

Advent Hope

Origins (of Sin and Salvation)

Last week I spoke about the needs of our world, our nation, our own lives ... sometimes things seem so messed up that there's no hope. Do you ever have periods in your life – maybe in you're in one now – when you feel like there's no hope? How can we get out of our mess? Who can save us from destruction? People, people like you and me, ask these questions ... if not consciously, then certainly in our minds or through the choices we make.

And once in awhile we ask how'd we come to this? I thought life was getting better ... or supposed to get better. Technology is ever improving our lives ... the digital age has revolutionized communication, transportation, manufacturing, and even medicine. Overall poverty is actually down across the world, fresh water is available to millions more, medical care to more, and just about every remote corner of the earth can have wireless communications. So with all the improvements why do we still have so many problems and issues, tragedy, and strife? Isn't there some way our world, our nation, our lives can be fixed or healed? Is there someone who can save us from the mess?

Advent, these weeks before Christmas, is when we remember and say, "Yes! There is hope for the world, hope for you and me. Our hope has come and is coming." But to understand this "Yes" we need to look back to origins: how and why the mess got started and what Someone did and is doing about it.

Origins of Sin

There a number of narratives about the origins of the world, human life and its meaning. There are those (such as Buddhism) that see life and history as ever repeating circles, going over and over the same ground. Jews and Christians understand the world and life not as a series of circles, but moving in a straight line toward a conclusion. This timeline is outlined in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and it is the key to understanding the plot of history and our place in it.

The title of the first book of the Bible is a Hebrew word that means "the beginning." In Genesis we read how it all started, how God created a world filled with abundant life, plants, animals, humans. [It speaks more about the "who" and "why" of creation than it does of the "how" and "when."] At the moment that creation came out of the hands of God, including the first man and woman, the Lord said, *"This is good, what has been made by us."* But the man and the woman responded by saying, "Let us determine for ourselves what is good and what is bad. We don't need God for that." You know how the story

goes. God gave them everything they needed but of the fruit of one particular tree God said, *“You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.”* But giving in to the temptation to *“be like God, knowing good and evil”* they did it anyway.

The result was a “fall” from the perfection they had previously enjoyed. The Bible calls this sin. It’s the original sin that still permeates the human soul and psyche. It’s “doing your own thing” without regard to the One who created you and His good intentions for your life. **Sin is defining the meaning of life, what is good and bad, right and wrong, apart from the One who created it all in the first place.** You may have noticed that humans have a natural desire to be boss and to ignore God’s principles for living. You’ve heard it in phrases like, “Look out for #1. Do your own thing.” “If it feels good, it must be right - regardless of what God says about it.” “It’s my life and I’ll do what I please!”

It’s like a state of rebellion against God and His creation has existed among humans ever since, and this had a ripple effect through the rest of creation. ***“All we, like sheep, have gone astray, we have all turned to our own way,”*** Isaiah 53:6.

Sin breaks our close relationship with God. It causes us to fear God and try to live our lives apart from His will. **This is the source of all the mess in the world – people are trying to live apart from God. *“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”*** Romans 3:23. When our relationship to God is not right, it causes problems in every area - marriage, career, relationships, finances, politics, education, exercise of power, governing ourselves and a nation. You name it, it’s infected with sin. ***“. . . your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God . . .”*** Isaiah 59:2.

When humans finally recognize they have a sin problem they try many ways to rectify it, not realizing how pervasive and how deep sin is in themselves and everyone. It’s kind of like the furniture in our living rooms – each piece connected to several others by large rubber bands. So when you move one piece it causes other pieces to move. You have a vision of a better arrangement but when you start to move furniture ... well, you get the picture. **Even with the best intentions for doing good our efforts are derailed by sin.** St. Paul said it so aptly ***“For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing,”*** Rom. 7:19-20.

We can deny this is reality (*“If we say that we never sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* 1 John 1:8), or ignore it until we’re in a worse mess, or we can throw up our hands in despair ... or ... we can look to the solution. You see, God set about rescuing humanity from a sin-broken world.

Origins of Salvation

In the mind of God the **rescue plan** began the moment Adam and Eve stepped into sin. God loved His Creation so much that he didn’t just let them go their

own way but set about to redeem it. Author Mike Starkey (*God, Sex and the Search for Lost Wonder*, Intervarsity Press, 1998), provides a helpful outline of God's creation and redemption of humanity.

1. Phase One The first stage of the rescue plan was the covenant with Israel. God chose one man, Abram (whose name was soon to be changed to Abraham) and made him a promise: that his extended family will be a prototype of what humanity can look like when restored to intimacy with God. His descendants are the people of Israel.

