

"Christ's Offer of Salvation"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, March 4, 2007

Text: Romans 10:9-17 John 14:1-6 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, who has loved us through the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, open our hearts and minds to your message of hope. Amen.

Normally the flight from Nassau to Miami took Walter Wyatt only 65 minutes. But this time he attempted it after thieves had looted the navigational equipment in his Beechcraft. With only a compass and a hand-held radio, Walter flew into skies blackened by storm clouds.

When his compass began to gyrate, Walter concluded he was headed in the wrong direction. He flew his plane below the clouds, hoping to spot something, but soon he knew he was lost. He put out a mayday call. A Coast Guard search plane arrived to lead him to an emergency landing strip only six miles away. Suddenly Wyatt's right engine coughed its last and died. The fuel tank had run dry. Around 8 p.m. Wyatt could do little more than glide the plane into the ocean.

Wyatt survived the crash, but his plane disappeared quickly, leaving him bobbing on the water in a leaky life vest. With blood on his forehead, Wyatt floated on his back. Suddenly he felt a hard bump against body. A shark had found him. Wyatt kicked the intruder and wondered if he would survive the night. He managed to stay afloat for the next 10 hours.

As the sun came up, Wyatt saw no airplanes. In the water a dorsal fin was headed for him. Twisting, he felt the hide of a shark brush against him. In a moment two more bull sharks sliced through the water toward him. Again he kicked the sharks, and they veered away. He was nearing exhaustion. Then he heard the sound of a distant aircraft. When it was within a half mile, he waved his orange vest.

The pilot radioed a Coast Guard cutter which was twelve minutes away, "Get moving, cutter! There's a shark targeting this guy!" As the cutter pulled alongside Wyatt, a Jacob's ladder was dropped over the side. Wyatt climbed wearily out of the water and onto the ship. He fell to his knees and kissed the deck. He had been saved!

That day Wyatt didn't need encouragement or better techniques. Nothing less than outside intervention could have rescued him from sure death.

How much we are like Walter Wyatt. In our world of difficulties, challenges, sorrow and sin, we need someone to rescue us. We need someone to save us. The good news is that Jesus Christ has come to be our Savior.

Lee Strobel has pointed out that many religions are based on people doing something to somehow earn favor with God. Some say you have to use a Tibetan prayer wheel, or give money to the poor, or avoid eating certain foods, or pray in a certain direction, or go through a cycle of reincarnations. These are all attempts to earn enough favor with God to deserve his salvation. Christianity is based on what Jesus Christ has done for us. God saves us when we trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

The mission of our church is sharing Christ from the heart of Durham. Exactly what are we sharing? Our central component of Jesus' ministry and legacy is his offer of salvation. At the foundation of the Christian faith is belief in Jesus Christ as Savior.

In his work, *Dogmatics in Outline*, Karl Barth writes, “To pronounce the name of Jesus Christ means to acknowledge that we are cared for, that we are not lost. Jesus Christ is man’s salvation in all circumstances and in face of all that darkens his life, including the evil that proceeds from himself. . . . God has so acted for our good, does and will so act, that there exists salvation for every lost condition.” (p. 71)

John in his gospel interprets the saving activity of Jesus with a variety of creative and tangible images. Jesus is teaching his disciples about preparing a place for them in the next life. He says, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus replied, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” (John 14:3-6) Jesus is the way to God. Jesus is the truth that will set us free. (John 8:32)

On another occasion, Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Can you see that wonderful light?

Jesus is the bread of life that nourishes and sustains our souls. (John 6:35) Can you smell that bread? Can you taste the bread that satisfies our deepest hungers? Jesus is the source of living water that overflows to eternal life. (John 4:14) Can you feel that refreshing, life-giving water? It quenches our thirst.

Jesus offers us life and can be our Savior. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a series of lectures titled, *Christ the Center*, describes our encounter with Christ: “One cannot avoid encounter with the person of Jesus because he is alive. With some care Goethe can be avoided, because he is dead. A thousandfold are the ways that men have used

to resist or evade an encounter with Jesus. . . There are only two ways possible of encountering Jesus: man must die or he must put Jesus to death.” (p. 34-35)

The apostle Paul proclaims to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Paul describes Jesus’ saving activity and our response in our epistle lesson for today. “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. . . No one who believes in him will be put to shame. . . Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Romans 10:9, 11, 13) Hallelujah! Our response is the response of faith.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist societies in England, records in his journal about this experience in his own life. This is part of the entry for May 24, 1738: “In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine* and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.” Wesley received the assurance of his salvation.

The apostle Paul wrote these words to his younger helper, Timothy, “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance.” Whenever Paul would write that in the Pastoral Epistles, it is like he is saying, “Listen carefully, the next part is very important!” Paul wrote, “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the

world to save sinners.” (I Timothy 1:15) We have a Savior. Walter Wyatt had a Coast Guard cutter. We have Jesus.

John Newton was a sailor who lived far from God in the eighteenth century. He was the captain of a slave-trading ship. Someone gave him a copy of Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. After reading it, he was saved. He quit sailing and became an Anglican priest. He traveled all over England sharing his faith. As an elderly man, he had to have an assistant stand in the pulpit with him on Sundays. He was nearly blind and spoke in whispers, but nothing could keep him from preaching while he still had breath.

One Sunday, while delivering his message, he repeated the sentence, “Jesus Christ is precious.” His helper whispered to him, “But you have already said that twice.” Newton turned to his helper and said loudly, “Yes, I’ve said it twice, and I’m going to say it again.” The stones in the ancient sanctuary almost shook as Newton said again, “Jesus Christ is precious!”

Jesus is precious. He is our Savior.

Today we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This meal is your opportunity to express to God your desire to live for Christ, to receive Christ into your life, and to accept his mercy and grace. When you receive the bread and the cup, take this opportunity to dedicate or rededicate your life to him. Claim him as your Savior. Amen.