

Windows of Salvation

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By Sister Mary Garascia

Door-to-door evangelists sometimes ask us: Have you been saved? We might quickly answer yes. But what does “being saved” really mean?

The witnesses who knew Jesus of Nazareth had many ways to answer that question, many images for being saved which found their way into our New Testament. Later in Christian history, doctrinal teachings about sin and the sacrifice of the Cross overwhelmed that richness, obscuring the original broader understanding of salvation.

Salvation is something happening in us. It’s an ongoing experience of God’s presence through Jesus that changes us. There are six weeks of Lent, so here are six windows to look through to see some of the multifaceted richness of what being saved means.

Mirroring God: Jesus’ life and teachings revealed to us our true natures, our amazing, spiritual essence that is like God’s. Children of God, friends, heirs, new creations, images or mirrors of God, all are ways early Christians expressed our true identity. Being saved means waking up or becoming aware of this identity, and then acting like it.

When Jesus’ chatted with the woman at the well, she woke up to her spiritual self and her spiritual hunger, and her life is changed. Profoundly understanding our goodness keeps our failures in perspective and empowers us to get up and go on. And appreciating our goodness does not lead to pride but awakens a desire to humbly acknowledge the Source of our goodness. Have you experienced yourself as good and holy, even though imperfect? Have you felt affirmed in your goodness during your life with the Lord, perhaps through people the Lord sent into your life? This is one way the Lord saves us.

Being found: I have absolutely no sense of direction and have often lost my way! And so I am fond of another salvation image in scripture – being found. Remember the lost sheep, the lost coin, the Prodigal Son who had to find his way back to his father and his home? Jesus’ world was full of conflict and confusing moral choices, as is ours. The first Christians were known as followers of “The Way,” and John’s Gospel image of Jesus is Light in darkness. In each of our lives there are times that are dark, times full of conflict, times when we are lost, in confusion or doubt about what to feel, think, or do. During those times we receive huge graces of insight or light, perhaps only realized later. These graces “find us,” light up our path or way. They save us.

Being healed: Human life brings us illnesses and wounds. We suffer and search for relief. It is all part of having bodies and a limited life span, and of relating to others because we are social. Healing was a main activity of Jesus’ ministry as he traveled from place to place, mediating divine compassion to so many. We also experience healing, physical healing but also healing of our inner wounds and hurts, of ruptured relationships, of failures, and other inner afflictions.

When we open ourselves to God through prayer for healing, we often experience an accompanying presence of the Lord. This Lord has known the bodily experience of suffering. He is the “fellow sufferer who understands” and who brings us peace. Have you had this experience during suffering? Salvation is how we name the experience of accompaniment and healing that gifts us in during suffering.

Being freed: Setting captives free or ransoming them is a metaphor the Hebrew prophets used to describe God’s saving action

and to identify the promised messiah. Jesus addressed many things that held people captive, like possessions: we store up earthly stuff instead of treasures of heaven, build houses on sand and fill storehouses we can’t take with us. Or take anger: we are held hostage by our need to justify our anger and so we can’t forgive. Many other things bind us and rob us of life’s precious moments. “Redemption,” being saved, is being freed from whatever is stopping us from loving, hoping, serving.

Winning: First century Christians pictured their world as a battle between good (God) and evil (the devil). We catch glimpses of that worldview in our scriptures: the devil corrupts the goodness of Adam and Eve (Genesis) but is defeated in battle by Michael the archangel (Revelation); Jesus defeats the devil during his temptations; cosmic signs like earthquakes and the awakening of the dead happen at the moment of Jesus’ death in John’s Gospel.

Crucial to this imagery is that evil is a force greater than the individual, a power strong enough even to challenge God. St Paul recognized that evil is inside all of us, so that despite our best intentions, we do not do the good we want to do. But evil also embeds itself outside us, in our social systems and cultures, making it difficult for anyone to evade or resist it.

Jesus is our moral model for defeating evil. His examples of meeting evil and violence with love, of being the ultimate suffering servant of Hebrew scripture, of modeling ethical behaviors like forgiveness and concern for the poor – these examples and others from his life become like searchlights in the darkness.

We need this “Christus Victor” to inspire us and keep us resisting evil and choosing good. Hopefully all of us can see how we have succeeded in doing that in our lives. Our victories are “not a done deed,” however. We continue every day, in small ways mostly, to choose the good in imitation of the life of Jesus. As we do this, we are being saved.

Being called: After his death, believers continued to experience Jesus’ saving presence in all the ways mentioned above, and more. Through those believers, and believers of today and tomorrow, the Risen Christ is bringing about the kingdom. The kingdom is an ongoing transformation or a divinization of the human spirit, of human structures and cultures and religion and history, and even the universe itself.

Our life is minuscule in this cosmic picture, but so was the life of Jesus of Nazareth, a smalltown preacher in a small country long ago. He died because he stayed faithful to the message and mission given him by his Father, who raised him up so that his life became transformative for the world. We also are called, called to be faithful followers of the beloved Son, to stay the course, and to work to bring ourselves and our worlds into conformity with the pattern of the life of Jesus. Can you see how you have and are doing this work in your families, your work life, your church life? As we do this discipleship work, we ourselves are transformed or saved.

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