

When I was around ten years old, my father took my little brother and me canoeing at Sugar Creek. I had never been canoeing and didn't know how to swim, so was very nervous and pessimistic. I knew a man who was in the Normandy Invasion and when, years later, he told me how he felt the night before the battle, it was exactly how I felt about canoeing. I was fairly confident that by the end of the day one or all of us would be dead.

My father had never canoed before, but approached the venture as he does most things, with wild optimism and unflagging zeal. "There's nothing to it," he said. "You just keep the front end pointed downstream." We pushed off into the stream and within a hundred yards came to the first bend, which we failed to clear. A tree had fallen into the water, debris had piled up behind it, and we crashed into it, flipping the canoe and landing in the water. The current pushed my brother under the limbs, where he became trapped. I could see him pinned under the water, but couldn't reach him. Fortunately, my father could and dove down and rescued him. My father hauled us to shore, went back for the canoe, pulled it to the bank, got us settled down and dried off, then said, "Your mother does not need to know about this."

Before he became the prime minister of England, Winston Churchill was a press correspondent in the Boer War in South Africa, where he narrowly escaped death. In one of his dispatches home, he wrote, “Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result.” I think that’s how my brother felt after our canoe trip. Nothing is so exhilarating as being close to death and getting saved.

The language of peril and rescue pervades religion. We Christians talk about “getting saved.” Which, of course, implies we were in peril, that our lives were in danger. Many of us were taught that we were born into sin and destined for hell, but when we believed in Jesus and confessed our sins, we were saved from that fate. That understanding of salvation assumed several things. It assumed we were inherently sinful, that we were born into a state of sin because of the sin of Adam and Eve. It assumed there was an afterlife, and that one possibility in that afterlife was a place of endless torment for people who didn’t believe in Jesus. It assumed God couldn’t freely forgive sin, that someone had to pay with his blood, that someone being Jesus. It assumed Jesus was willing and able to do that. It assumed all those things, which may or may not be true.

When we were taught that very specific formula, we were told it was an ancient belief. In fact, it’s relatively modern.

Before this, one's salvation had more to do with belonging to the right church or the right nation. We were saved by our connections. Or we were saved by giving money. We could buy our salvation. Many of the great cathedrals in Europe were funded by persons who believed they buying their way into heaven. But the understanding of salvation many of us were taught is a relatively new one, though we were told it was ancient. This is because the first thing people do with a new idea is try to convince others it's an old idea, that the weight of tradition and history are on their side.

"It's always been that way," they tell us. "That's what we've always believed. So you must believe it, too."

It becomes difficult to question these matters. People grow offended. But if we can, let's set aside our ideas about what it means when we talk about being saved, and let's see if we can't understand salvation a bit differently.

I want to do this by telling you a story of something that happened in this very room, the Sunday before Christmas. I'll jog your memory by reminding you it was the Sunday Daina Chamness dressed as Mrs. Claus for the children's message. She told a wonderful story, which culminated in the children in the meeting passing out cookies Daina had made for us. I think she called them peace-on-earth cookies.

Then you'll remember Jennifer asked us to sing Dick Givan's favorite carol, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*. Because Dick wasn't here to tell us the story behind that song, his son-in-law Larry did, and it was very touching. By then, it was 11:20, and I hadn't spoken, and was thinking maybe I wouldn't because we have this unspoken agreement that even though we're often a bit late getting things rolling, God wants us to end by 11:30. But I felt strongly led to speak on the theme of "For God So Loved the World, He Gave..." and closed the message by urging you to do what God did—reach deep down into yourself and find something beautiful, then give it to the world.

Eleven-thirty came and went. Several people spoke out of the silence. J.B. Symons noted the time, but in a wonderful way, by thanking all of you for giving your time so we could continue our worship. J.B. was a Methodist minister for 13 years and knows how to put a positive spin on things.

It was a wonderful Sunday, and by the time worship ended, I was deeply moved, and found myself tearing up. Someone asked if I was alright, and I said I'd never felt better. I know others felt that way too, because I received several letters, phone calls, and e-mails from people that week expressing their appreciation for our meeting.

I was lying in bed that night, thinking back over the day and especially of that morning, wondering what had made it such a powerful experience and I thought of the analogy of the perfect storm. A perfect storm is when all the necessary elements of weather intersect or come together to create an especially powerful storm.

Similarly, there are times in our lives when everything comes together, meets together, and we are as God intended us to be—fully alive and fully human. We are in right relationship with others. We are loving deeply. We are in right relationship with God. We have a keen awareness of the divine presence and feel deeply loved and profoundly connected.

Think for a moment how often we feel disconnected from others, how often we feel alone and separated. It is as if life is a swift current which carries us along, but we feel trapped in the debris, weighed down by the difficulties of life and unable to move. We feel bound and desperate and unsure. But then we are lifted up, we experience a moment of deep clarity and joy and understanding. Perhaps we might understand a troubling situation in a new light. Perhaps we might understand someone more deeply and are empowered to love them more fully. Perhaps we are able to forgive ourselves or someone else. I would say those are moments when we experience salvation.

Worship in this room the Sunday before Christmas was a moment of salvation for me. I felt connected to others. I felt connected to God. It was an experience of clarity, joy, and deep understanding.

Now do I have those experiences very often? No, I don't. These experiences of salvation aren't as frequent as I would like. However, they are frequent enough to keep me going. And they are transformative enough that I believe they are an appropriate goal for my life—to be connected to others, to be connected with the divine presence. So salvation isn't something we attain once and for all. Rather, it is a journey, a goal towards which we move, but the goal is always a little further ahead. Maybe when we get there, that is heaven. I had a glimpse of it four Sundays ago with all of you. I know I'll have it again.

I wasn't born in sin, needing to be rescued from an angry God. Neither were you. We were born immature and incomplete in an unfinished world. Salvation is growing up, growing wise, and finishing the job. It is becoming whole and healed, of realizing our connections. Every now and then we catch a glimpse of it. Someday, I believe, we will live in the fullness of it. That is my hope, that is my joy, and that is our job.