

“A Reflection on Salvation”
Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3: 13-22; Acts 17:22-31
Samuel Andri
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Friends once again Happy Mother's Day! to all women, mothers, soon-to-be mothers, grandparents, even again uncles, aunties, mentors who may have provided motherly figure for us. What would the world be without the presence of mothers and motherly figures among us? Isn't it! In the church we believe that, God in God's infinite wisdom chose to begin saving the world through a mother's eyes. In God's most infinite wisdom God finds it fitting finds it fitting for the savior of the world to be sustained and breast fed by a mother's breasts.

Indeed God doesn't need anyone to help him save the world, but in the mystery of God's plan God finds it fitting to save the world through a self-giving love of a mother. And for that we must praise God.

Let us pray!

Loving God you are our true mother, you are the mother of all motherless people, of orphans in this world. It is true that in you alone we find true comfort. But today on this mother's day we want to remember our mothers and our people who have stepped up to be mother figures for us bless them Lord we pray. Keep them safe in your loving hands may you be there everlasting comfort and may you embrace them always with your tender loving hands. Amen!

Friends! by showing up your hands, how many of you were born not as a Christian and perhaps not from a Christian family? Can I see your hand? if you are if you were born not as Christians when you were born you know can I see your hand not many of us sadly. OK! so I assume that the rest were born as Christians in a Christian family now for those of you who raise your hand like me think about specific time or reason or experience that brought you to Christianity or church. For those who are born as Christians think about a specific time or reason or experience that make you take this faith, this Christianity thing seriously.

You know what I'll give you a minute 60 seconds to try to remember and reflect back on this. Can we do that? Let's do that! Now some of us may have a dramatic story a rather dramatic story of becoming Christian. Some of us may not. I heard stories of how an alcoholic or a drug addict encountered God in dream and then become a Christian all of a sudden. Some encountered God when they were terribly, in terribly state, and God help them and then they become Christians some others were in hopeless situation and found God's help and then became Christian. Some were in need of forgiveness and encountered God and found God's forgiveness to be freeing so they became Christian. It's for some others may not be so dramatic perhaps because you were born already in a Christian family, but some encountered God and became Christian because perhaps

they felt some sort of loneliness and in need of community and they found that community in a church through friendship.

Some mothers met God when they felt loss and in search of a meaning. Now all of us here may have different experience and different why? of becoming a Christian. But I'm pretty sure it all starts with a, with our need to be saved from something. It is not surprising therefore in our scripture reading today when Paul was in Areopagus, he saw many objects of worship their altars, statues, temples, all dedicated to each god that the Greek people worshipped according to each of their needs. Perhaps there is a statue for the God of fertility, there's one for the God of wisdom, there's one for God of healing, there's another one for God of harvest, the God of marriage, the gods of childbirth, even the God of travel, and numerous other gods, including innumerable other lesser gods. If you're like me come from Asian Chinese tradition you kind of understand this many kinds of gods that have different answers to different needs.

So in this scripture passages like that as well. All of them were built so that the people could worship this God according to their needs. But here, there's even an altar dedicated to the unknown God. Historians say there really was an altar dedicated to the unknown God actually in attendance and some around as well this altar was dedicated to fill the gaps of things that are still unknown. It's dedicated to an unknown God in case there are some other gods that are not yet included in this whole temple thing.

This is perhaps like in case of emergency kind of God, or perhaps we could say that this is the God for their unknown needs. As we all could probably relate the relationship between these people with their numerous gods then innocence is very retributive. When I need some particular benefits from some gods, ah! let's say healing or money or good harvests then I would go or we go to a specific altars to this god, and give some sort of sacrificial offerings so that, that God would grant me my wish.

Or when I do something wrong perhaps and then make these gods angry, you know I'll come to the altar and then give something sacrificial, peace offering, to appease the wrath of God. In the retributive understanding of God, God is more like a vending machine. That this verse some blessings of punishment depending on us and what we do. Now of course as Christians we often say Oh no Christianity is different, not retributive like that.

If religion I often say this when I was in Indonesia if religion was in human attempt to find God, Christianity is God's attempt to find and save humanity. And we all say, Amen! For that. We say that Christianity is on grace alone, not our good works, right! We say that what Christ died under cross for all of us for all of us regardless of who they are. While we were still seeing us and then what Christ died for us. So we say, no, no, no, that's not like us. We're not retributive. We don't have like retributive theology. That's great in theory, but in reality many Christians still operate with this kind of retributive mindset actually. Just like the people in Areopagus. We worship God, in this case, in our case, Jesus Christ, because we want some sort of benefit from him.