God sent prophets to Israel to remind them of their covenant with God, with visions of a day when the perfection so briefly enjoyed in Eden (the past age) will be re-created (the age to come) and all suffering and sin of the present age will be erased. It will be *shalom*: a wholistic relationship between people, the earth, and God. The people of God (Israel) tried to devise all sorts of laws and programs to get themselves right with God. And yet, the taint of sin colored everything they did.

2. Phase Two In the first century A.D. came the most decisive milestone of all: God himself walked the earth as a human being. He brought the salvation from sin we so desperately needed, though God slipped into our world, almost unnoticed ... being born in a stable and all ... but that's a story for later.

The announcement of God's arrival came from an eccentric. But if John the Baptist had been an ordinary man, no one would have noticed him. People listened to him because he spoke to their problems and situation and he gave hope. He said One is coming who will lead you and help you to change for the better. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; ... I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" Mark 1:7-8. There is hope.

He was talking about God's incredible solution: God with us, in the man Jesus. God's own flesh and blood (and spirit), His Son, announced and demonstrated that the eagerly awaited age to come had started to break into the present age. [The health of the future age broke in through his miracles of healing; the salvation of the future age broke in through his acts of forgiveness; the justice of the future age broke in as Jesus offered dignity to those denied it. Jesus, God in human flesh and prototype citizen of God's future age, began to bring the reality of the future into the present.]

Jesus was ultimately killed. To many it looked like any other execution by the Roman authorities, but it was really an extraordinary death, for it was a final sacrifice for sin. God's solution to our sin problem was a solution far beyond human reason: "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die," Romans 5:7.

You've heard stories of soldiers who've fallen on a grenade to protect their comrades. That's a heroic sacrifice. But what would you call a soldier captured by the enemy who did the same to protect the lives of his enemies? We'd likely

call it crazy. “Who would ever do anything like that?” ... I know only one person who would do something like that. His name is Jesus Christ.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” Romans 5:8. When we read that, we like to emphasize, “Christ died for us,” but do we notice the phrase before? “While we were still sinners.” The wonder is not that Christ should die for us—though that would be wonderful enough. The wonder is that Christ died for us while we were still in rebellion against Him! He didn’t die just for his friends or those already good enough. He died for his enemies. He died for those who crucified him. He died for those who hated him. He died for those who rejected him. He died for those who cheered as the nails were driven in his hands. He died to pay the price for all the sins of humanity – including yours and mine. The love He offers is for each and all of us, regardless of where we stand now.

Then, most astounding of all, Jesus rose from death. **His bodily resurrection was** both God’s vindication of his sacrifice and **a defeat** of the sour fruit of sin, which is death. Through Him we can have a new and eternal life. ***“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...” 1 Peter 1:3.***

3. Phase Three: Jesus trained disciples to speak to others of His presence, what God, through Him, had said and done. He gave them a mission to go and baptize others and obey all His commandments. And he bestowed upon this, His church, the Holy Spirit (also God) to give comfort, guidance, strength and courage for their mission. During this time there is preparation for the coming kingdom of God by people who have given themselves over to Christ, who in turn lives through them. They plant seeds of the kingdom by introducing others to Christ and what He has done to remove their sins.

4. Phase Four: God’s rescue plan culminates in the return of Jesus to earth to bring in the promised age of shalom, the restoration of life with God that was lost when sin entered in. That part is still future, though Christians prepare themselves for that day ... ***“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne,” Matt. 25:31.*** Next week I will talk more about those preparations.

It is only within the plot of God’s rescue plan that Christians make sense of life: where we came from, our purpose here, and our destiny. Our place in God’s story is somewhere in Phase Three of the time line of history – with the power of the Holy Spirit growing disciples of Christ. We’re able to look back to the past, seeing God’s rescue to the present, and look forward to its fulfillment in the age to come. There is yet hope for us.

Hope For All

Yes, there is still hope. Last week I said that there is a longing deep in our souls for the eternal. That is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. To place our hope in anyone less than God, therefore, will bring only disappointment. Within God's rescue plan there is hope for all. The Apostle Peter tells us, *"The Lord is... patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance,"* 2 Peter 3:9. God holds back the last day, Peter says, so that more will have a chance to turn to Him.

The word of hope, the word of the Lord, doesn't always as a dramatic event. Most of the time God just speaks to people who are actively listening. "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." The word of hope permeates a life of disciplined prayer, bible reflection, worship, fellowship with the community of believers, and perseverance in the faith. Immersing ourselves in those Christian disciplines tunes our ears to hear the angels' Christmas song .

Next week I'll talk about the hope we have in God's rescue plan and how this gives us peace in our spirits and strength to persevere in all circumstances.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope," Romans 15:13.