

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16
Philippians 2:1-13

21st Sunday After Pentecost, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 29, 2017

The Saving Process

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today is a psalm of praise to God, here for God's grace in liberating the people from Egyptian bondage. This psalm seeks to teach the people about God—the God of grace and redeeming love. Listen to these words from Psalm 78:1-4 and 12-16...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson we hear a great Christological hymn which sings of God's mercy in Jesus. Writing from prison, Paul makes an appeal for unity and solidarity based on the example of Christ's humility. And the last two verses speak to the way Christians are to approach the living out of their faith. Listen to these words from Philippians 2:1-13...

Sermon

Nowhere in the New Testament is the work of salvation more succinctly stated than here in the 12th and 13th verses of the second chapter of Philippians:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

And how might we define this salvation? One way is: living in the light of God's love and truth.

As always, Paul chooses his words carefully. “Work out your own salvation,” he says. The Greek word Paul uses for *to work out* is *katergazesthai*, which has the idea of “bringing to completion, to a full and complete and perfect accomplishment and conclusion.”

According to William Barclay, it is as if the Apostle is saying: “Don't stop halfway; don't be satisfied with a partial experience of salvation. Go on until the work of salvation is

fully and finally wrought out in you.” Thereby we experience the total benefits of the gospel.

“Work out you own salvation.”

But then the Apostle goes on to say, “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Here the Greek word which Paul uses for *work* is *energein*. And there are two things that can be said about this verb: it is always used of the *action* of God; and it is always used of *effective* action. So Paul is saying that the whole saving process is the action of God, and it is action which is effective *because* it is the action of God.

Salvation is of God. It is God who works in us the will and the desire to be saved—to be whole—to live in the light of his love and truth, to seek to honor his commandments. It is God who knocks. It is God who calls. It is God who invites. It is God who wakens the desire for himself within our hearts. St. Augustine was right when he said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” And it is God who offers us the gift of his peace.

So God initiates the saving process. And the continuance of the process is dependent on God, as is the end of the process—which is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. It is therefore true to say that the work of salvation is begun, continued, and completed by God.

However, there is another side to this coin of salvation. Salvation is of us. “You work out your own salvation,” Paul says to the members of the church in Philippi. Without the cooperation of the human person, the process is limited. The fact is that any gift and any benefit has to be acknowledged, accepted, applied. A person may be ill; the doctor may be quite able to cure; the medicines and the techniques of healing may be there for the taking; but the person will never be healed until he makes use of them. Likewise, a person can stubbornly refuse the invitation, the call, and the persuasion of God.

Or again, a student may be quite able to learn with the help of a teacher. But the teacher is greatly limited if the student refuses to use the books, the technology, and the study through which knowledge comes. So it is with salvation. God sets in our hearts the desire. He invites, he knocks, he seeks; but in order for a person to know the full joy of salvation, he must respond.

“Work out your own salvation...; for God is at work in you.” The truth behind this admonition may be difficult because the familiar words have lost much of their force where self-sufficiency is primary in our lives. And to speak in the same breath about being saved and saving yourself, being worked in and working out for yourself—sounds like doubletalk. But such paradoxical language is the only way to express the fullness of the salvation experience.

Paul’s insight is profound when he combines the working of God and the working of the person in the saving process. And there are numerous expressions of this paradoxical experience in the apostle’s letters:

For to me to live is Christ. (Phil. 1:21)

...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ. (Phil. 3:9)

...I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me. (1 Cor. 15:10b)

For I am the least of the apostles...But by the grace of God I am what I am. (1 Cor 15:9-10a)

And down through the ages theologians have tried to say that God makes moral demands, and then by his Spirit brings forth what is demanded. In justification, God calls us to be his people. In sanctification, God gives us the power to be what he calls us to be.

All of Paul’s letters center around his discovery of this twofold working of the will of God and the will of man. Like most all his forebears and multitudes of his successors, Paul first

thought of morality as rules of behavior, or laws, imposed upon us by a moral ruler who required obedience and who administered punishment to those who disobeyed. Then it dawned on him that God is always trying to give us his life, his Spirit, his grace. Sin is separation from the life-giving God, and its punishment is the consequence of shutting God out and trying to live without him. It is living outside the boundaries of his commandments. It is living outside the light of his love and truth.

Grace, as the Bible uses the term, has been crowded out of our vocabulary. It means more than “graciousness.” It is a gift added to our life, which we cannot do without, which we cannot supply ourselves, and for which we can only be grateful.

On this Reformation Sunday we celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s *Ninety-five Theses* being nailed to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, unleashing the Protestant Reformation. And it is surely fitting to recall that Luther had struggled personally with a “works righteousness” understanding of salvation, before coming to embrace Paul’s doctrine of “salvation by grace,” through faith in Jesus Christ. Our salvation is not something that can be earned by good deeds or purchased with indulgences. It can only be received as the free gift of God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ—our Savior and Redeemer.

In one sense all the powers of nature are the grace of God—they are given to us, not made by us. We sail a boat, yet not we but the wind created by God. We grow our vegetables, yet not we but the growing power which nature supplies. We start our cars, yet not we but the electrical power that was here before cars were even thought of. And in all these ways we work, and yet the working is not all ours—but we must work.

There are many aspects of the mystery of grace. We must be loved before we can love. God gives parents to teach love. God sends Christ to teach love. Christ was a light from the life of God, seeking from the foundation of the world to win his way in the lives of people.

The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God. (Jn. 1:9, 12)

In the end, what can we say about the “fear and trembling?” “Work out your own salvation with ‘fear and trembling’.” Paul uses this phrase “fear and trembling” several times in his letters to indicate a humble frame of mind. A humble disposition manifests God’s presence in the soul. Paul does not mean that our salvation is something precarious, about which we should feel anxious and fretful. The very essence of faith, as Paul sees it, is the certainty that Christ will save.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:37-39)

His point here in Philippians is that we must never lose the sense of our own need for God.

Fear and trembling means reverence, awe, wonder, respect for the holy God of all creation. The God who loves us so much that he sends his only Son to live and die for us and our salvation.

Can you remember your first day at school? For me, it was Poindexter Elementary in Jackson, Mississippi—just a walk around the corner from where we lived. Miss Hewitt was my teacher. Can you remember the fear and trembling at beginning your formal education? The fear and trembling of leaving your home and parents and going to a strange building to be taught by someone you don’t know? We got excited about learning, but all too soon it can become

boring. Likewise, we can easily lose a sense of awe and wonder at the majesty and complexity of God's creation, of life itself, of God's love for us. Working out your salvation in fear and trembling involves realizing that God intends us to develop a life-long passion for learning and growing, for spirituality, for loving and helping people in need.

To be sure, there is a frightful side to the working of God's providence. Paul himself had once kicked against the pricks, gone against God's grain, and his life wrought destruction. When we set ourselves against life as God has created it—honoring his commandments, a life lived in the light of God's love and truth—then we go against the ways of God, and that produces all kinds of chaos in our lives and in the lives of others around us.

So the message is: Work out your salvation, with reverence for the sacred journey you travel. But also, do so with confidence—confidence that the Eternal God is at work in your life for good. When you're in a situation or time when you're feeling lost, abandoned, confused—remember this: the Eternal God—the Creator of all that is, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—this God is at work in your life for good. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.