

Jesus: God Saves

Luke 2:1-20

Naming a child is a special privilege given parents. Some take it seriously and some.... It might be wise to consider how the name would sound if the child were to become an international leader: President Charlie Brown; Secretary of State Pippi Longstocking! A child might be named for an ancestor to carry on a family tradition. A special friend might be honored by granting their name to a child. Sometimes a name is selected for its meaning.

In ancient days names were chosen to represent the significance God intended for a child. Tonight we celebrate the birth of a child named Jesus. His name was given by the angel Gabriel, a messenger of God, who announced to Mary, "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Luke 1:31). Luke also tells us that eight days after the birth, the baby was circumcised and given the name of Jesus, as his mother was instructed before he was conceived in the womb (2:21).

Jesus is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Joshua. The meaning is "God saves." You recall in the Hebrew Scriptures that Joshua is the successor to Moses, who led the people Israel out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. Jesus will continue that tradition of deliverance. The liberation he offers is salvation from our sins, from those things that separate us from God and one another. We human beings too often let our own desire, anger, fear, hurt and prejudice alienate us from God and from our fellow human beings. Jesus comes to offer a life-saving bridge so that we might find our way back into the life, energy, and heart of God.

For nearly two thousand years theologians have tried to understand the mystery of salvation. There are theories of atonement that seek to explain how Jesus' death on the cross was the instrument of salvation. No explanation has completely satisfied all. What it comes down to is simply accepting that the saving grace of God is a gift. God loves us so much that God sent a Son that through him the world might be saved.

To save is to heal or to make whole. God longs to heal us of the pain, frustration, terror, and loneliness that haunts us. In Jesus, God says, "Let go of all that binds you. Let it go and let me hold you, heal you. Come, rest in my love. Come, be made whole."

When Brian was a child, his father had one story that he liked to tell. It was the story of the "good little boy." Once upon a time there was a good little boy who was the oldest son of a poor widowed mother. He had younger brothers and sisters and together they had nothing. The little boy

went to work at a store every day after school and brought home his meager earnings to help his family survive. On Christmas Eve at the 11:00 worship, it was the custom for everyone to bring a gift to place at the manger of the Christ child.

The year came when the little boy was finally old enough to attend the midnight worship. He wondered what he would give the Christ child because he didn't have anything except a little toy car. It was his favorite thing, but it was broken. Two of the four wheels were missing, the roof was bashed in; but when he played doctor, the car was his ambulance. When he played soldier, the little car was the tank. It was whatever he needed it to be; it was all he had. He couldn't imagine giving his toy car to the baby Jesus.

He decided to get a before-school job. "I'll work before Christmas and then I'll have some money to do something for the baby Jesus." He got up early every morning before school and worked. On Christmas Eve he was sitting at the family table counting his extra earnings. He wondered if there was time to go buy a gift for the baby Jesus or whether he would just give his earnings. His mother came through the kitchen. Seeing the money on the table, she said, "Oh, my son, thank you so much. Now we'll have enough for a real Christmas dinner." She gathered up the boy's meager earnings and ran off to the store to purchase dinner.

The good little boy went to his room. He tried not to be angry with his mother. He saw his broken little car. That's all he had, so he took it with him to midnight worship and made his way to the manger. The church had a long center aisle, with side rooms, wings, we might call them, a few pews way over here and a few pews over there. In one wing they set up the manger scene. Everyone came in and laid their gifts at the foot of the baby Jesus. The little boy came and hid his broken car in the corner and sat in the front pew among strangers.

Just before the service began, an usher looked at the gifts in their wrappings. He saw the broken toy there and said, "Who left this piece of junk here?" He grabbed it and threw it across the room to the wing on the other side. At that time the procession began and the priests and choirs began to walk down the long center aisle. As they got to the front, they stopped. The baby Jesus had come to life and he was crawling on the cold stone across the sanctuary. Everyone dropped to their knees as the baby Jesus went to the far side of church, found the broken car, held it under his arm, and crawled back to his crib to become, with the toy in his arms, the little plastic Jesus in the manger again.

Brian says that as a child he came to resent his father's story. His father was a drunk and abusive man. Brian had a terrible childhood. He always thought that his father was presenting himself as the good little boy. Brian knew that his father was not good.

When Brian grew up, he left the church and later as an adult made his way back. He came to Christmas Eve worship one night and thought about the story his father had told him as a child. He felt that old resentment rising as he thought about his father lifting himself up as the good little boy. Then he realized that his father was not the good little boy after all. His father was the broken toy. He realized how, as broken as his father was, perhaps more than anything in all the world, his father wished to be picked up and cradled in the arms of the Christ child.¹

My friends, God invites you to place your brokenness in the manger, that you might be cradled in the arms of Jesus, and loved into wholeness.

There is too much brokenness in our world – in our personal lives and in our communities, nations, and world. When we take out our pain on one another, we only increase the brokenness. Jesus offers us a place to take our brokenness for healing, so that we don't have to inflict our pain on others. Jesus receives our brokenness, cradles us in his loving arms, and makes us whole.

This holy night we are invited to place our personal hurt and the anguish of our broken world in the manger, in order that we and all God's people might be cradled with love, healed, and made whole.

Jesus means God saves, God heals, God makes whole. Praise be to God for Jesus!

O Holy Child of Bethlehem, we celebrate your birth this sacred night. We have been making ready our hearts and our homes to welcome you once again. We have been longing for the rebirth of your presence in our lives. We yearn for your truth to purge the falsehoods that deceive us. We hope for you to establish God's reign of justice and peace on earth. We wait for you to descend into the ruins of our lives and reshape us into whole persons reflecting your glory.

Light of the World, shatter the darkness of despair with your brilliant rays of light.

Bread of Life, inspire sharing of our abundance so that the loaves and fish that feed us might be multiplied to satisfy the hunger of all.

Living Water, quench the thirst of dry, barren, parched souls that they might be stirred to life, hope, and joy.

Door of welcome, show the lost and forlorn the way through your portal and onto the pathway that leads to life abundant.

Fruit-bearing Vine, reconnect us to the source of all life that we might be enriched to bear our gifts to the world.

Healing Jesus, touch those who are hurting and make them whole.

Trusting in your promise to renew hope, faith and love, we offer our lives to you this night, O Lord. Receive us, with our mixture of brokenness and gifts, of hopes and fears. Shape us into followers who walk in the way of Jesus and who dwell in the heart of God.

Come, Savior of the nations, come with your healing balm to repair relations between warring tribes and factions. Teach us the art of peaceful living with the multitude of creatures you have made. Save us from our selfish motives and free us for respectful living.

In the name of your Son, our Savior and Companion, Jesus the Christ Child, we pray. Amen.

¹ Brian Abel Ragen, "The baby Jesus and the Angel of Light," *The Christian Century*, December 13, 1995, pp. 1212-1215.

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