

Sermon Title: Saved For What?
Text: Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13
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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
First Sunday of Lent

For the last several years one of the trips we've taken with our Spiritual Quest class has been to the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. They've always been wonderful hosts, sharing their traditions and approach to faith with us in ways that were respectful and interesting. So when I got a call late last year asking if we might return the favor, I could hardly refuse. Ash Wednesday was the night they thought it might be good to join us, to get a taste of Christian worship, and to have some time for conversation following the service about what we do, and why. I put it in my calendar, and promptly forgot about it, until a reminder phone call last week, following which it again sort of slipped from my consciousness until Wednesday afternoon, when I realized I would not just bundle up and head home after worship, but I'd have one more thing to do.

It was okay, though. Wednesday had been an interesting mix of things in my life already—hospital visits, and a mid-afternoon worship service at Peabody Manor to complement the things I would do on a normal mid-week like staff meetings, and getting my thoughts together for the Ash Wednesday worship. It would be, I figured, a pretty easy conversation, in which I'd let their questions about what they'd just experienced lead the way.

They were surprised to find that at *our* Ash Wednesday service there were no ashes, and I tried to explain that it was something that some Presbyterian churches would offer, but that in my mind, the ashes were something like the initiation of a season of fasting which, if you're not going to take the fast particularly seriously you might do better to be without. Symbols without grounding in the lived experience of a community too easily become talismans and the stuff of magic, not faith. If we're not *really* going to honor the fast as a community, then why make it look like we are by marking ourselves with the sign of that fast? The ashes are a visible reminder that we intend to set ourselves aside for something over the next five weeks—that the life we're going to live is *different* from the life the rest of the world will be about. So sorry, no ashes!

What we *did* do as a part of that service that was something of a novelty to these young people, and less so to their adult mentors, was celebrated the Lord's Supper. They'd decided, as a group (though as far as I could tell without forethought) that they would not come forward to receive the bread and the cup. They weren't sure, it seems, if they'd be welcome, and some had participated in worship in other branches of the Christian family where it had been made clear that they were *not*. I assured them that in no case would the elements be refused to one who came forward seeking them. Presbyterianism makes simply *no* allowance for withholding the bread and cup. But the service itself, and the invitation to the table, offers guidance. "All those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and acknowledge their need for God's healing touch, are welcome to come and partake," is what we say. And in so far as I have no magic glasses that allow me to see into a person's soul to know if those statements are true for them or not, it is at that point between the person and their God, and it's not for me to meddle!

But those questions in and of themselves, were enough to get us all to thinking. The second is easier than the first, because the wearing business of living in this world takes most all of us—even High Schoolers—to a point that we long for a healing touch, from God or anyone else who

might be able to offer it. But that first question is harder: do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Because if you don't, then just like the ashes of Ash Wednesday, it just might be better to take a pass.

“Lord” is a funny word. It is just one of those symbols that has gotten cut off from the grounding of the lived experience of a community for long enough that it just seems odd. We might meet Lords and Ladies if we traveled off to London to visit the Parliament, or if we spent a Summer day at a Renaissance Faire, but it would be more a quaint relic, or maybe a harmless joke. We don't *really* have Lords in our world, and in fact we're highly suspicious of them. “I'm the boss of me,” thank you very much. The idea that there's someone who owns, not only all the land and things around me, but my very self, is counter-intuitive. Approaching the Lord's Table, then, in some basic way contradicts the messages this world sends incessantly our way: I am *not* the captain of my own life. The fundamental mark of my existence is not that I am an independent consumer, whose right and responsibility is to do exactly as I please. I have a *Lord!* And that *Lord*—the master of my existence, is Jesus. It all sounds a little odd.

But my guess was that *Savior* was even harder. *Saving* itself is pretty easy, actually. It's something we're all probably better at than we should be in some ways, worse at in ways we shouldn't. One of the tangents of our Thursday morning discussion was that an entire generation was about to reach retirement age without enough money to retire. We've just not *saved* enough. But those very same baby boomers are the ones who have fed an entire industry of remote storage facilities—50,000 of them in the United States I heard as I drove to church on Friday afternoon—because we've managed to *save* more stuff than we can keep in our houses, basements, attics, and three attached garages. We're so good at saving stuff that we need to rent places to put it, even though we've not saved enough to give ourselves the time to *use* it. *Saving* is easy...or it's hard...but in either case we know *exactly* what it is. But that's not the question, is it? It's not “can you or do you *save*” but are *you* “saved”?

