



We are “saved” in so many ways

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Is a rose a flower? It is difficult to answer “yes” about this beauty, this representative of human love on Valentine’s Day and on coffin displays, this adornment of floats and race horses, whose petals are strewn before brides, whose fragrance is perhaps the world’s oldest perfume, this religious symbol and gift to Juan Diego. “Flower” is too simple a term. It doesn’t capture the rose-ness of roses!

What does it mean to be saved? “Being saved” has largely been limited to “saved from sin,” and so our appreciation of the richness and beauty this rose of our faith, salvation, is not as full and nourishing as it could be.

First, a word about “saved from sin.” It is one necessary petal of our salvation rose. Unfortunately, this petal became so overgrown and distorted that it has made our salvation rose grotesque. In the 11th century, Bishop Anselm of Canterbury taught the “satisfaction theory” of salvation: Adam’s sin offended the infinite Creator and broke the “order of creation,” the harmony God intended between people and with God. This divinely created order could only be restored by Jesus, a being with the same divine status with God. As a true man, however, the man Jesus owed everything to God, as we all do. What could the man Jesus give God? Death is the penalty for sin in Genesis. Since he was sinless, Jesus did not have to die; his death was the one thing Jesus could freely give God to repay or “satisfy” the debt owed for our sinning. This “satisfaction theology,” adopted and strengthened during the reformation and counter reformation, became enshrined in Catholic catechisms, devotions, and liturgical practices. Among the many criticisms of this theology is that it pictures a vindictive God who requires the death of his beloved Son. You can read more criticisms in the works of Pope Benedict XVI, writing as the theologian Joseph Ratzinger, and in the recent book by Elizabeth Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*. But for now, let’s look at other petals of our salvation rose to help us better appreciate “being saved” during our Holy Week prayer.

Irenaeus of Lyons (d 202) coined the motto you see sometimes on inspirational cards: “The Glory of God is man fully alive.” Jesus’ life and teachings reveal for us our true natures: we are not just evolved and thinking animals, but we have this amazing, spiritual essence that is like God’s. Being saved, scripture tells us, means becoming aware, waking up, becoming a new creation, being glorified or made holy, understanding ourselves as images or mirrors of the divine. No one can take away our divine dignity. Jesus’ life even more than his death motivates us to live as people fully alive. His revelation about our beautiful selves saves us from despair when we fall and empowers us to get up and go on. Have you experienced this kind of being saved?

Another salvation image in scripture (cf Luke 15) is of being found — the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost prodigal son. Jesus’ world was full of conflict and confused moral choices, a world easy to get lost in. So is ours. The first Christians were known as followers of

“The Way,” and John’s Gospel word for Jesus is Light. Some times in my life were dark, full of conflict, times I was lost in confusion. How about you? There were huge graces of insight or light during those times, perhaps only realized later. These graces “find us,” light up our path or way, and save us.

The kingdom is another salvation image in the teaching of Jesus. The kingdom is the restored order of creation that Jesus announces. Paul takes it one step further: Jesus is the new Adam who gives us the Spirit and makes us His body. “You are the body of Christ,” he tells the Corinthians and his other church communities. These communities are to embody “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth...” The Eucharistic community, preeminent embodiment of kingdom, unites us with one another. When we truly experience the unity flowing from community, love changes us and saves us from everything in us that separates us from others and Christ. Have you experienced love within and through community? Within the community of family? Of friends? Of work and civic groups: Of our Church? Have you experienced the energy and purpose that comes from this communal love? That is being saved!

What about the death of Jesus? Today we still understand his death as the consequence of sin, but we understand this more sociologically or environmentally. As humans, our evolutionary past lives within us in destructive behaviors flowing from survival of the fittest, territoriality, aggression and so on. As the most free of animals, we humans make bad choices, cruel choices, choices that live on in the families and cultural structures we create. “Human history is a sad story of violence, war, injustice, and the slaughter of the innocent,” remarks Father Tom Rausch. This is the world we are born into — the Original Sin we inherit and participate in when we ourselves freely sin. This is the world that killed Jesus when he criticized and threatened the “powers that be” of his day. None of the founders of the other world religions died a violent death. As a human, Jesus would have died, but that he died violently gives us Christians a special lens to view ourselves and our world. It makes us focus on the worst of human nature, on how we still persecute and crucify others. Contemplating the violent death of Jesus calls us to convert from all forms of violence and become instead compassionate, reconciling and healing persons, in act and not only in word. Have you experienced yourself becoming more that way? That is an experience of being saved.

There are many other images and experiences of saving: being freed from the situations, addictions, and wrong thinking that keep us from being fully alive; being restored to wholeness after tragedies of life like death, divorce, betrayal; receiving the Resurrection gift of hope that makes facing death bearable. Please ponder these salvation rose petals for yourself lest the *BYTE* editor fire me for going on and on! And may our Holy Week reflections on the mystery of being saved lead us to increased awe at what God has done through Jesus to save us!

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