

Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Salvation”

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On Christmas Day Phoebe and I got into a car accident in a winter storm outside of Denver. We did not hit another car or anything else and we weren't injured other than some muscle tension from bouncing off the road and into a ditch. The damage to the car was relatively minimal, though the car would not be drivable until we got it home and into the shop for some repairs. Honestly, for everything that could have gone so much worse, it's a miracle that we and the car are now fine.

But there was a much bigger miracle at work that Christmas holiday. A police officer responded almost immediately to our 911 call and stayed with us till the car was towed, keeping his lights on to make sure no one else plowed into us, something that could have happened easily. He called the tow truck for us, recommended a motel, and then drove me to the motel while Phoebe rode with the tow guy. The officer then stayed with me till I was checked in at the motel. Ironically, we wound up at a Holiday Inn Express so I guess you could say there was room at the Inn on Christmas. The motel staff took great care of us, from putting us in a room quite close to our towed car to letting us stay in our room three hours late on the day we left. They found us a taxi driver willing to take us to the one place open to get food on Christmas Day in Brighton, Colorado: a 7-11. Not much of a Christmas dinner, admittedly, but at least we got to eat something since our no-frills motel had no dinner restaurant. The next day, our cabbie drove us to a mall where we ate lunch out and shopped for food for our motel room. We even ordered in pizza the day after Christmas, which felt like a luxury after the 7-11 food the night before.

Then one of Phoebe's college friends, who planned to drive from Illinois to Boulder, agreed to drive a bit out of her way to pick us up and bring us to her family's home for the night. We got a lovely dinner, good company, and a lift the next day to DIA, where a shuttle brought us to Colorado Springs and a friend from my church drove us home. Amazing. And in a miracle worthy almost of Jesus, all but one bottle of the wine, beer and hard cider in the car's trunk, which had frozen, melted without the bottles cracking and is now in our refrigerator.

What does any of this have to do with the concept of salvation? I mean, we all know what salvation is, right? It's being saved from sin and from hell so that one may have eternal life in heaven. Only certain people, who believe certain things, are saved. And the saving is done by God the Father through the death of his son Jesus. Aren't those the basics of salvation?

Well, not for me and perhaps not for you either. Salvation, like sin, is a concept with a lot of problems. For those of us who don't believe in heaven or hell or eternal life, or exclusivity in who gets saved or that God does the saving or that salvation happens through divine child abuse, or that the traditional understanding of salvation makes any sense in light of how Unitarian Universalists think about sin, doesn't it just make more sense to throw out the concept of salvation completely?

I don't think so, and one reason has to do with what happened to us on Christmas Day 2014 and in the days following. This may sound either crazy or melodramatic, but I think we experienced

salvation over and over during our adventure. And, no, I'm not talking about an old man in the sky reaching down to keep us from hitting any other cars. And I'm not talking about a guy on a cross making sure there was a police officer available that night. I'm talking about that which is sacred in each one of us connecting with that which is sacred in those whom we encounter. But I'll come back to that idea.

Today, I'd like to approach the idea of salvation in what I hope is a fresh way for most of you. First, I'll spend some time on the work of Marcus J. Borg, a progressive Christian theologian and biblical scholar. His book *Speaking Christian* contrasts what he calls the heaven-and-hell approach to Christianity with what early Christianity must have looked like given the Judaism from which Jesus and Paul emerged. Borg compares the two approaches by offering a chapter each on a variety of Christian concepts, one of which is salvation. I'll share some of Borg's insights about salvation as an early Christian concept, then turn to the ideas I presented about sin last month and consider what salvation might look like as a response to sin viewed as imperfection, isolation, and idolatry, both individual and collective.

Borg begins with the Hebrew Bible story of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, which makes a lot of sense. The book of Exodus notes at one point (14:30) that "the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians" by drowning the Egyptians in the sea. When Moses and the Israelites respond to God in gratitude, they sing, "The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation" (Exodus 15:2). Psalm 106:21 refers to God as Israel's Savior who had done great things in Egypt. So, we definitely have some salvation language here that is not about forgiving sins or putting people on the up escalator to heaven rather than the down escalator to hell. It's about liberation. And if we think about the situation of the Israelites under the Egyptians, which was basically slavery, we can say that salvation in this case is not just liberation in general but, as Borg points out, liberation from economic, political, and religious bondage.

What if we thought about salvation from this perspective? Are there any ways we are in bondage? In bondage to addictions, to pasts that come back to haunt us, to caring too much what others think of us? Are we in bondage to social inequality? From what do we need to be liberated? What would it mean if we were liberated? I won't try to answer these questions now because we all have our own versions of the answers, but surely, we and all human beings are children of the Israelites and ought not to be slaves. If we determine where we are enslaved, perhaps we can figure out what our salvation from slavery looks like and from whence it comes. And if we understand how others are enslaved, perhaps we ourselves have a role in freeing them.

Borg goes on to consider the concept of salvation as rescue from peril. Here, the Psalms are a particularly rich source of material. The Psalmist refers to God as "God of our salvation" (Psalm 65:5) who saved "all the oppressed of the earth" (Psalm 76:9). The notion of salvation as rescue from peril is particularly clear in prayers in which the Psalmist is asking for something: that God restore the joy of God's salvation (51:12); that God's salvation might protect the Psalmist (69:29); that God might save the Psalmist's life (6:4), and that God might save the Psalmist from the bloodthirsty (59:2) and from all the Psalmist's pursuers (7:1).

We might ask the same question about peril that we asked about slavery and liberation. Are we in perils from which we need saving? As individuals? As a society? As a planet? What dangers face us, and why? How might we be saved from them, and by whom? Do we have any role in saving others from perils?

Certainly, Phoebe's and my Christmas adventure had lots of small moments of being saved from peril: by a police officer, a tow truck guy, a whole bunch of motel clerks, a taxi driver, and our friends. In some of those cases the peril could literally have been perilous as in deadly; in other cases, the peril was better understood as difficulty or temporary hardship. Nonetheless, salvation was at hand, over and over again.

Borg goes on to point out that salvation can also be understood as transformation from that which hurts us to that which helps us. The word "salvation" is not exactly used this way in the Bible but, Borg suggests, wherever we see movement from injustice to justice and violence to peace, whenever the transformation we seek is found, it is not too strong a term to consider this salvation. Our reading today is an example of this way of thinking about salvation without actually using the word.

Recall that the prophet Micah lifted up the image of people beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. There are two important points to make about this image. First, we can either envision the people as individuals or as collectivities; we can exchange war for peace either as individuals or as a whole society. Second, Micah's language is not merely about rejecting war for peace as such but about turning the tools of human suffering into the tools of human flourishing. Such a transformation, it seems to me, is nothing less than salvation, from wherever it may come.

Micah goes on to prophesy that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more but they shall all sit under their own vines and fig trees and no one shall make them afraid. Here too Micah has wisdom for us. It is not enough that war won't be practiced; it will not even be learned. Nations will not raise their children to dehumanize others and lift up swords against them; instead, Micah's image is of nourishment, of the vine and fig tree feeding Israel and the other nations. We will neither terrorize nor be terrorized; instead, we will feast in joy and gratitude. I don't know about you, but that sounds like salvation to me.

Finally, Borg claims that the return of the Israelites from their exile in Babylon can be understood as salvation, though the term is not directly used in the Bible. The more relevant biblical term is redemption but there's plenty of evidence that the two terms are related to each other in the Hebrew Bible. Returning from exile, coming home is salvation; it certainly was for us three and a half days after our car fishtailed off I-76 on Christmas.

So, we have four images of salvation from the Hebrew Bible, courtesy of Marcus Borg: liberation from bondage, rescue from peril, transformation leading toward the world we seek, and return from exile. None of these require Jesus, heaven, hell, or particular doctrines, and interpreted by us for our own time they may not require God or religion either. I'll come back to this last point in a bit.

During my last visit I invited us to contemplate sin in what I hoped was a less toxic way than we may have learned growing up. We envisioned sin as imperfection, isolation, and idolatry, and considered the possibility that it could have both individual and social or collective manifestations.

If this is so of sin, might it not also be so of salvation? We are so used to thinking of the sin-and-salvation relationship as relying on a wholly good God to save utterly fallen and depraved people that even a gentler approach to sin might make it hard to envision salvation as something meaningful for us. But why don't we try?

If sin reasonably refers in part to human imperfection, might we think of salvation as wholeness or wellness? The word "salvation" does, after all, come from the same root as the salving of wounds. Could our efforts toward individual and collective health be a kind of salvation? Jews have a phrase, *tikkun olam*, which refers to healing the world. Perhaps our salvation comes in the work of *tikkun olam*. And thus, we find meaningful our words of welcome from Israel Zangwill, assuring us that if we come into the community of mercy, holiness, and health, we shall know peace and joy. Or, put differently, salvation.

If sin reasonably refers in part to human isolation, might we think of salvation as connection and relationship – with ourselves, each other, the world, that which we encounter as holy? After all, the classic Universalist understanding of God assumed a God in relationship with all people, even those who had rejected God. Even those of us who do not find that image of God compelling have hopefully had experiences of relationship in which we feel free, joyful, and part of something larger. It is, I think, especially the feeling that one is part of something larger that pushes against what I've called the sin of isolation. Why not think of that as one type of salvation?

If sin reasonably refers in part to human idolatry, might we think of salvation as what happens when we put our trust in what is trustworthy? That might sound abstract or arcane, but here's a translation, one that finally brings us to the question we have not faced directly yet. Putting our trust in what is trustworthy is, sooner or later, seeking salvation from that which can truly save us.

So, and here's the question of the day, who or what can truly save us? Who or what can liberate us from bondage? Rescue us from peril? Transform us so we can transform the world? Return us from exile? Heal us? Connect us with our deepest selves, with each other, and with our world more broadly? Each of these approaches to salvation sounds overwhelming enough, but taken together they sound completely impossible. Maybe the God of the Hebrew Bible could do all that but plenty of us don't understand the sacred that way. So, what's left? Who can save us?

And here's the answer: It's us, folks. We must save ourselves and each other. No, we are not, each of us, an all-powerful deity but we are what we have. Jesus and the Buddha and their compatriots are long gone to their rest. All we have left is each of us, each other, and the Spirit of Life and Love that moves within and among and between us, connecting that which is sacred within each of us to the sacred in our fellow human beings.

It is our work to liberate ourselves and each other from bondage, first by coming to understand the nature of our bondage and how to bring it to an end, and then by taking action for individual and collective freedom. Along the same lines, it is our work to rescue ourselves and each other from peril, to transform ourselves and others so the world can be transformed, and to return ourselves and each other from exile. We must heal ourselves and each other. We must be the ones to build connections and relationships. And if we take up these various kinds of work, I guarantee that they will be hard and we won't get everything right and it will take a long time and we will need to bring more and more people into the salvation work with us. But I am also pretty sure that we can at least get part way down the salvation road.

If we bring courage and trust and passion and love to the work, we will move away from bondage and toward liberation. We will move away from peril and toward safety. We will move away from fear and toward transformation. And we will head toward home after our various forms of exile. We will move away from damage and toward health, wellness and wholeness. And we will move away from isolation and toward connection and relationship.

My friends, does this movement toward salvation move your spirits? Could you imagine hoping for it? Acting toward it? If so, do not throw out the idea of salvation too quickly. It could turn out to be a gift in disguise. Amen and blessed be.