

The Freedom of Eternal Salvation

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Isaiah 53:4-12 (NRSV)

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.⁹ They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.¹² Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was

numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Hebrews 5:1-10 (NRSV)

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.² He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness;³ and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.⁴ And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”;⁶ as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Mark 10:35-45 (NRSV)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”³⁶ And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”³⁷ And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”³⁹ They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”⁴¹ When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.⁴² So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.⁴³ But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

It's good to be back at St. David's. I livestreamed Elizabeth's service on Saturday. It reminded me once again that you have been through a hard time as a parish. So this morning I'd like us to think about how you started and why you're here. One dimension of your story is told on your website—how the diocese bought the land in 1964, the first services were held in 1967, and so forth. Someone with historical interest might go back to 1607, when the first Anglican service was held at Jamestown, starting what eventually became the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

Then you could go back through church history to the Reformation and the unique establishment of the Church of England, and then back to the Roman Catholic Church, and farther back to the Christianization of the Roman Empire. You could go back to Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead around 33 A.D. as the real reason St. David's is here today.

But to get the real reason, we have to go back even farther—into Eternity itself, to before God created the universe. We have to go back to the heart of the eternal uncreated God, the Holy Trinity. This is where God's loving purpose in creating humanity springs from. Eons before he spoke the universe into being, God had it in his heart to create a universe, and in it he made a unique being in his own image. Out of his infinite love, he gave them his own life. And he gave them a choice. He gave them the choice of living the way he wanted them to, or to live the way they wanted to. Sadly, they chose to live their way.

Things haven't gone well for them ever since. Ever since human beings can remember, they've treated each other badly, they've ruined the beautiful places God gave them to live. And they've suffered terribly because they loved each other—and then they would die. Every day death takes away people who are loved by other people. We've all experienced this.

Human beings haven't improved their behavior. And they haven't solved the problem of death. Only God can do that—and he has. He has sent his Son all the way from eternity to be born in Bethlehem of Judea as a human baby who grew into the only human being who ever lived the way God wants his people to live. Of course, I'm talking about Jesus. The Bible is all about Jesus, and our readings this morning are all about Jesus. And God's eternal love in sending Jesus into this world is why St. David's is here.

Our reading from Isaiah is about God's servant, Jesus. Though it was written 700 years before he was born, it describes how he was rejected by his own people. And it describes how **“he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”** The people who caused him to die considered him to be a **“transgressor,”** someone who doesn't live the way God wants, but the way he wants. But in reality, he was taking their punishment for living their way instead of God's—**“he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”** That is, he came between the transgressors and God.

This is where our reading from Hebrews comes in. It talks about Jesus as our high priest. A priest presents the people to God, and God to the people. Though he was born thousands of years later in Bethlehem of Judea, Hebrews tells us that in eternity, before creation, God the Father told him, **“You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”** This is a quote from Psalm 2. The writer of Hebrews goes on, **“as he says also in another place, (Psalm 110) “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.”** So who is this Melchizedek? He's a mysterious king and priest who shows up in Genesis 14. Abraham—Jesus' ancestor, who lived thousands of years before him—gave a tenth of his income to Melchizedek. Later in the Letter to the Hebrews that author describes Melchizedek this way: **“Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.”** (Hebrews 7:3 NRSV) Melchizedek's priesthood extends into the future forever *because* it comes from eternity. Melchizedek's priesthood is the job description for the job that Jesus has carried out.

Which brings us to Jesus and the disciples in our reading from Mark. James and John are star-struck from having been around Jesus. They've come to understand that Jesus means to usher in a new kingdom of peace and love and glory—and they want the top jobs. They ask him, **“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”** How does he respond? Mark tells us, **“Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking.’”**

He goes on to tell them about how his kingdom works. The greatest people in our world lord it over the lesser people. Some of those underlings get top jobs. But not in God's kingdom. In God's kingdom, the servant is the greatest—and Jesus is the greatest servant.

He's the servant from eternity, who gave his life for the transgressors. He's the high priest from eternity who puts himself between a holy God and a sinful human race. Our lessons today are telling us that salvation through Jesus is eternal salvation. That is, it began before the universe began in the heart of the One True God and it extends beyond the life of this planet or the universe into the uncharted reaches of eternity. And he came, **“not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”**

Jesus' death was not a tragic mistake. It was not another bleak story of a virtuous person ruthlessly hounded to death by ignorant people. It was God's purpose from eternity to give **“his only Son so that all who believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”** Why? Because he **“so loved the world.”**

When human beings chose to live the way they wanted to instead of the way God wants them to, they were choosing to be mastered—tyrannized—by their own thoughts and desires and impulses. They were choosing not to be free. Open your Prayer Books to page 99. At the bottom of the page is the Collect for Peace. Let's read it together: **“O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom: Defend us, your humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”**

The opening of his prayer teaches us two things: first, that to know God is eternal life. Knowing in the Bible means more than having command of facts about something or someone. It means entering into a relationship with someone. In Jesus, God chose from all eternity to enter into a relationship with us, and we with him. Through his death for our sins and his rising from the dead he has conquered both sin and death—for us. Second, it teaches us that serving God is perfect freedom. That's because God is the only being in the universe that is completely free. There are no limits on who he is or what he can choose to do. So when we serve him, we are entering into his freedom. We are choosing to step away from the tyranny of our own mistaken or limited or foolish ideas about who we think we ought to be or what we think we ought to do and we're aligning ourselves with God, the eternal creator of the universe. He has loved us and purposed our eternal salvation since before the world was made. Only in our eternal salvation are we truly free. When we serve God through his Son Jesus, we are entering into the freedom to be free from ourselves.

Think for a moment—what do you want to be free from? You know.

Let's ask Jesus right now to free us to serve him in perfect freedom.

Let us pray.