

REDEMPTION

The subject today is redemption. Redemption is one of what I would call the “old words” – a word that in former times was used with power and passion by Christians of every persuasion, but which today is a mere shadow of its former self. Redemption was what the Christian Faith was about. Redemption was the purpose. To redeem was what Jesus came to do. “I know that my Redeemer liveth.” (That’s actually from Job 19:25.) To be redeemed was to be saved, and salvation was what it was about. So this word once rang through the life of the church, as it rang through the New Testament, and people loved it, knew what it meant, and were blessed in the knowing.

Today most Christians go months at a time and never hear the word or use it. Even if they see or hear it, they do not *see* or *hear* it. It is not part of their Christian vocabulary – their language for claiming or understanding what Jesus is about, or what their relationship with Jesus is like. In fact, though not invariably true, it is nearly always true that when I ask a Christian (liberal or evangelical or fundamentalist), “What does Jesus really do for us? What does ‘Jesus saves’ really mean?” – most of the time I get silence, or I get formulaic words thrown back at me. (“Well, you know, He died for our sins.”) But when I ask what the formulas mean, I get more formulas, or I get silence.

Now, I know as well as you do that the vast majority of Christians who have lived on this earth have not understood Jesus’ identity or saving work in any profound intellectual way. They have put their faith in Jesus – they have *trusted* Him – and have turned their present lives and their future hopes over to Him. That is still what really matters. My own theology is very simple and practical: If everybody would let the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ rule this world, things would be just fine. We all need to report in for duty each morning, seek the guidance and comfort and assignments the Holy Spirit wants to give us, and then spend the rest of the day trying to follow our orders to the best of our ability. As for the rest, keep turning it over to Him.

Four years of seminary ... forty years of ministry ... one thousand books ... eighteen hundred sermons – and that’s it? That’s right. That *is* it! Of course, none of us can begin to do even *that* if we don’t trust God’s personal love for us. Between us and that kind of trust is all the

mayhem and confusion and travail of this life. Without the Cross and Resurrection, I don't think anybody gets past merely pretending to trust God. Nevertheless, we don't have to understand it all before Jesus is real. We don't have to understand it all before Jesus starts loving us and going to work for us. Salvation does not depend on our passing theological exams (like fundamentalists believe) or on having a high IQ (like liberal Christians believe). None of it depends upon us. It depends upon God. Either God loves us or he doesn't. If God doesn't love us, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – we can do about it. If God does, it is a gift – sheer grace. Receiving is our part. And when we do our part, we become immensely grateful. But we are forever trying to make it much more difficult and complicated than that. We want to see ourselves in a more heroic role than that. So we are forever trying to change it around so that we are the key players, and God is the audience. **“You are saved by grace, through faith.”** No, no, no ... we are saved by good works, by sacrifice, by fancy theories, by how many people we convert, by how much money we give, by how many churches we build, by whether or not we are baptized in the right way or take communion in the proper manner – by whether or not we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Not about how He accepts *us*, you see, but about how we accept Him. We just cannot, or will not, take ourselves out of the driver's seat. Even Christmas is not about His coming, but about how we celebrate. Easter is not about His rising from the dead, but about if or how much we choose to believe it. We just cannot or will not get out of our own way. So we are forever turning Christianity away from the grace and love of God, and back into some land-locked, human-designed system where we are back in charge – ordering each other around, approving or disapproving of each other, deciding who is in and who is out – almost like we thought it was *our* church, *our* religion, *our* baptism, *our* communion, *our* salvation.

The truth is, God is down on the field playing the real game, and we are supposed to be doing the cheering. Almost everybody here just said to themselves, “Ughhh – that can't be right.” How strong the “ughhh” was tells you how far away you are from the Gospel. We secretly believe that we are supposed to play the real game, and God is just there to cheer *us* on. WE are going to save the world? I know, I know – by tomorrow morning, half of you will be thinking it all depends on how well we cheer. Even *that* would be a big improvement.

