

Easter 3

April 26, 2008

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Ascension Lutheran Church

“Name Above All Names”

Acts 4.12

Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia!!!

And the day is coming when at the name of *Jesus* every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that *Jesus is Lord* to the glory of God the Father.

Our text is today’s first lesson(Acts 4.8-12) where St. Peter says of Jesus: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we can be saved.”

Imagine a room full of people plunged in total darkness. They can’t see a thing. But they are told a very valuable pearl has been put in that room, and the person who finds it can keep it. Everyone starts groping about in the darkness searching for that pearl. Some will pick up stones and be happy thinking they have found the pearl. Some will pick up bits of glass and think they have the pearl. Everyone in the room may be holding onto something, rejoicing because they believe that they have found the pearl. But when the lights come on it will be revealed that only *one* has the pearl.

That story was told by a Christian Bishop named Timothy back in 700's¹. He told it to a Muslim ruler in Bagdad who wondered aloud why there were so many religions in the world, each claiming to have found the truth. Bishop Timothy told that story to answer his question: in humanity’s search for God, we are all looking for that pearl of great value. When the lights come on, some of us will be found to be holding it.

We believe that *Jesus* is that pearl of surpassing value. “There is salvation in no one else,” St. Peter says of Jesus, “for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we can be saved.” “There is one mediator between God and humanity”, St. Paul wrote to Timothy, “Christ Jesus ... who gave himself a ransom for all.” Jesus himself said “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”

Now I must admit that sounds like a rather intolerant claim. And Christians have often been found to be intolerant. Over the course of history, terrible atrocities have been committed “in the name of Jesus.” There have been too many times that Christians have attempted to force their beliefs on others by violence. We have burned at the stake those who did not agree with us.

While admitting our own excesses we also have to acknowledge that the human experience has been enriched by **all** those who have sincerely sought to find God. There are many men and women who although they were not Christian who have inspired us with their writings and the stories of their spiritual journeys.

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, Harper Collins, p.17.

But we also believe that Jesus – only Jesus – was uniquely situated to bridge the gap that separated God and humanity. It is in Jesus – true God begotten of his Father from eternity and true Man born of the Virgin Mary – that God and humanity are reconciled. Who else but One who is God **and** Man could forge the missing link between a holy God and a fallen humanity.

That’s why “no one comes to the Father except thru Jesus”. That’s why “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we can be saved.” The God/Man is the link between God and humanity.

That’s Good News. That’s the Good News we have to ***go and tell*** (the “Easter imperatives”.) We ***can*** do that arrogantly: “Ha, ha: we’ve got the Good News. We’re right, you’re wrong. You’re gonna burn in hell.” I have seen – and do not understand – Christians who seem to take *delight* in telling others they’re bound for destruction. They seem to take delight in it and do not understand how that smacks of arrogance and intolerance, and drives more people away from Jesus than it draws to Jesus.

Or we can take the gift of grace we have been given and go with a humble spirit, realizing that we’re all searching in the dark for that valuable pearl, and it’s only by the grace of God that we have found the pearl of surpassing value and not a hunk of glass. Martin Luther reminded us that when it comes to salvation we are all beggars. The only difference between us and those who are not Christians is that we have found where they are distributing the free Bread. Our job is to share that information with others.

But if there is salvation in no one else, does that mean that those who don’t know Jesus or don’t believe in Jesus are lost forever? Some of us are quick to say “Yes, that’s exactly what it means.”

I believe that when the “end” comes, there will be some people who stand before Christ and say

“Look, I’ve told you a million times, I don’t want anything to do with you...Can’t you just leave me along.” And at that point even a very patient God will say “have it your way”. As they finally and forever walk away from God it will be a very, very sad moment.

But I also believe that God is extravagant with his love. I believe St. Paul was dead on target when he wrote to Timothy that God desires **all** people to be saved. St. John is dead on target when he writes in our 2nd lesson (1 John 1.1 - 2.2) that “Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. Jesus said when he was lifted up he would draw all people to himself. And St. Paul told the Philippians that the day is coming when every knee will bow before Jesus and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the F.

So great is the love that God has for us, and so great is his desire that no one perish, I believe that when the lights come on some of us will be blessed to see that we are holding the Pearl of surpassing value. Some will see that they are holding only a rock or a piece of glass. And when they look at Jesus the pearl of God’s love and say “I wish I had found **that**. I wish I was holding **that**.” – I believe that even then, even at that 11th hour, even after some of us gave our whole lives to Christ and have worked all day long in the vineyard, even then God will say to those

people, “I’ve waited your whole life for you to say that. Come to place prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

The day is coming when – with a few sad exceptions – at the **name of Jesus** every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

God’s extravagant love does not reduce our motivation to **Go and Tell**. We’re under an Easter imperative. We have found the Pearl of surpassing value. We know where the Living Bread is. What else can we do but share what we have found with others?

He is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.