

January 2, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Salvation is Yours!

Do not discard it.

Do not hoard it.

After his training, he was ordained and assigned as a foreign missionary. He was very excited to go to a new city in a new country. There would be lots of new sights and sounds and smells and foods to experience. He would be like a little boy curiously exploring. Still, he did admit to himself that he was a bit nervous. He would be meeting new people and making lots of first impressions. And, why would they listen to him, a foreigner, when he talked to them about a God they could not see? What if they totally rejected the good news he wanted to share with them? Nevertheless, the joy and peace of salvation that filled his heart kept him moving forward and smiling.

Soon after he arrived, he made some connections and learned about a get-together on Saturday. His new friends invited him and he gladly accepted. On Saturday, he was quietly observing until they asked him what brought him to their city. He took a deep breath, said a silent prayer, and introduced himself. He explained that he came to tell them about a man name Jesus who came back from the dead. At first, they laughed at him, but as he shared the eyewitness accounts of how so many saw him alive after he was crucified, they got serious and listened carefully. When it was time to go home, they thanked him for sharing his news and agreed that they would get together again next Saturday. During the week, the new missionary continued exploring his new mission field. When he arrived at the meeting next Saturday, he was blown away to see that nearly the whole city was there to hear about life after death through Jesus.

Dr. Luke could see the Apostle Paul's eyes light up as he told the story of his first missionary journey when he stopped at Pisidian Antioch in Asia Minor. [Pisidia was like a county.] Paul, and his companion Barnabas, started their mission work at the synagogue where the Jews met every Sabbath. The Jews had been waiting for the Messiah for 2000 years ever since God promised that he would be born from Abraham's family tree. When they heard Paul explain how Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament predictions about the Messiah, they were excited. The Savior had finally come! Alleluia! On the next Saturday, a large number of Gentiles, non-Jews, also showed up at the synagogue eager to hear about life after death through Christ. How cool was that?

Paul's mood turned sour as he explained to Luke how the Jews reacted. You would think they would have been happy to have lots of visitors at church. Instead, they were jealous. The Jews should have known that Gentiles getting into heaven was God's plan all along. Paul proved that point by quoting Isaiah 49:6 where God the Father spoke to Jesus and said, "**I have made you** [referring to

Jesus] **a light for the Gentiles, that you [Jesus] may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.**" If salvation was not for all nations, then God would not have put a star in the sky for the Magi to follow to Bethlehem. Salvation is for all! And if salvation is for all, then it is also for you and me. Alleluia! As we rejoice to hear that salvation is ours, we want to make sure that we do not discard it and that we do not hoard it.

Do not discard it

The Jews considered themselves to be the "insiders," as if they were members of an elite gold club. They considered the Gentiles to be the "outsiders," the lowly and lost people. When Paul and Barnabas gladly welcomed the Gentiles, the Jews got upset as if they had invited the lowly, dirty, sweaty and smelly workers into their banquet hall to get all the white tablecloths dirty. How dare they? The Gentiles were not worthy. The Gentiles had received the Old Testament promises of a Messiah. The Gentiles were not led out of Egypt through the Red Sea. The Gentiles did not deny themselves bacon, or offer costly sacrifices to God. Their response revealed the real issue for the Jews. They were not upset that the Gentiles sat in their favorite pew or drank all their coffee or even that the Gentiles could get into heaven. The real issue is that the Jews thought they were better than the Gentiles. The Jews were trusting in their pedigree as Abraham's descendants and in their performance as they followed the Old Testament ceremonial rituals. The real issue is that the Jews were not trusting in God for salvation. They were trusting in their own goodness.

The Jews' rejection of Jesus is absolutely tragic. Paul and Barnabas explained to those Jews in Antioch (:46), "**We had to speak the word of God to you first.**" The Jews were God's chosen people. They had the prophets and prophecies. Jesus was born of a Jew. Jesus lived and worked among the Jews. Paul and Barnabas started their mission work by going to the Jews in the synagogue. The Jews had first dibs on the gospel. It's as if God took their hand, opened it up and gently placed a magnificent diamond in their hand. But like a jealous child having a temper tantrum that he did not get his way, they threw the diamond away. They discarded it. It's not that they misunderstood what Paul was saying. The rejected salvation, purposefully turning their backs on it. Their selfish pride as Jews was more important to them than salvation. The Jews considered themselves to be insiders and the Gentiles, the outsiders. In that synagogue in Antioch, things got turned inside out. The Jews ended up outside of God's kingdom and the Gentiles ended up as the insiders.

