

GOD ACTS TO SAVE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Feb. 14, 2016
Based on Isaiah 53:3-11 and Romans 3:21-26***

The sermon refers extensively to the rescue of Modern Express, a cargo ship that foundered in the Mediterranean a few weeks ago. Images of the unfolding saga were shown on the screen in each worship setting. You can find these images and the whole story by doing an internet search for “Modern Express Cargo Ship.”

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled “Ten Truths that Change Life, during which we are looking at key Biblical ideas which have been and continue to be revolutionary in human life. This morning we are looking at the whole idea of “salvation.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

A few weeks ago off the southern coast of France, a ship called the “Modern Express” was in serious trouble. It was a heavily loaded freighter, listing badly in rough seas, without power, being driven slowly by the wind and waves toward a crash point that would be somewhere along the rocky coast. That ship was an appropriate image, in a way, of our whole human condition. Like the ship, we have been created at the outset with an impressive set of gifts and abilities. We talked in the first sermon in this series about how we have been created by God in the image of God; God has given us reason and creativity and all sorts of talents, God has given us a moral awareness and the capacity to do good and to authentically love, and God has given us a spiritual sense and the ability to respond to God and live in a relationship with God. But, like the ship, we are in trouble. We talked in the second sermon in this series about how we have fallen into sin, which means to go our own way apart from God, and in cutting ourselves off from God our human life becomes seriously askew. We end up in damaging behaviors and misplaced priorities and distorted values. When we look at the world today, is it not plain that the world, like this ship, is off kilter? So we are adrift; and each of us is heading inexorably toward final destruction in death.

But we are not alone on the seas of life. You will note that above the ship there is a helicopter, with a very concerned pilot looking down on the ship, and the 22 sailors who were stuck on the ship. In a much larger sense, there is Someone above us looking with concern upon us. In the third installment of this sermon series, we noted that there is one God who reigns above all who is good and who looks with care upon human beings. But obviously, if the ship is going to get out of trouble, it is going to need more than someone looking with concern upon it; it is going to need help. We noted in the fourth installment of this sermon series that in order for us to get on the right track in life, we need help—we need God to show us how to live rightly and, even more, to enable us finally to live rightly.

So in the case of the ship, what did the crew on the helicopter do? They acted decisively to rescue the sailors and to save the ship. Helicopters airlifted the sailors off the ship, one by one, while a tugboat sought to attach a line to the ship—all of which was no easy task, and took several days to accomplish. But finally—success! The ship was under tow, being pulled away from destruction toward a harbor, and the sailors were all safe.

If you were a sailor on that listing ship, there is one thing of which you would have been keenly aware during this whole crisis --- that you needed salvation. Yet this bit of wisdom is often lacking among people when it comes to our human condition. People may recognize that life is off kilter, that our human journey is in peril, and that the rocks of destruction are out there; but they often want to think that we don't need any higher power, that we can just straighten things out on our own. But to imagine that we don't need salvation is to seriously underestimate our situation. What if the sailors on that ship had decided to go it alone and try to rescue the ship themselves? They could have gotten out the oars or raised a sail—that would have been ridiculously inadequate. Likewise we cannot save ourselves from our troubled condition, from our spiritual alienation, or from the onslaught of death.

Of course, some people today will acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves and will conclude that the only thing left to do is to just try to have a good time in life until the end comes. I suppose that those sailors could have done that—they could have had party on the ship until they were dashed to pieces on the rocks or sank to the bottom. But what the sailors actually did was to sound an S.O.S.—to call for a rescue, and salvation came.

In the history of religion, one of the universal human perceptions has been that human life is fundamentally off kilter and that something needs to happen in order to set things aright; but there has been a general lack of clarity about where salvation might come from and what exactly it will look like. There is a pattern here that we have seen throughout this sermon series—that human beings have a universal spiritual awareness, a basic perception of spiritual truth, but in our sinfulness we tend to have a blurred spiritual vision. So, for example, we saw in this series that there has been a universal awareness of the reality of God—every human culture throughout history has believed in an ultimate spiritual Power—but there has been general lack of clarity about what God is like, with ancient peoples often imagining that there are numerous gods and that the gods are quarrelsome and not particularly concerned about human beings. The clear truth comes through in the Bible, and supremely in Jesus—that the one God is good, and beneficent toward us. Likewise we saw in this sermon series how there has been a universal human moral awareness—a general sense of right and wrong—but in our sinfulness our values become distorted, or our values become limited, so that we may agree, for example, that murder is wrong, but only apply that principle to our own circle. The clear truth comes through in the Bible and supremely in Jesus, who shows

us fully how to live, and who promises to enable us to live rightly. So when it comes to the whole question of salvation, human beings again have a basic spiritual awareness but a blurred vision—there is a universal perception that the human ship is in trouble but lack of clarity about how exactly we can be saved.

