



Hey, Are You Saved?

Rev. Tom Are Jr., Pastor, Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS

John 3:1-16

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 17, 2016

Introduction

It is quite an honor to be with you again. I want to thank you for giving Chandler this sabbatical. Sabbaticals are good for the soul and good for reminding us what matters most. It will be a good thing for him and also for you. I think he is a great pastor, and this sabbatical time will let him live more deeply into that.

I also want to thank you for your support of NEXT Church. You may know a great deal about that, or very little, but it is a network of resurrection hope in the Presbyterian Church, and we couldn't do this good work without your support. I particularly thank you for sharing Elder Joel Schultze with us. His presence on our leadership team is a great gift.

* * *

Now to the text: Something that you already know. I come from a different part of the country. In case you haven't noticed, I learned to talk in the south. And it may be because I grew up in the south that I have a long love-hate relationship with this text. (I hope you understand that there is no disrespect to the scripture to have a relationship of struggle with some texts).

I have spent portions of my life when there were friends and, at times, complete strangers who expressed great concern for my salvation. This concern has been expressed, at times, in the most bizarre fashion. Once, I was getting gas for my car and the guy on the other side of the pump says, "These gas prices are pretty good." "Yes," I say. Then he says, "Do you know Jesus?" What? You can be standing in line at the ice cream parlor, unable to decide between Butter Pecan or the Rocky Road. The guy behind you says, "They are all good, but none of them are as good as Jesus." Oh, my. Makes me queasy.

Our denomination has what we call the six great ends—or purposes—of the church. The first great end of the church says this: The church's great purpose is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. That's what it says. But I wonder, how often do you come to worship in a search for a word of salvation? How deeply do you feel a need to be saved?

Saved from what? Saved for what?

Nicodemus comes at night. The first thing that you need to know is that John is not telling us what time it is. He is telling us something about what Nic is missing. He needs some light in his life. He needs saving.

My friend Michael told me once that he quit going to church because all the preacher talked about was getting saved. Michael said, "The truth of it is, I never felt that I needed to be saved. I was okay." All this talk about being saved wasn't bad, he said, just irrelevant.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

Hey, Are You Saved?

I get that.

I think to speak of being saved is a way to talk about God's love affair with the world. But that is not always the way salvation is understood.

In college I was a choir director in the New Prospect Baptist Church in Laurens, South Carolina. Nothing in my life prepared me for that.

They taught me a lot. And more than other churches I had been part of they worried about my salvation. Some of them asked, "Hey Tom, are you saved?" Have you ever been asked that?

I told them this:

When I was in high school, I went to a Billy Graham crusade. He filled Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta. He said the reason Jesus came into this world was to save me from my sin. He said because of my sin, I deserved to go to hell, but I could escape the fires of hell and spend all of eternity in heaven. It cost Jesus a terrible price, which I could never repay, but all I needed to do was accept him as my savior. He ended the service by inviting people to say a prayer accepting Jesus as their savior. He said that after the prayer I would be born again and wouldn't go to hell.

I said the prayer. Unlike Nicodemus, I didn't worry about how I would be born again; I just hoped I was. I didn't want to go to hell.

I guess Nicodemus didn't either. At least Nic knows he's lacking. He needs a little light in his life, so he asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said, to inherit eternal life—to be saved, you have to be born from above.

Jesus says, "You must be *genothe anothén*." That's the Greek. *Genothe* means to become or be born. But *anothen* can mean *again* or it can mean *from above*.

When words mean more than one thing we need context to help us.

Do you know what rhubarb is? My friend Duff makes a great rhubarb pie and several times I was the beneficiary of one.

You mention rhubarb and I will take a pleasant trip in memory to Duff's back porch and a piece of pie. But before Duff, if someone said rhubarb it made me think of baseball. A rhubarb is what happens when the first base umpire calls a runner out, and the first base coach could see that he was safe by a mile. They begin to exchange views. If fingers are pointed, and the managers come out, their heads bobbing like some kind of automated Pez dispensers. . . . You call that a rhubarb. Unless they start kicking dirt—then you just call it childish.

Rhubarb: It's the same word, but it has different meanings. *Genothe anothén* can be translated as *born again* or it can be translated as *born from above*, meaning born of God.

Hey, Are You Saved?

It's easy to see how someone could get confused. Who could know what Jesus means? Well, actually it's not that tough. The meaning is determined by the context. If you are listening to a baseball game on the radio and they mention that a rhubarb has broken out, you can rest assured they aren't serving the players pie during the seventh inning stretch. The meaning is determined by the context.

Nicodemus has already said Jesus is a teacher who has come from God, so you would think old Nic would choose the theological meaning— being born from above. But no, he acts like Jesus is an ob/gyn doctor. Nicodemus goes for Door Number Two and wonders how he can be physically born a second time.

