

Matthew 1: 18-21  
**Born to Save**  
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There have been some people, who, the minute they were born, everyone knew that they were destined for greatness. In 1500 A.D. a baby boy was born that all expected great things from. His name was Charles, and his father was Duke Philip the Handsome, the Duke of Burgundy, and Charles' mother was Joanna the mad, the Daughter of the famous king and queen Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. On top of all this, Charles belonged to the famous Hapsburg family, which was the family that ruled the German states. So when Charles was only a day old, he already was a powerful person, being the future ruler of part of France, much of Germany, some of Italy, and all of Spain. This Charles became Charles V, one of the most powerful rulers ever in Europe. But this didn't surprise anyone, because ever since Charles' royal birth, everyone expected him to become great.

But that's more the exception than the norm. When Hans and Margarethe Luther looked at little Martin in his cradle, they could not imagine that he would lead a reformation of his church that nearly cost him his life, but which would lead to the establishment of the Protestant church. They wondered if he would survive childhood.

Or Abraham Lincoln's parents never looked at little Abe when he was a newborn out on the frontier and thought, "This baby is destined for greatness! He's going to be president of the US." They couldn't have thought that.

Because of speech difficulties, Herman and Pauline Einstein were told by Albert's teachers that their son would never amount to anything. But Albert Einstein took care of that misconception later on by becoming the father of modern physics.

Anytime we go over a newborn child, we don't know what the future will hold for him or her. There are so many factors and circumstances that could lead to anything or nothing.

This morning I want to talk about another baby who was destined for greatness even before he was born. That is why I chose the passage for this morning. We can't get enough of the truly scandalous birth story of Jesus as reported to us in scriptures, and how God intervened to keep Joseph calm and Mary safe. It is God's instructions to Joseph that tell us of the greatness to come from this child. His name shall be Jesus which means "God saves," and he is going to save his people from their sins.

Choosing a name for a child is a very important responsibility. Often parents consider many things when choosing a name for their child. The choice may be to honor a family member or a close friend, or in admiration for a famous person. Mine was the “name” of the year – I have been told by my mother.

In the ancient, Biblical world, names were important for identity and meaning for the individual as a member of a community. Children were given names by their parents, which were significant to the circumstances of their birth or the destiny of the child. An example is the name, Moses, which in Hebrew means literally ‘to draw out’. This is an appropriate name for Moses, who as an infant was saved from death by being drawn out of the water by Pharaoh’s daughter. As a man, Moses became the leader of the Hebrew people and led them out of slavery in Egypt to freedom.

Sometimes the name of a person in the Bible changes because of specific circumstances. Jesus changed the Hebrew name of his disciple, Simon, to the Greek name, Petros, which means ‘rock’, because Jesus wanted Simon to build a foundation for his mission to the world.

The name given to Jesus was not chosen by Mary and Joseph. His name was chosen by God and told it to them before the baby was born. In the gospels, he is called Jesus, which is the Greek version of his Hebrew name. The Hebrew name of Jesus is Joshua, more properly pronounced Yeshua, which means ‘The Lord saves’ or simply ‘Savior’. It seems that God had a special plan for this infant; a plan that would be revealed gradually over many years.

“He will save his people from their sins.” I trust you get that this is the crux of the matter at hand. When I hear the words sins and save/salvation my mind automatically goes in to a number of uncomfortable directions like: Jesus died for our sins; salvation means that I have to accept JC as Lord and Savior in order to go to heaven; I can never be good enough; etc. Traditional Christian Theology has conditioned us to associate salvation with heaven. “Are your saved ?” most often means “Are you confident that you will go to heaven when you die?” Salvation is about the next world.

Marcus Borg says in his book “The Heart of Christianity” that the major emphasis on the afterlife and how we get there is one of the worst contributions to the Christian religion for three reasons. Why?

1. When the afterlife is primarily emphasized, the invariable result is that it turns Christianity into a religion of requirements – a result that is at odds with a good, loving, and gracious God.
2. It also creates a religion that makes a distinction between the ‘ins’ and the ‘out’ – those who are saved and those who are not.

3. And when the focus is on the afterlife, then there is not reason for any kind of transformation in and of this world.

The afterlife is certainly part of the HS in the Book of Daniel in particular, and the writers of the NT believed in an afterlife.

Paul spoke of being in Christ forever. In John's gospel eternal life is a major theme, and Revelation concludes with a magnificent vision of the new Jerusalem. And even though Paul believes in an afterlife, he puts his primary emphasis on new life "in Christ" in this life, in the here and now, a metaphor that has both personal and social dimensions.

It is my own belief that Jesus did not walk this earth to prepare me and you solely for life in heaven, life beyond death; he came to prepare us for a faithful life here on earth. He came to transform his people of his time, to bring about the Kingdom of God; and he is still transforming us today.

Let's take a look at the sins of the people Jesus was sent to save. By the way, these sins of the people then do not differ from the sins of people living today. The sins of his people could be summed up in three words: separation from God. It is that simple and yet kind of complicated because there are so many different understandings of sin out there.

