

Exodus 17:1-7  
Philippians 2:1-13  
Matthew 21:23-32

Did you hear about the contest between Jesus and Satan? Seems like they were having a dispute over which of them was better on the computer – which was, Jesus held, a heavenly device meant to enrich and expand the lives of all God’s children. Satan, on the other hand, maintained that the Information Age was devilish and the computer a means of so confounding people as to drive them into the very pits of hell.

This goes on for some time until they agree to a duel – a computer programming duel – with God as the judge. They sit at their computers and type. Furiously. Lines of code stream forth, for hours upon hours. Seconds before the end of the competition, a bolt of lightning strikes and kills the electricity. When power is restored, God announces that the contest has ended.

Satan is asked to show his results. He pouts, “I have nothing. I lost it all when the power went out.” God says, “Let’s see how Jesus did.” Jesus clicks a few keys on his computer, and the screen comes alive in vivid display with angelic choirs pouring forth from the speakers.

Satan is astonished. “How is this possible? I lost everything, yet his program is intact. How did he do it?”

God could only smile, since we all know that “Jesus saves.”

Isn’t that awful? Who in her right mind would tell such a horrible joke? And you all knew where it was going, right? “Jesus saves.” Well, since we’re here, let’s talk about that for a moment – *Jesus saves*.

The New Testament uses the word “salvation” several dozen times including such statements as:

There is **salvation** in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for **salvation** to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16)

For you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the **salvation** of your souls. (I Peter 1:9)

All that being said, what does “salvation” mean to you? For many people it means the promise of eternal life in contrast to eternal damnation. We Episcopalians – as well as other mainline denominations and progressive Christians – aren’t real big on “eternal damnation.” To

support the idea of damnation and hell and fire and brimstone, we would need to cling very tightly to the idea of God as wrathful, vengeful, and punishing. We just don't go there.

To be sure that leaves open the question of judgment. What happens to all those who caused evil in the world? Is there a final reckoning? I'm reading a fascinating theologian right now named Ilia Delio, a Roman Catholic woman who teaches at Washington Theological Union. She wonders whether God – as the ground of all being, and indeed, Being itself – exists beyond human moral categories of right and wrong; good and evil. If that seems like a stretch, then at least consider that whatever God doles out on the so-called “Judgment Day” will be restorative justice, not retributive justice.

So if we're not really keen on the idea of being saved from hell, what is salvation?

Minister, author and theologian John Killinger wrote an interesting book a few years ago called “The Changing Shape of our Salvation.” I read it when the question I just posed – “what is salvation” – really started to bother me. What emerged from the book was no hard-and-fast dogma but rather some reflections.

Mr. Killinger polled clergy from all over the US for answers to this question. He says, “Again and again, in responses from these ministers, there is an emphasis on salvation as wholeness and fulfillment.”<sup>1</sup>

For example, one Southern Baptist minister said, “Salvation is the glue that holds life together. It is a relationship with God that provides meaning, opens the door to loving contact with others, and points the way to moral stability. It is the force that holds together all the confluences of life.”<sup>2</sup>

With this kind of understanding in place, let's re-read part of today's passage from Philippians: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

This passage has actually confounded Christians – and the Church. It has contributed to a “works” mentality. A “works” model of our faith says that we work to gain God's approval and favor. This is what helped pave the way for financial abuse during The Middle Ages. People offered money to the Church in lieu of doing enough good works to consider themselves saved. Or they gave money on behalf of less-than-stellar family members.

“Work out your salvation” is actually a wonderful invitation to figure out a few things. We already know that God is love; that God's love never ends. It flows out of and through God the Trinity like an inexhaustible spring of water. So our job is to learn how to swim.

How do you best connect with God? Some people are very kinesthetic. They connect most deeply with themselves and God while moving. Walking a labyrinth is one of their best

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<sup>1</sup> John Killinger, *The Changing Shape of our Salvation*, (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY), 2007, p.96

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (p.97)

ways to connect with God. Others are musical. For them the saying rings true: the one who sings prays twice! Others are quiet. For them, connecting with God is deeply personal, private.

For all of us, communing with God includes communicating with God. I have a little sign in my office that says, “Prayer is when you talk to God; meditation is when you listen to God.”

“Work out your salvation” also speaks to a kind of openness about one’s own self. We might call this self-improvement. It is the kind of work we all do on our personalities and character traits to become better people.....or, better said, to come more into the image of Christ.

We do this because Scripture holds up a standard of Christ-like behavior that we want for ourselves. We even hear a little bit of it in the Philippians reading: “be of the same mind, having the same love; do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” We have to work at these things: humility; charity; agreeableness.

“Work out your salvation” means that we haven’t arrived. We’re on a journey. In some sense we are perpetual pilgrims. There is still something new to learn; some new spiritual practice to master. This is in contrast to “the premature certainty” of some Christians who feel that once they’ve accepted Jesus as Savior, they’re done: they’re saved!

Long-time Newsweek magazine religion editor, Kenneth Woodward, said of one prominent evangelical preacher, “He was already saved and so had nothing to learn from others that was of any importance to his relationship to God.”<sup>3</sup> That’s not working out your salvation. That’s not swimming in the pools of God’s love. That’s self-satisfaction.

What is salvation to you? What does it mean to be saved by Christ? I hope you’ll think on these things this week as you consider how it is that you work out your salvation with fear and trembling!

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., (p.98)