So if it doesn't matter whether or not you understand it, why do I want you to understand it? Well, I did not mean to imply that your

understanding has no significance at all. At age twelve, I was convinced that my father did not love me. As far as I could tell, he disapproved of everything I did and was. By the age of fourteen, I was certain that my father did love me but had a very weird way of showing it. Between ages twelve and fourteen, my father went to work at the same time as every other day; went on about his life approximately the same way he always had; expected the same things from me, and maybe even a little more. And he still did not approve of a lot of the things I did and did not do – or at least he kept trying to improve them. But I am here to tell you, it made a huge difference in my life when I understood that he loved me.

It *does* make a difference if you understand. Aside from that, I always dream of being part of a church where people like to talk about their God and their faith. When people ask them what they believe, they really know. Without being pushy or cocksure of everything, they are not afraid to talk about it.

Redemption. Redemption is an old word, and therefore its meanings come from an ancient context. It needs to mean some newer things to every one of you today. But if you don't know where it came from, that cuts it loose from its moorings, and it loses its power. It's like cutting Jesus loose from His moorings so He is no longer Son of David and steeped in the faith of Israel. He then becomes a mere spiritual Peter Pan – flitting from “unconditional love” to forgiving people because “there is no wrong,” and promising eternal life in some cosmic Insane Asylum.

I don't want to go back to Adam and Eve – not enough time – just back to Cain and Abel. Firstfruits. God is Creator. God made and runs the world. In honor and tribute, and to say thank you, humans bring firstlings and firstfruits to God. It is forerunner of the tithe. God accepts Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Big mystery. Why does God not accept Cain's offering? Sorry, no mystery at all. Abel brings “*the choicest of the firstborn of his flock.*” (Genesis 4:4) Cain brings “*some of the fruits of the earth.*” (Genesis 4:3) Is the story too subtle, or are we just afraid of it? Cain does not bring firstfruits; he brings nothing special, just “some” – what is left over, what he thinks he can do without. Cain does not put God first. God does not kill Cain, or even punish him. He just says, “I think you better try that again.” But all the forgiveness and grace in the world cannot help Cain if he will not repent – if he does not want to put God first. God goes right on trying to help Cain; Cain just wants nothing to do with him. Cain's offering revealed his true attitude. Offerings always do.

Skip down to the time of Moses. The people of Israel had been giving firstborn and firstfruits to God for seven or eight hundred years, but they end up in Egypt, and eventually as slaves in Egypt. Pharaoh is an evil ruler. He is the Hitler/Stalin of Moses' time. He has no regard for God, and he enslaves man. From a biblical perspective, those two go together. But what happens if you disobey and disregard the Creator and the Creator's ways? Creation starts to fall apart. Creation starts to come unglued. Things stop working according to the laws and principles by which they were designed. And then what happens? You get plagues, of course. Nature starts to self-destruct. Frogs, flies, hail, blood – everything happening in the wrong way, at the wrong time. If something does not reverse the process, the whole place will go blooey.

So God finally steps in and sends Moses. But of course God has to set it right himself. Moses is just the messenger – the mouthpiece. He is not in management; he is just a messenger. God has given Pharaoh a lot of chances, a lot of slack and leeway, but of course Pharaoh has only become more and more out of line: proud, independent, self-important. Nature is getting closer and closer to total chaos. So God steps in. How do we know? Because God goes to the core of what is wrong: there is no respect, no honor, no humility, no obedience, no worship of any kind toward the Creator. So God takes what has been withheld – the firstborn. *Everybody* in the world of that time knows that they owe firstfruits and firstborn to God. Pharaoh has defied God on purpose, withholding the tribute. Pharaoh thinks he himself can play God. So God takes what is rightfully his – the hard way – and sets creation back on course. Passover. God saves the Israelite firstborn because, as slaves, they are unable to give the sacrifices. They smear blood on their doorposts as a sign to the angel of death that they are willing to make sacrifice, and promise to do so as soon as they are freed. It is a sign that they want the Creator to be back in charge – to come first.

