



good shepherd
presbyterian church

A Planting of the Lord

Isaiah 61:1-6a,10-11; 1 Peter 2:5,9-10

Sermon by: Robert Austell
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Today I want to unpack a word a bit for you and that word is 'salvation'. While it can be used in a non-religious sense, it's a pretty religious word and people can use it in a number of different ways. It's also an important word... more than that, a reality. And so I want to look at some of what the Bible has to say about salvation.

First, what it is not. Salvation isn't a "ticket to heaven" with little other meaning than getting you through the gate to the great theme park in the sky. And while I say that a little tongue-in-cheek, it is what many Christians, including me, have taken it to mean at some point.

What is it, then? The Bible's answer to that is deep and wide and rich indeed. First of all, the word itself doesn't mean 'ticket' or 'admission' but 'rescue' or 'deliverance'. And while in every day terms we might only talk about being rescued from a fire or dangerous situation, the more full-orbed and biblical meaning of this rescue includes three components: FROM what, TO what, and importantly, FOR what.

We could begin answering those questions from a number of places in Scripture, but today we are going to look at Isaiah and 1 Peter, who use several vivid and effective images and metaphors to help us understand salvation. We'll start in Isaiah.

When God Plants a Tree...

Isaiah writes about the Good News of God's salvation. It is the same that Jesus read and echoed in his own ministry: to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners, to comfort all who mourn and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. From that Good News, Isaiah moves to a powerful image to describe the result of that Good News and that salvation. He writes that that we will be called a "planting of the Lord." Imagine what we would be without that Good

News, without God's intervention. Isaiah tells us: we would remain lost and hopeless: broken-heartedness, captivity, and mourning would remain. Later in the New Testament, we read that it's even more bleak: we would be dead, lost in our trespasses and sins. That's the FROM WHAT I described earlier.

But God has intervened to rescue His people! Isaiah describes this death-to-life Good News in this way: God plants us like seeds into the soil of the world. We are given new names and new identities. We are reborn and resurrected with purpose. And Isaiah says that we grow up into "oaks of righteousness." That imagery brings much to mind. In order to grow and thrive we long for the water of the Holy Spirit, the nurture of the community of faith, the nourishment of God's Word, and the light of Christ. Isaiah moves from that imagery into a description of the restoration God will bring about. Simply said, God's salvation is rebirth as a new creation. There is no sin, past or present, that is greater than God's forgiveness, and there is no devastation or ruin in life that God cannot begin to rebuild and make new. There may be scars – even Christ bears the scars of our sin. But in these verses we may anticipate the words of Christ, "Behold, I make all things new." That's the TO WHAT I mentioned: God rescues us for new life.

God heals and makes whole; but the greater consequence of this restoration is pointed out in the text... that God may be glorified. When someone saw the wall of Jerusalem rebuilt, a natural reaction would be to say, "I know how badly that wall was destroyed; who built it back?!" Likewise, people will look at us, particularly people who know us, and say, "Who did that to you? Who put you back together after all you've been through? How did you find such peace? What's your secret?" To God be the glory! That's the FOR WHAT... to participate in bringing glory to God before all the world.

That glory-giving is described in verses 10-11, which you heard as our call to worship:

I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up, So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise To spring up before all the nations.

Priests of the Lord

The second image given in today's text for those God rescues is "priests of the Lord." Both Isaiah AND Peter tell us that we are priests. Scripture tells us that in Jesus Christ, God came to seek and to save the world. For all who hear, believe, and follow, Isaiah and Peter describe at least three truths:

RE-CREATION: God declares a new name and a new identity

RESTORATION: God is in the process of building and restoring (imago Dei)

PARTICIPATION: God invites our partnership in His work/glory (missio Dei)

Now here's the last part of that "reality sequence." Not only has God sought you, saved you, and renamed you... not only is God remaking and renewing you... God wants you to work for him in the meantime! This is an elaboration on the FOR WHAT – how it is that we participate in God's glory.

God doesn't just pull us out of the trash can. God doesn't even just pull us out of the trash can and clean us up. God doesn't even just pull us out of the trash, clean us up, and fix us, only to display us. God does all that to INVOLVE us in bringing glory to His name.

Our scriptures today describe at least three things priests do. This isn't talking about Old Testament priests; it's not talking about modern day pastors; it is talking about every Christian who is being remade into the likeness of Christ, who is our great high priest... every one of us!

Priests Worship by "offering up spiritual sacrifices" (v.5) – The first thing we are to do as priests after the example of Jesus is to worship God. Our praises, our offerings, our service, our obedience... all of what constitutes worship is our "spiritual sacrifice" to God. All this work God has done in you is to culminate in this! The salvation, the re-creation, the restoration, the new identity – it all is to prepare you and equip you to worship. Well, that's not so hard, is it? Does God really have to do all that to me for me to come to worship? 1 Peter makes clear that worship is not something we come to, it is something we offer! You are not the audience; God is the audience! You and I are the players on the field, the performers on the stage, and the workers in the field. Worship is work; worship is serving; worship is obedience. It is the job of a priest of the Lord, and that is what God has declared you to be!

Priests "proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (vv.9-10) – Peter only reinforces the words of Isaiah 61 – "The Spirit of the Lord... has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted... to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord..." Priests, and that means all Christians, are to pattern themselves after Jesus Christ, for whom this Isaiah passage was crucial! Our words and our lives are to be full of proclamation of the good and hopeful news of our God and His great mercy.

Priests Live Love (Isaiah 61 again) – Those same words in Isaiah 61 also describe what the Bible means by "love of neighbor" in the context of worshiping God and

proclaiming His mercies. We are to “bind up the brokenhearted [and] comfort all who mourn.” As we love and care for those in need... those all around us... our neighbors... we demonstrate the love of God and in doing so help fulfill the other responsibilities of priests – proclaiming God’s mercy and serving God in love and worship.

It’s all related! What it means to be a priest of the Lord is simply what it means to be a Christian and to follow Christ. We are to love God and love one another through worship, proclamation, and living out love. In doing so, we bring all honor and glory to God, our Father and Creator. That’s why God made us and is God’s purpose in saving, renaming, renovating, and recruiting us!

Planted to be Priests

We’ve covered a lot of ground! And I realize that few of us (and I include myself!) feel qualified to be an official “priest of the Lord.” I recognize that we are works in progress... and I think both passages recognize this with their choice of imagery. We are a planting of the Lord on the way to becoming a full-grown oak. We are living stones being built into a spiritual house. (We didn’t even delve into that image today!) At the same time, God has declared our new identity and name as a reality. We are new creations! We are beloved sons; we are beloved daughters! We are forgiven and set free!

And so, while God is doing the work of transforming us into the image of Christ – the work of bringing our experience into alignment with our spiritual identity and reality – God calls us into His service. That sentence is the message of today’s sermon and text in a nutshell – let me say it again in a different way...

This is all about following Jesus Christ. As we follow Jesus in faith, God promises to forgive, deal with, rework, and renovate the mess in our lives. We can purposely stall that, but as we follow Christ and seek God’s healing, He will do it. And as God is transforming us, he recruits us – again, as followers of Jesus – into His service as priests of the Lord. We express our faith and faithfulness through our worship, our proclamation, and our living out of mercy and love. It is for God’s glory – that’s why we are here!

You were once not a people, but now you are the people of God. You once had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Go, worship and serve the Lord! Amen.