

Cross-Words: Listen, Salvation
Isaiah 51:1-8
December 31, 2016

Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the Lord: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many. The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail. Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations.

Listening is a skill at which few people excel, but today our text calls on us to listen to what the Lord has to say about our salvation.

When you were in elementary school, you were taught a three-fold plan to keep you safe when you were crossing the street. Do you remember those three things? Stop! Look! Listen! Even as an adult, that triad of advice is helpful. That wisdom is timeless and it's useful whether you are crossing the street or staring temptation in the face. A multitude of things in life would be much easier if we would just stop, look, and listen.

New Year's Eve is traditionally a time to stop, take a look at the past year's record of successes and failures, and gingerly plan for the future. Many of us will make New Year's resolutions once again, if only for tradition's sake. But, we rarely expend much effort listening, the final part of the triune exhortation. We are much better at looking, talking, advising, and correcting than at listening. However, today God's Word commands our attention by telling us to listen three times. Perhaps this is a good time to practice that skill, especially since God is talking about something that is very important to us – our salvation.

As we close out another calendar year and cautiously step into another 365 new days ahead, we realize how quickly we pass through life. It's comforting to know that God remains a steadfast, enduring source of strength for us. It has been said, *the transcendency of God far outweighs the transiency of man*. The Lord has much to tell us, and if we listen we will hear the most encouraging word ever spoken – salvation.

In our text, Israel is called to *look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn* (v 1). In other words, the people are reminded of their roots and their

solidarity as a nation. They are God's elect children and they are children of Abraham.

The reference to Abraham and Sarah is a link to the covenant that God made fifteen hundred years before Isaiah wrote the words of our text. That's when God promised Abraham: *I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you* (Gen 12:2-3).

We are part of that same covenant, because through baptism we are adopted as children of Abraham by faith.

God fulfilled his promise to Abraham by sending Jesus as a descendant of Abraham according to his human nature. Jesus Christ is the source of blessing for all people. That includes us. The Jewish leaders of Jesus' day thought it was enough simply to be physical descendants of Abraham, but Jesus disagreed. Jesus said that what is needed is faith.

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are descendants of Abraham, regardless of whether or not we are physically descended from him. We celebrate the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham because we are part of that great nation, the kingdom of God.

We don't always enjoy looking at our past, because we see mistakes and failures. But God doesn't call us to look back on our sins. He calls us to look back to the one, who frees us from our sins. Jesus said to those who claimed they were descendants of Abraham: *I tell you the truth, every one who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed* (Jn 8:34-36).

As Christians, we can look into our past and see the event that set us free – our baptism. Because of our baptism, we are free to live each day with confidence and peace because we have been marked as children of the triune God. We live each day rejoicing in our forgiveness. We live each day knowing that we have the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We are free – free from past sins and free to look forward to a future with God.

Isaiah looks back at Eden and forward to the new Creation. *The Lord will surely comfort Zion ... he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord* (Is 51:3).

When Adam and Eve sinned, they and their descendants were cut off from the Tree of Life, which stood in the middle of Eden. Yet, through Isaiah, God promises a new Creation. According to Revelation, the Tree of Life will be accessible to all who live in the New Jerusalem. Jesus hung on the tree of the cross to regain the Tree of Life for us.

Now, let's turn our attention to what God has to say about salvation in the present.

In every age of history, God calls people to be his own. Isaiah spoke to people who had been put through the wringer: attacks by foreigners, the decimation of their population, slavery, despair, and hopelessness. Yet God still tenderly called them *my people ... my nation* (v 4). Situations develop in every generation which cause people to doubt God. Still, the Good News is that the same God, who called Israel to be his people, claims us as his very own.

We who have been baptized into Christ have been called out of darkness and now live in his marvelous light. We have listened and heard him say, *I am your salvation*. We are part of the body of Christ. Through faith in him, we, too, have been hewn from the quarry of Abraham's faith. Jesus is the Rock, the Cornerstone upon which the church is built. By faith we are heirs of salvation and rocks upon which Jesus builds the church for his glory (Mt 16:18). We are living stones built into the temple of God (1 Pet 2:5).

Baptism gives us the certainty of experiencing God's salvation in the here and now. No matter what happens to us on this short-lived earth, our salvation is securely tucked away in the vault of heaven. Heaven and earth may pass away, but God's love for us will endure for eternity.

There's a story told of a bee that flew into a car through an open window. The young boy riding in the car with his father became hysterical, thinking he would be stung. The father caught the bee in his hand, it stung him, and he released it. The boy became frantic when the bee began to fly again. "Don't be afraid," said the father. "The bee has only one sting. When it stung me, it left its stinger in me. It can't sting you any more. It will die soon."

When Christ died for us on the cross, he absorbed the sting of death. When he rose from the dead, he proved that death, and its sting, had no more power over him. The apostle Paul writes: *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Cor 15:56-57).

Now neither death nor its sting should scare us. Our victory has been guaranteed by our Savior. That's what Paul meant when he told the Roman Christians: *We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom 8:37-39).

As we stand at the threshold of another year, let's look at our prospects for the future.

Do we have any reason to fear the future? According to our text, the answer is no. Isaiah says we need not *fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults* (v 7). Why? Because our God is stronger than any human enemy. Our God is stronger than any force of nature. Our God is stronger than any demonic power.

I love the assurance found in the VeggieTales' song *God Is Bigger*. These lyrics may be meant for children, but when fear strikes we are all just children. We all need the lesson they teach:

God is bigger than the boogie-man
He's bigger than Godzilla or the monsters on TV
Oh, God is bigger than the boogie-man
And he's watchin' out for you and me.

So, don't be anxious about the new year we are entering. You can put your trust in Christ, because he alone holds the power of salvation. Jesus tells us: *Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself* (Mt 6:33-34).

If we listen to God's word of salvation and take comfort in our adoption as his sons and daughters, we can face the coming year without fear or apprehension. The situations and circumstances which we dread today will one day pass away like smoke. But God's righteousness will last forever, and his salvation through all generations (v 8).

On this last day of 2016, look back on your past and rejoice in the baptism that made you part of God's family. Look around at all God has blessed you with and live each day for Jesus Christ. And don't fear the future because we may not know what the future holds but we know for sure who holds the future.