I am not telling you how you are supposed to think. I am reminding you how they thought, what they believed, and what the story meant to them. No sooner did they get out of Egypt than they clearly reinstated the commitment: *“The Lord spoke to Moses. He said, ‘Every firstborn, the first birth of every womb among the Israelites, you must dedicate to me, both man and beast; it belongs to me.’”* Never pretend that I am not here.

Before Abraham, much of the world actually gave the firstborn in sacrifice on the altar. Israel's God forbade child sacrifice from their

beginning. You know the story of Abraham and Isaac, I hope. (Genesis 22:1-18) That is the root and source of redemption. If you do not give the firstborn in sacrifice to God, you must kill it. That is: if it is unclean or if you think it unworthy of the altar, you must kill it; you may not keep it for yourself. It is not yours under any circumstances. It belongs to God. But God forbids child sacrifice, so God keeps the alignment – keeps things in order and running right – by means of redemption. Redemption means you bring a special offering in place of the firstborn. With the Lord's permission, you buy back your firstborn's life, sacrificing an animal in place of your child. This offering is above and beyond all other offerings that you owe or wish to give, and you dare not neglect it. First of all, it would begin to send nature back toward chaos. Secondly, God might take your child another way.

Of course, you all know that this is sheer superstition. We don't have to pay attention to God in real or pragmatic ways anymore. We don't need God in charge. Things have natural causes, and we just have to use our knowledge and our common sense. That's why our air is clear, our waters are pure, and all our leaders are humble and trustworthy. As for plagues – nature in chaos – we all know that is a thing of the past, just ancient people exaggerating things to make a good story. Boy, are we smart! Man, were they stupid.

Well, I suppose some of you haven't thought much about "redemption" since we stopped getting S&H Green Stamps at the grocery store. But the "old words" – salvation, ransom, justification, atonement, judgment, purification, sacrifice, reconciliation, guilt and grace, sin and sanctification – have a power and a majesty that dwarf the anemic terms used today to express religious or spiritual meaning. Beside such concepts, notions of "getting a good self-image" and "learning to take care of myself" and "having an interesting spiritual experience" sound pale and puny to my ears. At the very least, I enjoy and appreciate knowing something of what was going on in the minds and hearts of the Christians who came before us. Some of that we can see by the way they lived. But you can also feel it in the words they used.

Of course, Jesus was a firstborn son. Do you know your Christmas story? (Luke 2:21-24) Thirty days after His birth, Joseph and Mary went all the way to Jerusalem to *redeem* Him. Jesus came out of a culture – out of a two-thousand-year-old tradition – where altars and sacrifices, redeeming the firstborn male, and sharing the sacred meal with God and your community were all common, familiar-to-everybody affairs.

It wasn't that much of a leap for the early church to see Jesus as the redemption price – the sacrifice that redeemed all of them from death, from Satan, from the sins that were separating them, perhaps forever, from God. The New Testament sees Jesus as a “sacrifice” – as “the meal provided for all to share, that they might become holy and blessed and live again in God's presence.” The New Testament sees Jesus as “lamb without blemish” who goes on the altar that all the other children may be redeemed and go free. All these images, and many more, were rich and powerful metaphors to the early Christians, but they are easily lost on those of us who have never seen one single animal sacrifice in our entire lives. How many of you have “redeemed” your firstborn son? You may have noticed that at first it was son or daughter. Later, the redemption of firstborn sons covered both sons and daughters.

So if you say “Jesus saves” or “Jesus is our redeemer” to your neighbor, co-worker, or friend today, are you presuming they know all about Cain, Pharaoh, altars, and animal sacrifice? Are you telling them that this is still your take on how God is saving us? *“God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”* (Colossians 1:13-14) Hallelujah! “I know that my redeemer liveth ...”