The logical question, of course, is “from what?” Maybe if we'd been caught in the flooding in New Orleans, or caught up in a firefight in Baghdad, we'd need some help. But really, we're pretty comfortable, aren't we? The reflex answer to the question, I suppose is, “why from death, of course!” From eternal damnation! That's the image of Christianity imprinted in the minds of those young members of the UU Fellowship. But I'd just been through Ash Wednesday worship with them, and one of the clearest messages of that service is that *none* of us can reasonably expect to get out of this alive...that God himself, in order to do what we call the work of salvation, had to embrace death. “Being saved” doesn't mean that I will somehow get a magical pass out of the brute reality of human living. And as a Presbyterian sort of Christian, I have to honestly admit that there is no direct relationship between anything I might say or believe and what might happen *after* I die. That's God's business, and should I presume to judge myself or anyone else I've just decreased my odds! Whatever it is that being saved might mean, “saved from death” won't work for me.

But it was really after the conversation was ended, and I was driving home for the night, that the best answer came to me—why is it *always* that way! The problem isn't with the verb: “to be saved”...the problem is with the preposition! It's not that I'm saved *from* anything! I'm saved *for*!

It came together for me...and finally, we get to our reading from the Gospel for this morning...as I thought of Jesus, newly baptized, “full of the Holy Spirit”, being led by that Spirit into the wilderness. I suspect the demand for baptism would fall precipitously if we followed this model, and it seems to go against the grain of our fundamental understanding of what happens when a baptism is done. Isn't the whole point to *protect* us from the assaults of the devil? To keep us safe and sound in this life, and vouchsafe us for eternity? Isn't it *precisely* baptism that *saves* us from the devil's temptations? But in Jesus' case it is just the opposite: his baptism is the first step, and forty days and nights of trial, eating nothing, left famished and weakened in order to face this “devil” is the next step. Because the work of faith was not to save him *from* anything—it is to save him for the purpose to which his living and dying were ordained: to face down the devil's conceits, and bring the fullness of life into this world.

There are three distinct temptations that Jesus faced, and another sermon can find the interesting distinctions between them. This morning, I think it will do to observe that each is a variation on a single theme. The *test* was whether Jesus, riding high with the echo of God's voice in his ears—“You are my son...you're my beloved...you are my *delight!*”—and buoyed by the Holy Spirit, would take all these gifts, all the power of his life, and turn them in upon himself. Would he make it all about *him*? Would he turn stones to bread to satisfy his hunger? Would he offer his devotion to that which was not God in order to inherit the world? Would he test the angels to protect him from his own folly? But Jesus gets it all from the first moment. Bread for the day was not all there was to it. *Any* worship that found as its object something other than God was not worship to begin with. These gifts were not his so that he could put *God* to the test, but so that he himself could be tested, and refined, made pure and prepared for that which was his work and role in the world—that for which, from the beginning of time, his life had been *saved*: that this world might know God's saving love and intention.

That's what *Jesus* was saved for, and it leads to this most wonderful question that in the end can only really be answered in the core of your own heart: so why have *you* been saved? You see, my deep Presbyterian roots insist that I'm not here because I made good choices, or because I'm so wonderful, or because I managed to say the right prayer at the right time. I'm here because there is something uniquely suited to my gifts that God would have me do in this world, and the only way I can figure it out—I can “work out my salvation in fear and trembling” as Paul would say to the church in Philippi, is by finding my place within the community of God's called. It's here, as we gather in worship, fed by the sacraments, shaped by God's Word, that we discover that for which *we* have been saved, “Hidden in Christ” as the letter to the Colossians puts it.

It was earlier on Ash Wednesday, first at our staff meeting, and then at that service at Peabody that I was reminded of the way Frederick Buechner put it in his treasure of a book, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*. Let me leave you with his definition of Lent, because it says better than I ever could why we're on this road—why the trials and temptations; why we've been baptized, and why God continues to call us to follow:

After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?

When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?

If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?

Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?

If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear yourself begin to try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. (n.b. I'd add, what it is for which you have been *saved*.) It can be pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end."¹

Let us pray.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*. HarperCollins San Francisco, 1993, pp. 82-83.