You notice our our prayers have often been nothing but a long shopping list of wishes. I don't know if you remember a story that I mentioned to you perhaps a year or two ago. A story when when I was a high school teacher back in Indonesia, I was teaching about 30 students. This is like Christian high school. So I asked them to imagine about heaven about afterlife and then after the imagine I asked them to, draw something, draw something about heaven. So they don't do something you know some with the with a golden pathway, towards like a castle, and then some not creative ones usually just write like two mountains with a little bit of sun here and there. And you know it's all of them do something.

Some actually drew like a big soccer field because he loves soccer. But here's a funny thing though, here's a funny, funny thing. very interesting thing. Not even one of them has a drawing of Jesus Christ in that picture. Even though we say that we are Christians, somehow we still come to God only because we want something, because we need something, just like the people in Areopagus. It can be healing, it can be money, it can be a sense of community, or like in Vancouver or Richmond, if we have all of that at least we need some sort of assurance that someday after we die, we don't go to hell or something.

No wonder many Christians have a very self-centric view of salvation. We thought salvation is nothing but simply an escape from hell. If you ask my students that that drew those pictures like why do you want to go to heaven? They will answer because hell sucks. Heaven becomes our need escaping hell becomes our need. And just like the people in Athens who built an altar to the unknown God, because they want to make sure they are there unknown needs too will be fulfilled. We often worship God and become Christians because we want to make sure our unknown needs of the afterlife will be granted as well.

Actually there's a Pulitzer price winner author that talk about this. The author's name is 'Ernest Becker'. In 1973 he wrote a book entitled 'The Denial of Death'. In it he mentioned that human being possessed an intrinsic instinctive awareness of our mortality that many animals don't have. So human we have some sort of specific ability to somehow imagine that we will die someday. Other animals he said, don't have that kind of strong understanding or instinctive awareness of their mortality, but we do. In other words we know somehow in our life, that we will die someday. Human beings have always been haunted by their realization that they will die someday. Now this intrinsic awareness of our mortality that will die someday in turn gives us an existential or very personal, very deep anxiety. Think about it, think about it. Realizing not just knowing, realizing fully that we will die some day is truly scary, right!

Now we perhaps know intellectually that will die someday. But to truly realize that we will die someday is something, it's actually very terrifying. Realizing fully that we won't be with our loved ones forever is terrifying. Realizing that all of our lives hard work and accomplishments will be stopped abruptly by death is upsetting. It is scary. In fact just several days ago while Christy and I were you know we're having small talk before we

slept, all of sudden Krista said to me, 'I'm scared of death'. In Indonesian language off course!

And i said, me too. I guess that realization that the impermanence the realization of our impermanence somehow you know came to her mind and that came to my mind as well. But of course it's not every day that we fear death, because human beings have mustered the skills like Baker say to deny death. To distract us from the anxiety, because imagine if you truly realize every single day every single second that you know that you'll die you'll be paralyzed you won't do anything you won't love you won't you won't go out you won't do anything because you'll die anyway, right! So what happened is that we have we have mustered the skill to deny that. How do we do that? by doing all other things that make us feel we could be immortal somehow. We try to create some sort of self-worth and significance through many kinds of achievements, statues, pursuit of success and meaning. And we hope that those things become a legacy legacy that lives through even after we die.

We try to create those things in life because we want to have some sort of permanence. In other words we want to make sure that we live forever somehow even if it's not bodily. off course as many sociologists, anthropologists have said human beings also turned to religion that promise some sort of students of an escape from death. But here's what is unfortunate I think for many Christians. For many Christians, Christianity is just like another retributive belief that gives a promise for humans to escape death.

For example when many Christians say, believe in Jesus so that you will be saved, we say it as if being saved means escaping death, or going to heaven or escape hell. But if that's the case what's the difference between us and the people of Athens that worship their gods simply to receive some sort of benefit. Believe in A and then you will get B.

Then off course you know Christians create some sort of explanation. Oh no! it's not! it's not like that. It's still free gift, like salvation is freaky but then you still need to receive it, To be saved. But here's the thing though. Salvation is not a material gift that you need to receive is just given. Like sunshine is given. Whether you receive it or not, whether you realize it or not you cannot escape from it. Friends, I think it is here that the Easter proclamation, by the way we're still in the Easter season. Sixth Sunday of Easter, it is here that in the Easter proclamation becomes very very important for us to understand because in Easter in the resurrection of Jesus Christ we see that Christianity does not offer a promise to escape death.

There is no promise yes it is not a promise because it is a done deal. It is done. It is finished. There's nothing anyone can do about it. Remember on the cross when Jesus said 'it is finished' remember that? Here's a fun fact. He was not talking about his life 'it is finished', 'my life is finished'. No, he was talking about the 'reign of death' that has now finished.