I really believe that. But I also know that these words don't come out of the same context for me that they did for Paul, who grew up loving and participating in the temple's worship and sacrifices. I also know that they cannot mean to my friends what they meant to Paul's friends. Am I faithless for knowing that? Not only am I not faithless, I am trying to say to you, my Christian friends, that if you do not spend time and give earnest thought to what Jesus really means to you – and does for you – you cannot be a very good carrier of the Message or inviter into the WAY. That is, Jesus will not be able to use you to reach the people He would really love to connect with through you.

We may not go to the temple for animal sacrifices, but we still have some experience with being in bondage; with not being where we want to be, or who we want to be; with not finding life compatible with the hungers of our souls, for both external and internal reasons. The people all around us don't advertise these things on the surface any more than we do, but they all share this reality with us – and with Peter and Paul and Moses and Cain and all the others. Because Jesus is the Redeemer, we need to learn both where that word comes from and how to translate it into things we experience and deal with in our time.

I am not trying to solve the equation for you. In fact, I'm trying very hard not to. As far as I am aware, Jesus moves me – and redeems me – by revealing to me how much God cares. I am not “won over” by a transaction Jesus makes with God – or with Satan. I do see in Him a WAY of Life I did not know existed, and a personal caring I did not know was possible. In the Cross and Resurrection, I see both promise and invitation to live for a different reality, with different values from those I see running the world I know and experience and keep getting drawn into. Of course, I identify Jesus as THE ONE sent by God, or this would have very little effect on me. Concluding that God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, Jesus' story changes all truth and reality for me. He lives on a level I have never heard of before, and He follows a light – a set of values – I would never have dreamed was possible. Even that would only make Him a great hero – not a Redeemer (Savior) – were it not for the Cross and Resurrection.

Is that enough to get you on the hook, but not enough to get you off your own assignment? That is what I'm trying for. The Cross is not a price paid to God or to Satan. It is a thing done for me, done to me – to my loneliness, fear, greed, and hatred. The old language is not stupid; it just comes from a different time. The Cross really is a price paid to buy off my loneliness, my fear, my hatred, my bondage. That is, I did not know that caring like that existed. And even had I supposed it might, certainly I did not imagine that it existed for me, especially not from the Almighty.

One of the differences between the way it is for me and the way it is for some of my friends who I think “don't get it” yet is that they think it's over. For them, the Cross is history. They even think the Resurrection is history, though I don't know how they manage to keep it in the past. Years ago, Mariana stood beside me before God's altar and said “I do.” For you, that may seem like history. For me, it is an ongoing reality that changes every day of my life. Years ago, Jesus died on a Cross. It was His way of saying a much bigger and more far-reaching “I do.” For me, that is not history. It is an ongoing reality that changes every day of my life.

I have friends who think maybe Jesus doesn't have much to do with things anymore. I also have friends who don't like any kind of redemptive language – “Please, God, I would rather do it myself.” They think they have better concepts and better words; I think they have merely lost the truth, so they invent a new vocabulary to voice a pathetic humanism that has no power to redeem us. I often think we only

make up theories about how spiritually advanced we think we would like to be and then try to pretend we already are that way. But the charade keeps blowing away, and the debris makes it obvious that we are only pretending.

Whenever it gets real – or hard, or really hard – I love knowing that Jesus is here. I don't care much about the theories then, one way or the other. I like to know that the One who was not afraid of death or Satan, the One who would not run from priest or Roman, the One who would not duck the Cross, and who is even now in Resurrection – I like to know that He is with us. I do not make any of it up; I just cannot escape it. So more and more, I like to bet it all on Him – seek His guidance, ask for help, trust His love.

I know that my redeemer liveth. Nearly every day I wish that I could live better for Him. But I have no trouble wondering if I need redemption. It is an old word that rings just fine in my ears. I hope it keeps ringing in my life, too – and in yours – and that because of us, some folk will find the redemption of Jesus the Christ who might not have found it otherwise.

But you cannot leave it up to me. I have an older sister; I'm not even the firstborn. You have to find your own language. You have to know and carry the Message too.