching a lot of Christmas movies. Here’s something I found interesting. In *Elf*, which was made in 2003, the decline of Christmas spirit was traced to the 1960’s (the decade that forced the addition of a jet engine to the sleigh). But in the *Miracle on 34th St.*, which was made in 1947, Kris Kringle declares, “For the last 50 years ago I’ve been getting more and more worried about Christmas...” That would take us back to 1897 at least, as the point when the decay started.

In other words, no matter what year it is, 40-50 years ago everything was better. If you’re Santa Claus, the true Christmas spirit was better then. If you’re an Episcopal

priest, what was better was that people observed Advent properly. If you're an old person, what was better was that children respected their elders and hamburgers were 10 cents.

But...before I get any farther off track...whether or not there really was ever a time when people felt a deep and profound sense of their own sinfulness during Advent, it is undeniably true that the reason for Jesus coming (and the reason for his naming) is that he has come to save us from our sins. It's not just the angel that says this either; John the Baptist's father Zechariah, in his great hymn of praise at the birth of his son (and before the birth of Jesus), speaks of "knowledge of salvation to his people, in the forgiveness of their sins."²

Now about this salvation: certainly heaven is a part of that, right? Because this baby boy in Mary's womb came to save us from our sins, it means that we don't pray the price — the ultimate separation from God — that our sins should cost us.

And this is good. You don't want to die in your sins.

But you know what, you don't want to live in your sins either. And the salvation Jesus brings is us just as much about the saving us from living in our sins as saving us from dying in our sins. This baby is bringing more than bus passes to heaven.

Let's just say, hypothetically (not that this has ever happened in our house), that you have a toddler who is walking directly towards the top of the stairs. You can see what's going to happen; you know how this is going to end up. The toddler, let's just hypothetically call him Drew, can see what's coming too — but for some reason he seems to think this is a good idea. Because that's how most of us sin, right — we do it on purpose because we think "This is a good idea", or "This is going to be fun," or "I wonder what will happen if..."

Anyway, back to the example, you're across the room, and you spring up and exclaim, "Don't worry! I'll save you!" Now what do you mean by that, as a parent? Do you mean, "I'm going to go ahead and watch you tumble face-first down to the first-floor, and then pick you up and put a box of bandaids all over your bloody self," or do you mean, "I'm going to pick you up before you rush headlong over the edge?"

To save the toddler from the stairs, we'd try to prevent the disaster from happening, right?

Same with Jesus saving us from our sins. Let me ask you, are you letting Jesus pick you up, are you letting Jesus save you from your sins? Or are you just counting on God to have a box of band-aids ready when you're done tumbling face-first through this life?

Jesus is given another name in this passage too, an honorific, rather than a personal name, a name taken from the prophet Isaiah: Emmanuel.³ Because Matthew has transliterated the Hebrew word into Greek, rather than translated it, he helpfully tells his readers what it means: God with us. So just as the angel leaves us with the conclusion that Jesus is God, Matthew's citation of Isaiah makes much the same point: in Jesus, God is with us.

If we skip all the way to the end of the book, the last half of the very last verse of Matthew's gospel, the very last thing Jesus says, is this: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."⁴ Here at the beginning we learn Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and then at the end the very last thing he says is "I am with you." He who is "God with us" ends his bodily time on earth saying "I am with you always."

Jesus is not just going keeper of the pearly gates. Salvation isn't just getting scooped up at the bottom of the metaphorical stairs, when at last we collapse in a heap bloodied and bruised by sin, and being taken up to heaven.

The angel's message about what God is doing, what Jesus means, what Emmanuel means, is that God is with us even now. He will, if you let him, save you from your sins — not just by forgiving them (though certainly that) — but by lifting you out of a life of sin and bringing to a new life.

Salvation is a present from God, in that it is his Christmas gift. Salvation is also present, in that it's for right now. May you receive the gift of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, this season. Invite him into your heart today. Mary's baby came to save you, even right now. Amen.

1. Matt 1:25 [↩](#)

2. Luke 1:77 [↩](#)

3. Matt 1:23, see Is 7:14 [↩](#)

4. Matt 28:20 [↩](#)