In the history of human religion, one of the ideas that has often emerged is the belief that the way to salvation will be through rigorous spiritual effort. Salvation must be achieved through self-discipline and self-purification and moral exertion. So you become a monk, or work your way up a spiritual ladder through good works and all sorts of pious activities. The problem with this approach is that few people make it very far up the ladder, and there is a serious question as to whether anyone will make it to the top. The attempt to achieve salvation through spiritual effort is simply the religious version of the modern secular idea that we have to somehow save ourselves. But when we truly recognize how serious our situation is, and how weak we are, we perceive that any sort of self-rescue is impossible.

So another approach in the history of religion and philosophy is to just give up on the salvation effort and resign ourselves to our gloomy destiny. This was the approach of the Stoics in ancient Greece, who said you simply have to accept your fate; or along with that there was the approach of the Epicureans, who said that you might as well party and have as much fun as possible while accepting your fate. Again we've got modern secular parallels to these ideas, but of course this sort of path does not have a happy end.

Within the human religious quest, what many people finally came to realize is what those sailors perceived on that ship—to be saved, we must become positively connected to a saving power beyond ourselves. The theological word for that connection is the word “atonement.” Atonement means, first of all, the wiping away of anything that is preventing our connection with God—thus the cleansing of our sin—and it means the restoration of a full life-giving connection with God. You could think of the word as “at-one-ment.” An atonement is something that enables us who are sinners to become “at one” with God.

So what can bring about atonement? What can put weak, sinful human beings into a saving connection with God? Across human cultures, a perception emerged that *atonement will be created through a sacrifice*. In ancient Israel, lambs were offered on the altar, and as the sacrifice was made, there was a sense that the sacrificial lamb was absorbing the punishment for the sins of the human community, while at the same time a life was being offered to bring people into connection with God. This basic idea of sacrifice emerged everywhere; in all different societies across millennia, the practice of atoning sacrifice upon an altar appears over and over—it is as though there was implanted within the human spirit a basic sense that a sacrifice of atonement would reconcile us to God. But once again, although there was a universal human perception about the place of atoning sacrifice, there was a lack of clear vision as to what exactly

the sacrifice was to be or how it could happen. Most cultures and religions sacrificed various sorts of animals. Some sacrificed people; and in every case, it was still a matter of human beings making the sacrifice—trying to do something to put themselves into connection with God.

The clear truth comes through in the Bible and supremely in Jesus. The central message of the Bible is that God acts to save us. This idea itself is revolutionary in human history. Religion everywhere was always about people engaging in rituals and practices to try to get the attention of divine powers, to try to curry the favor of the gods, and to try to put oneself into connection with divine help. But the Bible declares that God takes the initiative; God acts to save us. It is not even quite like the sailors on that ship. They surely sent out a cry for help; but the Bible says that God reaches to us even before we call. [*The Lord says, "Before they call I will answer." Isaiah 65:24*] And as God acts to save us, it is God who makes the atoning sacrifice, in order to put us right with God. God comes to us in Jesus, who offers his life for us on the cross; he becomes "the lamb of God"—who takes upon himself the punishment for all our sins, so that we can be forgiven, and brought into life-giving connection with God. As Paul said in that passage we heard in Romans, "God put Christ forward as a sacrifice of atonement, effective through faith." [Romans 3:25]

On the Modern Express, the sailors received the decisive rescue that came to them from beyond, and they and their ship were saved. Today the good news is that God through Christ has come to save us. We are not left to try to save ourselves from sin and from destruction and death, or to just resign ourselves to a grim fate. We can receive the salvation of Jesus Christ in faith; and as we do, we are rescued by God's grace and brought into the life and goodness and eternal promises of God.