That's why when we Christians say let's say in evangelism believe in Jesus and you will be saved. We are not talking about believe in Jesus so that you will be saved from

death or saved from hell, no! Unfortunately many say it that way but it is wrong I think the thing is you don't need to believe in Jesus to be safe from the power of death because the scripture is clear on Easter which we celebrate six weeks ago and even today, Jesus has completely conquered death. Death by death he has conquered it. Even in our First Peter reading today we see that Jesus went to hell proclaim or in the apostles creed that we often say together right that Jesus descended into hell, for what? Jesus descended into hell. And the church often called that holy Saturday, for what?

Do you think Jesus went to hell to try to convince the souls there? Believe in me, please! believe in me so that you'll be saved. Do you think that's what Jesus did? No! What Jesus did, simply to proclaim that the reign of death is no more. That the power of death has been broken, and that they are now free to live. That's why now we together with St. Paul together with everyone who has died before Christ everyone who has died since Christ and everyone who will die, everyone that you know have died we can almost mock in the face and say, oh death! Where is thy victory? Oh death! Where is thy sting? Because death has been conquered completely by Christ.

Friends just like the spring is here and you and I don't need to believe in it for it to be true. Jesus Christ has conquered the death, and you and I don't need to believe in it to be true. But if that's the case now the question probably would be. What do we Christians mean then when we say believe in Jesus and you will be saved? What is it that we need to be saved from?

Well when we say to ourselves and do other people 'believe in Jesus and you will be saved'? It means that we need to believe in Jesus, in the resurrection of Jesus to be saved, from our unnecessary fear of death. To be saved from our foolishness that wrongly things that that is still raining that that is still the king because unfortunately even though death has been completely conquered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but many people including many Christians are still living under this fear of death.

And indeed this fear of death is the root of all evil and I think following Ernest Becker it is true that the fear of death is the root of all other fears. Out of fear of it, think about ,it out of fear of death we want to be on top to be fulfilled immortal. And out of fear of not being under thought people killed one another out of fear of losing power we crash at each other out of fear of not being the best siblings turn against one another. Out of fear of the others the other people Christians evangelized with violence and out of fear of losing authority religious wars happened, including ones perpetrated by Christians. Out of fear of losing dominance residential schools have been. Out of fear we rejected and marginalized those who are different from us in many aspects. And this is why we are Christians and non-Christians alike, need salvation.

Need to be saved by God, not from death because it has all been done, but from this fear. From this fear that still haunted us. Friends love cannot exist when there is fear. This is why the scripture says very clearly, there is No Fear in love but perfect love drives out fear. Because fear has to do with what? punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love love cannot exist when there is fear.

There was a time when I was about 17 years old I was in the church until late at night and I drove home by myself. It's about like one hour drive. And then there was a person riding a motorbike in front of me but out of a sudden he accidentally hit a curb and fell down pretty badly. I was right behind him at that time there was a very many second moment when I thought to myself should I help him? But I didn't. Because I was afraid I was afraid that people would misunderstand and think that I hit actually the person I was the one that actually hit the person I was afraid that perhaps the accident was actually just part of a scam there was really happening in Indonesia then I would be robbed somehow and helping him.

I was afraid of my safety but ultimately if you think about it I was afraid of death. That's why I didn't help him. But to be Christian, is actually nothing but to be safe from this ultimate fear of death. It is to be freed from the bondage of death that haunted human beings since ancient times. And as a Christians your best evangelism your best act of witnessing and in fact your best way to show that you are a Christian, is really not by words, but by the way you live your life without any fear.

Because when you do that, you show that you truly believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let me say it again. As a Christian your best way to show that you are Christian is really not by words but by the way you live your life without any fear of death. Because when you do that you show that you truly believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Oh imagine! if you and I have been truly safe from our fear of death imagine if Christians truly deeply believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, wow! if that's the case we will fear nothing in life.

If we truly believe that in the resurrection resurrection of Jesus right and truly safe from our fear of death we will live our lives dramatically differently. Because when we don't fear death anymore we will be free and won't be afraid to love those who hate us. Because when we don't fear death anymore we will be free and won't be afraid to be the least of all. To give our lives selflessly to others. Because when we feel death no more we will be free and won't be afraid to give and to forgive even our worst enemies.

Because when we don't feel that anymore we will be free and won't be afraid to relinquish all power and control completely for the sake of others. Because when we don't fear death anymore you and I will be free and won't be afraid to suffer and walk on the FIA de La Rosa for the sake of Christ. Or friends when we don't feel that no more we will be free and won't be afraid to beat our s words into ploughshares and our spears into pruning tools when we don't fear death we will be free to be human and people would know that we are indeed the followers and the believers the true believers of the resurrected Christ.

So I pray this morning that we will truly believe in Jesus Christ and in his resurrection from the dead. So that we will be truly safe from our unnecessary fear even today. Amen!