

He grew up in a little church. He said that as a youth, “I accepted Jesus as my savior and knew that I was saved.” He was active in church until his late teens when other interests drew him away. When he married, he returned to the church, partly because of his wife’s belief.

Now, in midlife, he’s obsessed with the question, “Am I really saved?” He studies the Bible to clear up his doubts but it doesn’t seem to help. He’s talked to pastors and friends but their views have only created more confusion. He’s even stopped praying because, “It feels like I’m just talking to myself.”

“What if I died tomorrow?” he asks. “I’m not sure that I’d go to heaven.”

Poor guy! He’s in real torment! There’s much we could say about his struggle to be certain of his salvation, but for now, I’ll just note the absence of one key player: God.

His struggle’s been a lonely battle to understand, a solitary attempt to decide, an individual need to feel, a personal effort to be sure. So, maybe, his turmoil has a message for him – take the focus off yourself!

Today’s world teaches us to narrate our lives without reference to God. It’s all our decisions, our actions, our feelings, our desires. Yet, while celebration of human potential is the dominant story it’s not the story to which Christians are accountable. It’s the accepted story of our culture but it’s clearly counter to the gospel. That’s why Christians have few more challenging words than *salvation*.

Salvation implies that there’s something from which we need to be saved, that we’re not doing as well as we’d like, that we don’t have the whole world in our hands, and that our hope is not of our own making.

Most people think of *salvation* in terms of the afterlife – in terms of dying and “going to heaven.” Well, scripture’s concerned with that, but it also sees salvation as God’s invitation to share in God’s life here, now, so we might do so - forever! Salvation isn’t just a destination; it’s a vocation. It’s not just a question of who’s saved, who’ll get to heaven and how, but how we’re swept up into sharing in the life of God – now and forever! Most of the Bible’s references to “heaven” have nothing to do with “death.” Heaven is a name for when or where one is fully with God – as in *the Kingdom of Heaven*.

Salvation is so grand that the Bible uses many images to express how rich and complex it is. First, it’s a claim about God. It says that God has taken on the task of “working salvation on earth.” That’s why God is called “the God of our salvation.” For some, salvation is rescue, deliverance, victory. For others, it’s healing, wholeness, completion, and rest. Isaiah speaks of it as a great economic reversal in which God gives a free banquet for the poor. Israel’s God provides, heals, rescues, and delivers – works salvation!

That’s what’s behind our saying “Jesus saves.” His ministry was about providing, healing, rescuing, and delivering. He loved those who were considered un-loveable, saved those no one thought could be saved.

He said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of Heaven.” To those who can do nothing to purchase the kingdom, he gives it for nothing. To those who haven’t got much spirit, who are inept at spiritual matters, and to those who by their poverty have no control over their future, Jesus promises everything – the Kingdom of Heaven, salvation!

No wonder one of the most persistent charges against him was “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them?” He was crucified for not only welcoming sinners but seeking them. With whom did he share his Last Supper? Sinners! After his resurrection, with whom did he share his first meals? Sinners! His door was too wide to suit many of the faithful. That’s why we did him in!

Yes, our response to God’s love in Jesus was awful – we crucified the one God sent to say “I love you.” Yet, our bloody rejection of Jesus makes God’s reaching out to us in him all the more amazing. God is determined to reach out to us, to get to us, to be with us, even if God has to suffer horribly to do so.

Mary understood that. She'd seen Jesus do it, in little personal ways: taking time to be with her, listen to her questions and respond, rather than expecting her to do "women's work," in the kitchen, fixing him a meal. She'd seen him do it in amazing, miraculous ways, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising her brother, who'd been dead long enough to begin to stink, back to life. She knew "Jesus saves."

So, when he said that he had to go to Jerusalem, where his love would be twisted against him, and he'd be rejected, and made to suffer and die, she trusted that this too, would be part of his saving work.

She knew that he was nearly there. Her home in Bethany was only five miles from Jerusalem. He was coming to a meal at the home she shared with her sister Martha and brother Lazarus. It might be her last chance to express her gratitude for his saving work, the "salvation" he'd brought into her life. So, she'd make the most of it, she'd say thanks for the salvation he'd brought to her, her family, her people, and somehow, she trusted, to the whole world. She knew the price he'd pay to bring that salvation, that it would, ultimately, cost him his life. She knew he was willing to pay that price because he loved her, her family, her people, and the whole world, so much. So, in gratitude for that great love, she wanted to give him her very best, something that would honor the sacrifice he'd make, something that would say that she understood what he was about to do, what he was about to bear, and that she was grateful.

