

## SERMON 2 Advent, RCL C Sermon

This 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent we deal with key spiritual concepts and forces. What is sin? How does it affect us? How does God's salvation come to help us?

Baruch, the scribe associated with the prophet Jeremiah, leads us to believe that we can ***“take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction... and, (in its place) put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.”***

We're told that God has great, ***awesome***, things in store for us.

Zechariah, the father of the one whom we have come to know as John the Baptist, gives us the song of praise we read this morning. He tells us that humanity will be given one who will announce God's in-breaking, and will escort us toward God's Kingdom.

“for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,  
To give people knowledge of salvation \*  
by the forgiveness of their sins.  
In the tender compassion of our God \*  
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,  
To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, \*  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

We are to hear and obey John's warnings to repent from our sin, to straighten out the bent and wrinkled parts of our lives, and to return to our God. We prepare for our next steps with God as we are given ***knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of our sins, in the tender compassion of our God***. So it's time, now, in Advent, and always, with pure and blameless hearts to build loving lives, lives filled with fruits of righteousness. That all sounds pretty high and noble. But how do we get there from here?

If you're at all like me, you were trained in academic settings whose “cultured despisers” sniffed dismissively at expressed convictions of traditional faith. Coming from that conditioning, something in us resists even speaking the words, “salvation,” and “sins.”

Perhaps we balk because there are Elmer Gantry versions of ministers out there: those worst and craziest preachers and narcissistic charlatans. They rant and harangue, often in a fear based, authoritarian mode on how we must get saved. They quote biblical passages to support their appeal. We may associate ***salvation from our sins*** with approaches to reading and interpreting the Bible that seem impossibly shallow or unconsidered. Or, perhaps the appeals sound to us just too emotional, just too rustic, or just too noisy.

At the other end of the spectrum, at our “religion on my terms” worst, we prefer a sort of airy, philosophic algorithm of faithfulness: “O Lord, we beseech thee, let thy word to us be placid, rational, somewhat poetic, but vaguely incomprehensible, that it may not in any substantial way disturb our comfortable preferences and our established routines. And may our repentance be impersonal, and mostly about matters beyond our control, like corporate

policies, or the previous administration.” Let’s be honest; there is not much spirit and truth in that approach, either.

Given this rhetorical minefield, let’s see if we can disentangle the concepts of sin and salvation from the *ad hominem* indictments--that either bad, misguided preachers, or spiritually torpid followers cause the very idea of salvation from our sins to be discredited.

Is it not true that at the heart of all of our lives is our longing to be whole, to be healthy, and to believe that we can interact in relationships of love and loyalty? If there is a loving God--and we dearly hope that there is--don’t we long to have our lives united with this God now, and in the world to come? At the core of our spirits is the cry to be set free from the regrettable, misspent, or misguided parts of our past. I don’t know about you, but I suspect that, like me, you ache to know that your sins could be forgiven... to experience the tender compassion of our God. I pray that the Holy Spirit of Truth will guide my feet into the way of peace, because I don’t know where that path is! These are all offered to us in our relationship with Christ; these are all most sincerely to be desired!

In an English Major’s attempt to bring light to the subject, let’s simply define our terms clearly, and then I’ll leave you to act on what you understand. God has promised to help us in these things!

**Sin:** There is a range of biblical words and meanings to describe this fact of life. In the Old Testament:

- 1) Deviation from the right way, straying off from the intended goal.
- 2) Guilt at having slipped from innocence.
- 3) A personal, voluntary rebellion against a superior or unfaithfulness to an agreement; lawlessness.
- 4) An assortment of variant synonyms which would translate as badness, violence, destructiveness, trouble, worthlessness, vanity, foolishness, and senselessness. We see these things. These things exist, We know these things.

In any of these uses, there are the connotations of failure, crookedness or twistedness from the original design, and damage to the health of our souls. Sin is seen to act with a sort of contagion on our souls. It continues to work deterioration and corruption in our lives even after the original transgressive act.

5) As with the individual soul, so with the relationships between people. Sin is a violation of a covenant or understanding between people. When damage is done to a neighbor or to relations in a community, God’s will has been thwarted. Reparations, restitution, and in some Old Testament cases, ritual sacrifice are necessary to bring the situation back to what it should be. In the community, the sinner is seen as one who--by his/her whole disposition and attitude--subverts the good of the community.

In the New Testament, references to sin carry the earlier connotations. The term “Sinners,” is used to denote the godless ones who live in conscious contradiction of the law. In the minds of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, the most common sinners were “people of the land.” These were the residents of Israel who did not adhere to the detailed, exhaustive Pharisaic interpretation of the law.

Jesus repeatedly spoke of “causing another to stumble” as an offense to be avoided. While his contemporaries were content to speak of whole classes of people as “sinners,” or as “the righteous,” Jesus taught that all humanity was subject to the proud autonomy that overestimates our own personal virtue and other people’s unworthiness. He warns us that **we are all subject to, and complicit in** various kinds of resistance to God’s will for us all.

St. Paul repeatedly uses the Greek word, *hamartia*, a term taken from archery, meaning, literally, **missing the mark**. In the most general sense, it meant failure to live up to the image of God, whether intentional or not.

Paul speaks of sin as a force that reigns over and enslaves humanity. He refers to Adam’s sin in Eden (“I’ll do things my own way!”) as the source and prototype of all sin. He also speaks of the dominion of sin and moral disorder as consequences of turning away from God to worship any sort of idol or lesser god. “The flesh,” for Paul, is not intrinsically evil, but is weak and especially susceptible to collapse under temptation.

In John’s gospel, sin is characterized as the unfulfilling, and ultimately fruitless quality of life that follows the refusal to recognize Jesus as God’s anointed agent in human history.

The Biblical remedy for sin is repentance, which includes all of the following:

- turning to God, acknowledging His rightful claim on our lives and behavior;
- confession: humbly--without self-justification or excuses--acknowledging our wrongdoing to God and perhaps another person;
- resolving to leave the sinful life and actions behind us;
- making restitution where possible and appropriate;
- seeking forgiveness from those whom we have hurt or offended;
- trusting in God’s mercy and love to forgive us, separate us from our past, and restore us to righteousness;

Simply put, **Sin** is our separation from God, and all the deceptive and destructive activity that ensues from that separation. **Redemption** is God’s free gift of a restored relationship with Him and our neighbors, and all the good that follows in those reconciled relationships. Sin is our regrettable situation. Redemption is what we need, want, and desire!

I love the simple, short illustration of God’s gracious love at work in the poem, “Love bade me welcome,” written by George Herbert, an Anglican priest in the early 1600s. Especially insightful

in this dialogue between God and a seeker is the motion of God's toward the individual, and the human soul's reflexive retreating from, and evading of that outreaching initiative.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in, drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    If I lacked anything.

"A guest, " I answered, "worthy to be here:"

    Love said, You shall be he."

"I, the unkind, ungrateful?"

Ah, my dear,

    I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand, and

smiling did reply,

    "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame

    Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," said Love, "who bore the blame?"

"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," said Love,

"and taste my meat."

So I did sit and eat.

Lord, we, too want to answer your invitation and come to your banquet! Help us all find our way past our past, beyond our sin, into the everlasting feast of your presence, In Christ's incomparable love, Amen.