

The God Who Saves
Isaiah 61:1-11
Luke 1:46b-55

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....”

The cover of last week’s *Der Spiegel*, Germany’s *Time Magazine*, shows a graphic novel version of Mary and Joseph bending over an opened Amazon box. In the box, a live baby boy is wriggling. The cartoon bubble above Joseph’s head has him saying, “I didn’t order that” while Mary ponders in her bubble, “I wonder if we can exchange this.” Mary, Joseph, and the babe lying in an Amazon box, is meant to make you turn to an article on “The Delivered Feast: How Online Trading Revolutionizes Our Lives.” Instead, we are turning to Isaiah 61 and Mary’s Magnificat, two texts whose substance has caused well-heeled Christians to exclaim, “I didn’t order that,” and has prompted prosperous pietists to wonder if the Savior Mary delivered could be exchanged for another.

What’s not to like about *this* Savior? In sum, he is the sort of Savior whose salvation is not confined to spiritual things. He meddles. When I asked the Wednesday morning Bible Study crowd what they thought salvation was, they began to speak about life after death: salvation is going to heaven to be with God after you die. Spiritual. But what makes that heaven? I asked. Being with God, they answered. So God is with us only after we die? I thought we believed God is with us here and now. After a little conversation about the Trinity, they agreed. God’s Spirit is in us and among us and between us.

I persisted. If salvation is being with God and God is with us here and now and not just when we die and go to heaven, how does that change your definition of salvation? Harry Spaeth whipped out his iPhone, of course, and looked it up. Salvation, he read, in the plain sense, means preservation or deliverance from harm, ruin or loss. In the religious sense, he read, salvation means deliverance from sin and its consequences. Well then, I said, if salvation in the religious sense is deliverance from sin, what is sin and how are we delivered from it? Sin is breaking God’s law, someone said. Which law, I asked and we agreed that the commandment to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself pretty much summed up the law we break. So God-with-us is saving us from the harm, the ruin, the loss we cause when we fail to love God and neighbor--when we live for ourselves?

Just then, the Amazon box arrived which we opened by opening our Bibles to Isaiah’s words and Mary’s song. Both texts are beautiful at first glance: a savior sent to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, liberate the enslaved, offer a garland instead of ashes to them that mourn. And a peasant girl singing of the God who saves here and now: who has scattered the proud, has brought down the powerful and has lifted up the lowly, has fed the hungry and has sent the rich empty away. Beautiful images until the words of both texts become scandalously particular in the flesh of the Savior Mary delivered to the world.

I cannot read Isaiah 61 without thinking about Jesus preaching on that text in his hometown. Methodist Bishop Will Willimon imagines congregants turning to one another at the beginning of Jesus’ sermon saying, “Lovely! We are in for a rebirth of spirituality in the nation!” Then this Savior gets specific, says in particular that the recipients of God’s great good news were to be found outside the congregation’s respectable, hard-working, Torah-keeping, well-deserving circle of serious believers. Specifically, Jesus proclaims that God’s deliverance, God’s salvation, God’s recompense entered human history to reverse the harm, the ruin, the loss inflicted not on God’s people but on foreigners and welfare mothers. Meddling! Suddenly “Lovely!” became “Lynch him!” and the congregation became a mob intent on sending this Savior back by throwing him over a cliff. What’s not to like? I repeat: the Savior we have been sent is a Savior who will not be confined to so-called spiritual things. He meddles in our social and economic and political arrangements, causing us to say with Joseph, “I didn’t order that,” and to say with Mary, “I wonder if we can exchange this” Savior for another.

