

Sermon Title: Saved By His Life
Sermon Text: Matt. 1:18-25
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Immanuel Baptist Church
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John Killinger has a new book out entitled, “The Changing Shape of our Salvation.” I recommend it. It will cause you to think. Any book that causes us to think is a good book. I want us to think about salvation today—as Matthew presents it in his Gospel. The text I want us to focus on is the statement where the Lord says to Joseph in a dream, “you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” What does that mean? And how does he do that? How does Jesus save us from our sins?

In Matthew’s Gospel both John and Jesus announce the reality of God’s kingdom—the rule of God that is both coming in fullness and yet is already among us. Jesus, however, not only proclaims this kingdom, he teaches us how to live in it. In Matthew’s Gospel he is the premiere Teacher. There are five discourses in this Gospel. The most well known and most important of the five is the body of teaching found in chapters 5-7 that we know as Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. If that’s all we had—nothing else in the New Testament—we would have all we need to fulfill God’s will on earth.

Jesus says, “You have heard it said, do not murder, but I tell you that you should not harbor anger in your heart.” Jesus says, “You have heard it said, do not commit adultery, but I tell you not to look at a woman (or man) for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Jesus says, “Do not use words to manipulate others, but let your yes be yes, and your no, no—be honest and straightforward, not deceitful or underhanded or conniving.” Jesus says, “Do not retaliate if a person does you wrong, but go out of your way to make peace.” “Love those who wish your harm, pray for them and do good by them.” “Do not do good works to be seen by others who can reward you; do not seek popularity or position or prominence or power. Do your good deeds in secret, not in order to be praised by others, but to please God.” And so it goes.

When Matthew says, “he shall save his people from their sins”—these are the sins he has in mind. These are the kinds of sins we need delivered from, the very things he talks about in the Sermon on the Mount—harboring anger and animosity, using others for our advantage, sexually or any other way, judging and condemning and comparing, seeking position and power, pursuing a course of revenge, excluding and rejecting those who are different than us. Jesus came to save us from all of that and anything else that distorts and demeans and destroys the image of God in others.

Author and former pastor Gordon Macdonald tells about giving a lecture and being approached afterward by a woman from Nigeria who was a physician. She introduced

herself using her African name. It was a long name that had many syllables and a musical sound to it. He asked her what it meant. She said, “It means ‘Child who takes the anger away.’” She explained that her parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they loved each other so much that they defied their families and married anyway, and for several years they were ostracized from both families. But when she was born and the grandparents held her in their arms the walls of hostility came down, and so she became the one who swept the anger away. Jesus is the one who takes not just our anger away, but all else that divides and tears down.

But it’s not the baby in the manger who saves us from our sins. Have you noticed that if you have a baby in your arms people tend to be more friendly, they may stop and smile and make a comment or two (that is if the baby is not pitching a fit like babies do sometimes). There is a fascination with babies.

It’s the same with the Christ child. There is a kind of fascination with Jesus in the manger. Look around at all the nice, pleasant sentimental manger scenes—but this will not save us from our sins. In fact, we can worship the Christ child in the manger, but be repelled by the life he calls us to live. We are saved from our sins, not by being a passive spectator at his birth, but by being an active participant in his life.

Matthew’s theology of salvation very much challenges our contemporary perceptions and beliefs about salvation. According to Matthew we will not be saved from our sins by simply believing an atonement theology that focuses exclusively on Jesus’ death. When Matthew says, “he will save us from our sins” he is not talking simply about the guilt of our sins. Guilt is not the real problem anyway. Guilt can be handled through forgiveness and forgiveness is no problem for a God of unconditional love. It’s more of a problem for us. Jesus didn’t have to die in order for God to forgive sins. God is a loving parent and is always forgiving. But if we are to experience God’s forgiveness we need a forgiving spirit and that’s where for many people it becomes a problem and a barrier. Because some of us simply refuse to share God’s forgiving nature. But when we do, it can shape us in significant ways.

Dr. Wayne Dyer’s books have sold in the millions. He has a strange combination of Christianity, Eastern and new age religion, human potentiality and modern psychology. He says that his life dramatically changed when he was able to make peace with the memories of his father. When he was a baby, his father abandoned him and his mother and brothers and sisters. He grew up hating his father for leaving them in such poverty and with such great need. In his mid 30’s he went to Biloxi, Mississippi, to the cemetery where his father was buried. He stood at his father’s grave and had it out with him. He told him about the pain he caused and the anger he had for him and then he said, “I forgive you. I never knew you or saw you; and I have hated you, but I forgive you.” He said the experience at his father’s grave was the transforming experience of his life. He could not

find rest and freedom from his anger and bitterness until he forgave his father. But God has no problem with forgiveness. We are the ones who struggle with forgiveness.

In Matthew, as well as in the other Gospels, the death of Jesus is inseparable from his life. In Matthew 20, Jesus, for the third time, speaks about his death. His disciples are simply not able to hear what he is saying. This is the scene where James and John ask Jesus if they can have the top positions in his kingdom—sitting on his left and right. When the others hear about it they are furious. So here are Jesus' closest associates, his disciples, acting no different than the religious hypocrites who were known for seeking out the chief seats. They were bickering and competing and comparing and aspiring to places of honor. Jesus rebukes them and says, "This is how the rulers of the world lord it over their subjects. Not so with you. You are to be servants of all—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"—or as a "liberation for many," which is a better translation—for that is how it is most often used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). This reference to Jesus giving his life is not a singular reference to his death, but to his whole life given in service to God and others.

Maybe you have heard some preachers say, "Jesus was born to die"—which in one sense is obvious—he was human so of course he was going to die. But what they mean is that his whole purpose in coming was to die—because it is, they say, his death that makes salvation possible. Not according to the Gospel of Matthew (as well as Mark and Luke). According to this Gospel Jesus died for us because he lived for us. Jesus gave his life in service to God's kingdom, to God's cause in the world; Jesus gave himself humbly, graciously, completely and sacrificially for the good of others, even unto death. His death was the culmination and climax of a total life of self-giving. This is why the early Christians could speak of his death or his cross as a way of summing up his mission (what he was about). He died the way he lived—giving himself to God's cause in the world and for the good of others.

We experience liberation—from our need to lord it over others like the disciples in Matt. 20, as well as all the other sins that hold us in bondage that Jesus deals with in the Sermon on the Mount—not by believing in some theory of the atonement related to Jesus' death, but by trusting in the present reality of the living Christ, who is Immanuel, God with us. We experience salvation—liberation, wholeness—by obeying his words and living out his teachings, by emulating his self-giving and by following in his way that leads to the cross, by sharing in his life that embodies the justice and compassion and love of God. This is what faith is, this is what faith looks like, according to Matthew's Gospel. It involves doing the will of God.

Perhaps you are familiar with the story of Amahl and the Night Visitors. The three wise men are on their way to Bethlehem, and they come to the home of a poor woman who has a little boy name Amahl. Amahl is crippled; he could not walk without a crutch.

One evening their humdrum existence was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. His mother said to Amahl, “Go see who is at the door.” He went and came back and said, “Momma, a king is there.” She lashed out at him with her tongue for exaggerating so much and sent him back to the door. He came back a second time and said, “There are two kings out there.” He was in big trouble now. So for a third time she sent him to the door and he said, “Momma, there are three kings.”

After much conversation the three wise men come in. She was very impressed with them, especially the gold, which she tried to steal. But in the uproar of her attempted theft, one of the wise men, noticing her plight of need, says to her, “You can keep the gold. The babe we are going to worship does not need it.” But then, she gets caught up in the spirit of generosity and says, “I would never keep that gold. Take it to the baby king, and if I had anything to send myself, I would do it.”

Then comes that most poignant and moving moment when Amahl, sensing that he has nothing to send but wanting to send something says, “I will send my crutch.” The one thing that was indispensable to him, he was going to give away. So he lifted up his crutch and gave it to the wise men. He gave what we had, he gave it graciously, joyfully and sacrificially. And then a miracle occurred. His mother noticed first that he could walk now. He could stand alone, without his crutch. He was healed, he was made whole, he was saved.

I say “saved” because the Greek word for “saved” in the Gospels can also be translated “healed” or “made whole.” When Jesus says to the woman who touched his cloak and was healed of her bleeding—“Your faith has healed you”—we can translate that, “Your faith has saved you.” She was liberated from her infirmity and made whole.

This wholeness comes about not by sentimentally giving homage to the baby in the manger, but by taking up our cross, denying our selfish ego, and by following Christ into God’s new world—forgiving enemies, trusting God’s daily provision, refusing to judge or condemn others, and being filled with God’s compassion and grace. Like Amahl in the story, when we give ourselves away in the service of a greater cause, for the kingdom of God on earth and the good of others, we experience God’s salvation. And perhaps we will discover too that in our own healing and liberation, we bring healing and liberation to others as well. The Lord said, “You shall call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” But if this is to be relevant for us, we must make this personal. Is he saving me from all these destructive habits and attitudes that would keep me from being the person God has called me to be?

Gracious Lord,

We are all flawed and we have all failed you and each other in many ways. We are so grateful that your forgiveness is unconditional, that you are a forgiving and compassionate Parent. Help us to be free of anything that would keep us from sharing your forgiving and loving nature. Save us from our greed and pride and our need to control people and be right. Save us from all attitudes and actions that condemn and exclude and demean others. May we experience in ever new and fresh ways your healing, redeeming grace. Amen.