So, she took her most prized possession, given by someone very dear to her, a bottle of precious nard, and brought it to the dinner. She went to Jesus, and, without hesitation, poured it on his feet. As she did, emotion overwhelmed her - thoughts of all the love he'd shown her, her family, her people, and of how that love would cause him to suffer and die. Tears poured down her cheeks, mixing with the perfume, an even deeper sin of her love and gratitude. In spite of complaints by others about what she'd done, she knew that she'd done was right. That confidence helped her know, more deeply than ever, that Jesus saves. She knew, that because of him, there was a love and gratitude, a generosity and courage, that had never been there before. He'd set her heart free, free from self-focus, free to give, give her best in thanks and praise. She knew that in spite of her grief and sorrow, she felt good about giving, giving her best.

In giving her best in love and gratitude, Mary found the true salvation that Jesus came to give. She was no longer blocked with self concern or fear, she was full of love and gratitude, and wanted to give, give her very best to express it. That's salvation!

It's so easy to say, "Jesus saves!" It's so easy to say, "I love Jesus!" But what really says it, is what's in our hearts - the gratitude for his love, or lack of it; the eager desire to give him our best, or something less - and what we do with that. I'd suggest that's how that young man might get a sense of whether he's saved or not. *I'd also suggest that the gratitude for his love, shown in this faith family, and desire to give her best to say thanks for that love, expressed this morning by a young woman we've nurtured in faith since baptism, is a sign that God's salvation is at work among us - something to rejoice about!*

When I think of all the ways we get caught up in looking at what we don't have, protecting and holding on to what we do have, and trying to get more, when I think of all the things we do to avoid Mary's kind of giving, all the reasons we find to feel slighted, or be angry, to hold back when there's clearly a need, so we can excuse ourselves from giving our best, all the things we substitute for giving what's most precious to us, I see how hard this change is. And when I think of how empty and destructive those patterns are, I see that being set free of them is the heart of salvation.

So, there's that old, "Am I saved?" question. Whether you have your doubts or you're confident and sure, you might go a long way toward a truthful answer by examining your heart, examining your life, to see if there's any of the of gratitude and generosity that Mary showed - a gratitude that makes you want to give your best, your very best, generously, extravagantly, for Jesus?

Lord Jesus, in these days of Lent, we have been called to look at all the ways we sin.
We've been reminded of how far we are from your ways.
We have our good intentions, our better inclinations but time and again we turn away.
We live as we want to live, not as you call us to live.
We sin.

Today we've thought about what it means to say that you "save."
We've heard the story of Mary, of the deep thankfulness in her heart for all you'd done
....for her, her family, and her people,
....her sorrowful gratitude for what you were about to do, to endure, to suffer, for her and us all.
We've heard of what that prompted her to do, to bring her very best to you, and pour it out,
....generously, extravagantly, recklessly, in praise and gratitude for your love.
That gratitude, that generosity, showed that she'd grasped the magnitude of what you'd done,
....that she loved you for it, that she was right with you, that she was "saved,"
....saved from the self-focus that is death, the self-absorption, self-promotion, and selfishness,
....it always creates.

We look at her example and we look at ourselves and we are humbled.
We see how turned away from you and toward ourselves we are.
We see how much we need to be saved from that self-focus,
....the self-absorption, self-promotion, and selfishness.
We see how hesitant, cautious, and begrudging our giving can be as a result,
....the excuses we seek, the trades we make, the games we play, to avoid it.
For deep down, too often, we love what you've given us, more than we love you.

Forgive us!
Forgive us – but also save us!
Help us to be inspired by Mary's example.
She was not always so grateful, nor so extravagantly generous,
....your Spirit had to work in her heart to help bring that salvation to her,
....we trust that you can do the same for us.
In this moment of openness, help us let down our defenses, help us let you do the same for us.
Save us Lord Jesus!
Save us from our selves.

We pray we gratitude for the ways your salvation has been working among us as a faith family.
Thank you for opportunities to know the joy of forgetting ourselves and giving for others,
....for all the ways you've helped us be more aware of the needs of those around us,
....for all the opportunities you've given us to respond,
....and for how you've helped so many of us do that; help even more of us to in the weeks ahead.

We praise you for what it's meant for young Emily,
....for the gratitude she feels for the presence of your love among us,
....for the ways she looks at all of us, together, as her extended family,
....the ways she feels comfortable and at home here,
....and we praise you for her gratitude, excitement, and eagerness to give to our work for you.

As those in whom your salvation is working, helping us remember and be grateful for your love,
....and give our best to share it with others, we pray for those known to us with special needs.
We pray for...