The Holy Spirit guided Dr. Luke to write down the details of this story so that we can ponder it this morning and learn a lesson. This story is a warning to us that faithful church attenders who live outwardly moral lives can still miss out on heaven. With this story, the Holy Spirit holds a mirror in front of our hearts for us to see that the same sinful nature that tripped up those Jews lives inside of us. We also are tempted to point to our pedigree. Our parents, grandparents, great-parents and more all went to church. We have been coming to church for

decades while so many other members barely come, not to mention our neighbors and others who do not even belong to a church. We hold on to the true teachings of the Bible, not like those other churches which spew heresy every week. Our sinful nature tempts us to look at our year-end offering statements and think, “Wow! I gave a lot of money to the church. I’m pretty good.” It is so easy for that sinful nature to shift the balance from simple trust in Jesus to patting ourselves on our backs. And if you do not think that is a danger, then we’ve got a real serious problem.

Today, as we celebrate Epiphany, we rejoice that the light of salvation is shining for us. It shined for the magi. It shined for those Gentiles in Antioch. And it is still shining for you. It is right here, right now. The message of salvation is echoing around you as the Word of God is spoken and sung. It is brought to mind every time you look at the baptismal font. It is tasted every time you receive your Lord’s body and blood as the guarantee of his love which says that you are to die for. The Lord has gently and lovingly opened your hand and placed a crown jewel into your hand. You have Jesus. You have forgiveness. You have heaven. You have salvation. Do not discard it.

Whenever that sinful nature tries to rise up in your heart, crush it with the cross of Christ. Beat it down like you’re playing “whack a mole” at the county fair. As we head into a new year, rededicate yourself to spiritual deep breathing as you confess out your sinfulness and breathe in the good news of salvation again and again. Can I encourage you to try to challenge yourself spiritually? Maybe do something more than your normal devotions and prayers. Find something or someway to keep the gospel fresh in your heart and mind. Last week, I started reading this new devotion book called, “Our Worth to Him.” I really like it. I find myself rereading nearly every sentence as if I am chewing on a piece of perfectly barbequed steak so I can savor the flavor before I swallow it and read the next sentence. But who knows? You might find it boring. If reading the Bible seems a little heavy to you, then use a simpler way of reminding yourself of God’s love. You could read through this new summary of the Bible (The Story of God’s Love) which just came out this week. I think it’s going to be a classic. Or maybe just a summary of the life of Christ (The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ). Salvation is ours and we are going to be careful not to discard it.

I would guess that Paul and Barnabas tossed in their sleep after that second Sabbath in Antioch. Certainly, they were excited to see the smiles that Jesus brought to the face of the Gentiles. Yet, they were also broken hearted at the way the Jews rejected Jesus. So, how did Paul and Barnabas respond? They kept telling people about Jesus. Dr. Luke summarized (:49), “**The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.**” In the same way, not only will we be careful not to discard salvation, we will also be careful not to hoard it.

Do not hoard it.

When we get together each week as a family of faith (which is such a wonderful blessing), it is very easy for us to think only of ourselves. Epiphany reminds us that as the light of salvation shined for the Magi and for us, we also want to shine the light of salvation for others. Remember when grandma gave you a plate of cookies at Christmas time? Your eyes focused with excitement as your salivary glands started working overtime. As you reached for your next sugar high, what did your mother say? She said, “Don’t hoard those cookies. Make sure you share.” And with a sigh, you replied, “Oh, ok.” as you feebly offered the plate of cookies to others hoping that they would not take the biggest one that you had your eye on.

When you share your Christmas cookies, that means that you do not have as many cookies to eat for yourself. But the gospel is different. It’s like when Jesus was handing out lunch to the 5000. The bread and the fish just kept coming. There was no end to the bounty – as much as was needed and even more! That is what happens when you share the gospel. When you share the gospel, you do not end up with less. Instead, the Lord starts to overflow your heart with his love so you can give more and more.

Someone wise once told me, “The very next person you meet, is someone for whom Jesus lived and died.” How sad it is that so many in our community and in our lives – some who are very near and dear to us – do not know what Jesus did for them or what it means for them. Or, maybe they are like the Jews in Antioch who purposefully discarded the gospel. It breaks your heart. So, what are we going to do? The same thing that Paul and Barnabas did. We are going to keep telling people about Jesus. Maybe we’ll hand them a service folder and invite them to church still one more time. Maybe we’ll buy them a decent devotion book as a gift. Maybe we’ll spend time visiting with them and asking questions to find out what they think about God and life and death. Certainly, we’ll keep praying for them. I am praying that this year the Lord gives me more opportunities to share the good news of salvation since I wasted so many opportunities last year. I am also praying for courage to overcome my nervousness and simply ask people, “So, what is your opinion of Jesus? Who do you think he is?” And, then, perhaps your eyes and mine will sparkle with joy just like Paul’s did when he thought about his first missionary efforts.

At this moment, though, we rejoice to know that salvation is yours! Alleluia! Amen.