Billy Graham told me that to be saved I needed to be born again spiritually. That makes more sense than to be born again physically. But what does it mean to be born again spiritually?

This is where we get into trouble, I think.

Billy Graham told me that if I prayed the right prayer then Jesus would rescue me from hell. So I prayed the prayer. But think about this: When I prayed that prayer, who was I concerned about? Who was I seeking to care for? Who was the object of my love in that moment? Not God. Me. I had no love for God; I was praying out of self-love. I would do what God required of me to take care of me. This is the problem: When Christianity is reduced to my taking care of myself, it's not saving; it is just selfish. There is nothing about being selfish that saves us. The irony is selfishness is the sin that Jesus came to free us from.

To talk about salvation in terms that suggest there is a threat you need to avoid or a punishment you need to dodge is too small.

Jesus said you must be born from above. I think he chooses this word carefully... born from above—from God.

The thing about being born is that it is not something *you* do. Being born is always spoken in passive voice. You know that English term? It's not active voice; you don't born yourself. Being born is not something *you* do. It's something that happens to you. It is something with which you are gifted.

If I understand the text, Jesus says you need to understand that you belong to God—that you are always and already a child of God. You are born from above. Nothing can change that. Saving is not something you do at all...it is something God does. Salvation is God's work.

I have two children. If you have children then you will understand what I say... they will always belong to me. That's not a genetic statement; that's a statement of the heart. My son graduates from college in a month. I am very proud of him, and I am looking forward to getting the raise I will get when I am no longer paying tuition.

Hey, Are You Saved?

But here's the thing. From before I knew anything about him, when he was just a blob of baby, he was mine. I didn't know if he would grow up to be an attorney or just grow up to need one— and I care about that! But it doesn't change this: he will always belong to me. He doesn't make that happen. That happens in my heart.

I called my father last Saturday. I do that periodically. Not enough to suit either one of us, I suppose. We talked about his doctors and the friends he is worried about. He wanted to know all about his grandchildren, and if I am still employed.

I called him on Father's Day several years ago. It was in the day when we still had land lines. I called just to wish him a happy Father's Day. He wasn't at home so I left a message. But here's the thing: he doesn't know how to retrieve his own messages. "They just get lost in my phone," he says. "I don't think my messages thingy works." I left a message anyway.

That night he called me; I was out so he left a message.

Understanding this complicated technology, I was able to retrieve the message: "Well, I'm going to bed now but I just thought I would call and wish you a happy Father's Day. Being a father myself, I know it's nice to hear that. Hope your children have been good to you today. Take care ... it's dad. Your dad."

I said to Carol, "He didn't get my message." She said, "That's too bad. You are definitely out of the will now."

We laughed. But think of this for a moment.

What would you say if I told you that reason I called my father every Father's Day, and I get him a card on his birthday, and I send him a copy of my favorite book at Christmas is because I know if I don't do those things, I won't be in the will? I know if I do these things that he expects, then he will keep me in the will.

You would not only find me offensive, but you would know that my actions reveal no love for him; I am only loving myself—a self-love not in a healthy way, but in a selfish way. That's tragic. Right in front of me is the opportunity to be a son to a father I love, but instead I reduced that to taking care of myself. What a waste!

No father would want that. No father would find that meaningful.

So why do we think God wants that?

Whatever salvation is, it's not selfish.

Jesus said we are saved by the love of God, not by our prayers, or beliefs, or works. We belong to God because God loves. That's what it means to say Jesus is savior.

Hey, Are You Saved?

I don't know if you feel like you need saving, but I know all of us—
We feel broken sometimes.
We feel lost sometimes.
We get clumsy with the people that matter to us the most.
And we pass by on the other side of people whom we could help, but we never see them.
We tend to mess things up

With our parents,
And our kids,
And our friends.

What I know is that for all of us, life is a collection of beauty and heartbreak,
Of wonder and woe.

And sometimes the burdens get so heavy,
sometimes the fears are so strong,
sometimes the heartbreak is too much to bear.

And we can't fix it.
We need a little light in our lives.

I also know that we can get captured by our selfishness. It's so subtle that we would almost never think to call it selfishness:

Instead we would call it
Planning for the future,
Good business,
Protecting our children,
Even the American way.

It's hard to fight, because I spend every moment I have in this world, where I am the center of that experience. It's almost impossible for me to remember that I'm not the center of things. Jesus came to save me from that.

Lord knows I need it.
I believe love is the only power that heals all of that. And there is a love that will hold on to you.

And lift you,
And restore you,
And carry you
To a life so new, it feels like you have been born again—from above.

The whole world belongs to a God who loves it to death.
They doubt that.

Hey, Are You Saved?

We do too sometimes.

It is news so good it's almost impossible to believe all the time.

Which is why we need to be the church. Because whatever the world is becoming these days

We are still going to need a people who can proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind.