

Good News: A Savior is Coming!

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, November 29, 2020.

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

With the beginning of Advent, we begin a new year in the church's liturgical calendar. A month from now we'll be ringing in a new year in the world's secular calendar as well.

If you ask me, 2021 can't come soon enough! I mean let's face it, 2020 has been a pretty rotten year. We're still battling a global pandemic. And the longer it lasts, the worse the economic fallout becomes. We've seen a dramatic increase in severe climate change events. Racial tensions have heightened over police killings of African Americans. And the 2020 election has shown our nation to be even more divided than it was four years ago.

The pandemic, the economy, climate change, police brutality, a divided nation -- these problems are so serious, so overwhelming, that I start to wonder whether only divine intervention can turn them around! Is there any doubt that we need saving?

We are living through the worst pandemic in over a century. To date there have been more than 62 million cases of COVID-19 worldwide, over 13 million of them in the U.S. Globally, more than 1.4 million have died from the virus. Over 265,000 of those deaths have been in the U.S. That number will soon surpass the number of Americans killed in all of World War II. With hospitalizations surging, some hospitals are finding themselves overwhelmed. They are running out of space for patients, and hospital staffs are being stretched way too thin. Is there any doubt that the world needs saving?

As a direct consequence of the pandemic, we are experiencing the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression. Many businesses have been forced to close their doors -- some temporarily, some permanently. Millions of workers have lost their jobs. If the current U.S. moratorium on evictions is allowed to expire at the end of December, millions of renters who cannot afford to pay their rent could face eviction. Global poverty is on the increase for the first time in more than twenty years. The World Bank's chief economist projects that it could take five years for the global economy to fully recover from the pandemic. Is there any doubt that the economy needs saving?

Meanwhile, climate change continues unabated. Indeed, 2020 could be the worst year yet in terms of climate change. It is on course to be the warmest year on record, capping off what has been the warmest decade on record. We saw record-breaking wildfires burn millions of acres in Australia and California. This year's hurricane season was the most active on record. Storms increased in number and severity. The catastrophic consequences of global climate change, which once loomed large on the horizon, are no longer threats to our future. They are our present-day reality. Is there any doubt that the earth needs saving?

Earlier this year, the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, two incidents of police using deadly force against African Americans, ignited a firestorm of protests in cities and towns all across our country. Their rallying cry: "Black Lives Matter!" Fed up with policing that protects rich, white communities, while terrorizing low-income communities of color, to maintain a social order based on racial and economic injustice, some protesters have called for "defunding the police," while others have called for "police abolition." They point out that years of police reform efforts have been unsuccessful in transforming policing in the U.S. They argue, instead, that investing in jobs, housing, health care, and other human service programs does far more for the peace and security of a community than does spending on police departments. They are desperate for social transformation, for a new social order in which there is liberty and justice for all, not just for some. Is there any doubt that our communities need saving?

And in the face of these tremendous challenges, instead of coming together to address them as "one nation, under God, indivisible," we find ourselves deeply divided -- so politically polarized that it is difficult for us to find common ground with one another or work together across the lines that divide us for the common good of all. Is there any doubt that we need saving?

It's times like these, when we wish God would just come down here and sort us out! That's what the prophet Isaiah and the Psalmist were both asking of God. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, . . ." Isaiah cries out. And the Psalmist, too, pleads with God over and over again: "Restore us, O God, let your light shine, that we may be saved."

Of course, as Christians, we believe that God did exactly that! God came to earth -- in the form of Jesus the Christ, the light of the world, the one we call Emmanuel (God with us) -- that we might be saved. And that is very good news!

"Christians believe that Jesus is the Savior," writes theologian William C. Placher. "Even his name . . . means 'the Lord saves.' It was a common enough name in first-century Palestine, but right on the first page of the New Testament we get a signal of its importance. In the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, an angel tells Joseph to give the boy this name and explains that the name refers to 'saving' because he 'will save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21). As one contemporary biblical scholar writes, 'of all the traits Matthew ascribes to Jesus in the course of his story, the one most fundamental is that he is "saving.'" Who he is cannot be separated from what he does, and even his name means salvation."

In New Testament Greek, being saved is the same as being healed. It's the same word in Greek, the verb *sozo* means both "to save" and "to heal." Salvation has to do with healing -- mending broken bodies, bringing wholeness to fragmented lives, restoring humanity's relationship with God. There's no question that we need saving. And there's good news! A savior is coming!

The world needs to be saved from the coronavirus pandemic. The global economy needs to be saved from ruin. The earth, our common home, needs to be saved from ecological destruction. The U.S. needs to be saved from its original sin of racism. Our nation needs to be saved from the deep divisions that threaten to break it apart. We need to be saved. We need to be healed. And there's good news! A savior is coming!

We tend to think of salvation as getting right with God so that we'll go to heaven when we die. But viewing salvation as healing makes it much more concrete. We're talking about salvation in the here and now, not in the by and by. We're talking about Jesus making a difference in people's lives today. We're talking about Jesus saving the world – saving human beings from their afflictions. Where there is brokenness, Jesus brings wholeness. Where there is suffering, Jesus brings relief and comfort. Where there is despair, Jesus brings hope. Jesus is our healer, our savior.

And Jesus invites us to join him in this work. He calls us to follow his example. That's why we speak of the church today as the body of Christ. The church is the embodiment of Christ's presence in the world. We are his hands and feet. As the church, we have been entrusted with the work and ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. We have been enlisted into Jesus' movement for personal transformation and social change.

It is during the season of Advent that we remember the coming of our savior, who is Christ the Lord. We remember the story of the birth of Jesus each year at Advent in order to celebrate the story anew. But more than that, we remember the first Advent to anticipate the second. We remember the first time Christ came and dwelt among us, at the same time that we prepare for the day when Christ will come again. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Our savior is coming! Thanks be to God. Amen.