The most common association with the word sin is disobedience, breaking the rules, being bad, ignoring God's law. Sin is the failure of keeping God's law such as the 10 commandment or the Golden Rule. It is the action or actions that keep human beings separated from God.

Sin can also encompass a state of mind that produces specific separating behaviors. Pride (hubris) is in that category; self-concern that guides life. When we are overly self-concerned, we might become anxious and self-centered which does not leave much thought for the people and world around us. The "I" takes precedence over everything else. (Niebuhr)

Sin speaks of the relationship with God. Do we trust God? Do we love God with heart, life, strength, and mind? Do we truly love God? If we don't then the sin is "idolatry" or "adultery" in the sense that our trust goes toward something else.

So, sin can be named as disobedience, estrangement, pride, infidelity, lack of trust. This is just a snapshot of how sin is described in Holy Scriptures. There are many rich images or metaphors for our human condition: we might be blind, estranged, lost, in exile, self-centered, wounded, sick, paralyzed, trapped, heartless, living in darkness or behind closed doors, hungry and thirsty.

Sin is as much a personal issue as it is a social issue because sin does not just affect our personal lives but also our life together in community, country, and world. If our sin is self-centeredness then it is likely that the hungry are not being fed, the homeless and not housed, the lonely are not visited, the strangers not being welcomed. Social sins have real practical and detrimental implications on our life together.

But sin has a remedy, right? The correlative image in the Bible and in Christian thought is forgiveness – this one-size-fits-all designator of the human condition. When I have done something wrong then I seek forgiveness, right? - To wipe the slate clean, to make amends.

But here is something interesting about forgiveness: is not what is needed when I am struck with blindness. What's needed is sight. When I am hungry and thirsty I don't need forgiveness, I need food. When I am lost in my own world, I need new direction. When I live in exile, I need to be brought home. You get the idea.

Forgiveness – to forgive and be forgiven – has its powerful place in the human psyche and in the healing of relationships but more is needed; a new way, a transformation of the heart. **That is why God sent us Jesus to save his people and us.**

In simple terms salvation means to be saved from our predicament, from the self-inflicted sins to the ones caused by the social systems of which we are part.

Jesus came to show us a new way – for our personal lives and our lives together. I think we know our demons, the pieces of our lives that hold us back from embracing life abundantly, to trusting and loving God with all our heart, mind and soul.

And salvation also embraces a huge social component. Salvation is about life together in community. Salvation is about peace and justice within community and beyond. It is about shalom, a word that not just simply means peace as the absence of war, but peace as the wholeness of a community living together in peace and justice. Salvation in the Bible is never just an individual affair.

Jesus taught us that salvation is about bringing the Kingdom of God into being here on earth. Paul also, in creating new Christian community, stood for the social aspects of salvation, because they were communities in Christ whose life together embodied an alternative vision to that of the empire, the world they knew.

These early communities were communities of bread as well as Spirit: the sharing of the necessities of life, placing everyone on an even playing field, making sure that everyone is included and taken care of.

Our Savior was given to us by a more than gracious God. Salvation came from God, and it requires a response from us. Archbishop Desmond Tutu quoted St. Augustine, one of the early theologians of the church: "God without us will not do, as we without God cannot." God needs our response in order to transform us or this world.

What might be a first step to bring transformation about? Repentance – not just contrition but resolve. Repentance means primarily a return to God, to reconnect with God. To repent means to walk out of our exile or wilderness and toward God once again.

Repentance is the path of salvation, the path of reconnection, transformation, and being born again, the path of moving from a life that is dead to a life that is alive.

So, that was a lot of theology in one sermon. Let me end with this story. It is about a soldier, a soldier in the Israeli army.

One day he was on patrol in an area of occupied Palestine when he felt a rock strike him in the back. Before he had a chance to turn around, another rock had struck him in the shoulder, then another hit his helmet.

He whirled around, his rifle ready to fire. In his sights were several Palestinian children. Children. They were picking up more stones to throw at him. The soldier did not want to fire, but he could not allow them to attack him again.

Suddenly, he had an idea. He bent down and picked up three of the rocks. He picked them up and began to juggle. Yes, juggle. The children were mesmerized and forgot about their stones. The soldier did a few tricks, and the children laughed. Then he did a grand finale, and they applauded. He took a bow and walked away.

That soldier did not end the war between Israel and Palestine with his action. But he took what had been hurled as weapons and transformed them into objects of wonder. He took a broken moment and made it whole with the laughter of children. That moment revealed God's shalom and God's salvation. Amen.

Sources: Speaking Christian and The Heart of Christianity, Books by Marcus Borg

[www.epiphanydc.org/sermons/sermon\\_2006\\_04\\_23\\_Hensley.pdf](http://www.epiphanydc.org/sermons/sermon_2006_04_23_Hensley.pdf)