You know, of course, where I am going. Surely the irony is not lost on the God who saves that Christmas Day is the day when a new tax code bill is slated to land on the President’s desk for his signature. “A HUGE Christmas present,” the President has already declared, denying in the same breath that it benefits the so-called

“one percent.” The totally depraved Calvinist in me suspects that the tax bill *is* the Savior some have ordered in exchange for the Savior Mary delivered in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. But, before you stop listening to me, I say in the same breath that God knows, Harry knows, the whole Investment Committee knows what an idiot I am when it comes to economics. So sticking to theology, I can only report that the God who saves will be the first to rejoice if permanently lowering the corporate tax rate to 21%, doubling the estate tax exemption to \$22 million, creating a 20% deduction for pass-through businesses, eliminating the health care mandate and provisionally lowering taxes on individuals for nine years, also has the effect of scattering the proud in the imaginations of their hearts, bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich empty away. Wherever in the world the harm, the ruin and the loss caused by the sin of living for ourselves is reversed, you can bet that the God who saves has begun to reign, that God’s kingdom has come near. I live in hope.

But the reason I suspect giving a whole lot more to those who already have most of the world’s wealth is not exactly the salvation this Savior would bring is that he has come to save them too. And even though I remember him saying something about how having gobs of money made it harder to save someone, he also said that it was not impossible for the God who saves. So before we send this first Savior back, let’s see if there isn’t something for the proud and the powerful and the rich in the salvation he brings. Or better yet, let’s see how he means to save us, who are not so much proud or powerful or rich or lowly or hungry but simply lost in the middle!

“You got a choice to make, man,” General Dogon, a veteran of Skid Row in Los Angeles, says to Philip Alston, a UN special reporter on extreme poverty and human rights who is touring the United States. As Dogon steps over a dead rat and skirts around a body wrapped in a worn orange blanket lying on the sidewalk, the two come to an intersection. “You could go straight to heaven,” Dogon says, pointing “to the end of the street, where the glistening skyscrapers of downtown LA rise up in a promise of divine riches. Heaven. Or you could turn right, into that. . . into Skid Row bang in the center of LA’s downtown. That way lies 50 blocks of concentrated human humiliation.” You got a choice to make. Jesus saves the likes of us by turning right and inviting us to follow him into LA’s Skid Row; into the Tenderloin district of San Francisco where a woman named Tiny Gray-Garcia says to Alston that the poor suffer from what she called “the violence of looking away”; into Lowndes County, Alabama where the Black Belt of the South is occupied by the descendants of slaves living among open sewers, human waste bubbling up in kitchen sinks when it rains; into Guayama, Puerto Rico where 44% of the people were living below the poverty level before Maria hit; into Charleston, West Virginia where there will be no new jobs.

The Savior we did not order saves the human in us as he invites us to dwell with him in the manger places of this world: in Kensington, the Northeast, Mt. Airy, Kingsessing and North Philadelphia where five souls were shot dead this week. But then and even closer to home, Karl Barth writes, “There is quite another place where he simply enters. . . and waits until we gladly recognize his presence. . . You see,” Barth says, “the proud and modest inns, and our behavior as their inhabitants, are but the surface of our lives. Beneath there lurks the depth, even the abyss. Down below, we are, without exception, only poor beggars, lost sinners, moaning creatures on the threshold of death, only people who have lost their way. Down there [this Savior] sets up quarters,” precisely where we didn’t order him. We are free, of course, to refuse delivery. We are also free to try life out with him for a few days, a few months, a few years. And of course we are free, at any time during this trial period, to send him back to heaven where we believe he belongs.

Actually, the world waited about thirty years before sending him back, waited until noon one Friday. But on his way back, or so the creed goes, he turned left, descended into hell, assumed the distance some have chosen eternally to keep from God and neighbor, chose the hell of our self-aggrandizing heaven in order to save us, to be God with us even there. If you want to get in the true spirit of Christmas, Willimon says, begin with Good Friday and Easter because if “you begin with the baby Jesus before the crucified Christ, you end up with inconsequential sentimentality.” Begin with turning right toward Christ crucified in the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the enslaved. Begin with the God who saves us from life without them and without him by mercifully meddling in every moment of our life together. Thanks be to God.