

The lectionary today gives us an aspect of God's character that we innately know that we need but that we often times do not let ourselves express our need for it and that is our need to be saved or rescued. God is revealed to us in scripture today as the God who saves. The problem with having a God that saves is that in order for us to experience that side of him, we have to recognize that we are in a position of needing to be saved or rescued. God is always aware of our need for Him but we are not always aware of that same need.

The Old Testament scripture reading gave us a recount of the Exodus. That wonderful event when God actively took part in freeing Israel from Egyptian control and tyranny through wonderful signs and wonders culminating in the destruction of the Egyptian army who was in hot pursuit of Israel as they fled into the wilderness. Now Israel was in trouble for many years prior to the Exodus and God could have intervened at any time to circumvent their suffering. But He didn't. Oh, God had a plan. Long before, he had brought Moses' parents together and they conceived Moses. Moses was able to escape the killing fields of the Egyptian midwives and was subsequently raised by the Egyptian pharaoh as a much beloved adopted nephew. But it wasn't until the Israelites realized they were in trouble and cried out to God for deliverance that God brought Moses into their situation.

In Romans Paul is dealing with the Jewish believers that somehow have gotten the idea that they are more Christian than the non-Jewish believers. They point to the fact that they had been given the law (during Moses' time, by the way) and that their righteousness was somehow enhanced by their obedience to the law. God, through Paul, is rescuing them from those erroneous practices.

We also have lots of erroneous thoughts and practices in our faith journeys. We, like the Jews of Paul's time, have to be reminded that what has been done for us has been done by a God who rescues. For Paul, faith is not a generic sentiment (spirituality, as it is called today). It is not limited to a humanistic ethical code. While in Paul's day the Jews were leaning on their understanding and practicing of the law code, today we tend to lean on our understanding and practice of the ethical code, "help others," "work for a better world for everyone". Even our belief, like the Jews who received this letter, that there is only one God who created all things does not sum up all that our faith entails. Of course, these three – spirituality, helping others, and recognizing God as the source of our being – are all important to the life of faith, but the Christian message is not encapsulated in these things. The Christian message focuses on Jesus. As Paul puts it briefly in verse 9, "Jesus is more than an admirable human being. He embodies God's reality as Lord." We will be celebrating that fact as it is demonstrated in the Easter Resurrection. Jesus came to save the lost and the sinner.

We especially are mindful of this during the Lenten season as we focus on sin and the sacrifice Jesus Christ made to overcome sin and to purchase our redemption on Calvary.

Lent laments the pervasive presence of sin among human beings. For forty days we take account of times we have “missed the mark”, done what we should not have done, and not only committed sins, but have lived “in sin”. We admit freely that we have not done what we could have and we begin the season with an act of contrition on Ash Wednesday where we admit that we are sinners and that we have a need for Christ’s forgiveness.

Our gospel reading today deals with Jesus being tempted in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. Last week we studied his transfiguration, Jesus’ deity made manifest to the three disciples on the mountain top. As we often say about a person’s 40th birthday, “It isn’t the end of the world, but you can see it from there.” The transfiguration is not the end of the world, but Jesus can see it from there. He is about to spend the next 40 days on his route to the cross. What we read about this week in the gospel, what he learned in the desert, to chose God’s way over his own will and his own needs, will play out to the max at the end of the 40 days when he is led to Golgotha to die on the cross for our sins.

Like the plan for Moses to be born and to rescue the Israelites from Egyptian oppression was in place long before it came to fruition, so the plan for Jesus to come to earth to rescue us from the pains and punishment of sin and death was in place from the beginning of time. And at the appointed time he came. He lived on earth. He faced the temptation to do Satan's will as posited in his desert experience throughout his whole life and remained unstained by sin. Even in the garden as he prayed that this cup would pass, he once again defeated the temptations of Satan to save his own skin and set his face, again, to do the will of the Father and to complete the task that was before him. Lent will end with his crucifixion and final resurrection.

But what good does it do for us if we fail to realize that we are actually the ones who need to be rescued? I believe each one of us fall into this category at sometime in our lives. We are oblivious or we make ourselves oblivious to the fact that we need rescuing. Why? Maybe because it isn't "macho" to admit we have a need for God. We think we can go through life doing it our own way and we might even sing with pride the old Frank Sinatra song, "I did it my way."

But what man or woman would not trade in their prideful self-reliance the instant they found themselves in dire straights? What person, falling over a cliff, catching a branch and dangling over a 300 foot gorge would not instantly cry out for help? What person, trapped in a horrible automobile crash would refuse help from the first responders to their situation? The problem with us today is that we do not realize that that is the place in our spiritual walk that we may be in.

In Wesley's day and other "great awakening" evangelists day much was spoken about the danger of hell. Hell was the place of fire and folks gnashing their teeth, clawing to get out. It was a place that was as real as earth to many people and so when the evangelists talk about eternal damnation and punishment for sins, if their sermons were effective and they could paint the picture of spending eternity away from God in this horribly uncomfortable place, then people could get their heads around the fact that without Christ they were in a danger of a perilous situation. Now a days however, the description of hell has been ignored. In some folks' minds, even the idea of Satan as an adversary and God as the rescuer has been rejected altogether. As people devalue this Book (Bible) and cast it into the genre of fiction or maybe even spiritual fiction, the reality that it talks about that there are consequences to a sinful life that transcend this life are ignored. Well, I am here to say that this Book is still the Book of Truth and that our lives do not end when we die, that Jesus was the first fruit of the resurrection but that while everyone will be

resurrected, not everyone will be resurrected to a place where God is and that, my beloveds, is hell – a place where God is not. What will it look like? What will we experience? Well, I can say with you, “I do not know”. But I also can say that I know what life was like when I ignored God and I know how my life changed when I repented and trusted Christ and began to live for him and since that was only a glimpse of what it was like to be without God since God is here whether we recognize him or not and I lived under grace even though I “did it my way”, that glimpse, that glimpse of the consequences of sin was enough for me to know I do not want to spend eternity without God, wherever or however that may look.

So today I rejoice that I have made the choice to accept the rescue that God offers each one of us through Jesus Christ. The relationship that picks us up and puts us on solid ground. And I would challenge you to examine your relationship with God. Are you still doing it your way or have you humbled yourself and accepted Jesus and all that Jesus has done on your behalf to rescue from a life of sin and death and separation from God?

Let us silently dwell on the words of Paul today as we reflect on Jesus Christ, God, the rescuer, the savior.

But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because ^[a] if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

And almost as if God anticipates our tendency to want to avoid embarrassment of being seen as a person who needs God, Paul ends this section with the reminder of the promise in verse 11: “The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’”