

Introduction:

- A. We went to a wonderful concert last week. One of the highlights was an arrangement of “In the Bleak Midwinter” with the poem by Christina Rossetti:
*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
 Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
 Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
 In the bleak midwinter, long ago.
 Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;
 Heaven and earth shall flee away when He comes to reign.
 In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
 The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.*
- B. Well, of course, the problem is that Jesus was not likely born “in the bleak mid-winter” amidst snow and ice. In fact, I think it is likely that Jesus was born in March or April, 5 BC. But it kind of takes the stuffing out of that otherwise beautiful song. I don’t know if Christina Rossetti realized all that 150 years ago but she was a poet, and perhaps when she wrote “*In the bleak midwinter*” she wasn’t just thinking about the weather. Poets, of course, often mean more than meets the eye.
- C. The Bible doesn’t use winter as a metaphor but it does use darkness. 700 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah described the darkness in Israel in **Is. 8:19-20...** God’s people were Word-less; Word-of-God-less. They’d consult spiritists in order to get a word from the dead but they’d ignore their God. **V.21...** Isaiah was a poet, too, and I suspect he was speaking of more than physical distress and hunger. These people were famished because they ignored God. God was shouting at them in their pain but they wouldn’t listen to that word either. Instead of turning to him they became *enraged* and *cursed their King and God*. And when they looked from the brass heavens to the earth around them: **V.22...** See what I mean about “In the bleak midwinter... frosty wind made moan”? And these were God’s people!

- D. C. S. Lewis caught the idea when he described the land of Narnia as a cursed place where it was “*always winter and never Christmas.*” A lot of people live in that land; that bleak midwinter where frosty wind made moan.

Both Mary and Joseph were told by the angel to name the baby Jesus, which means *God saves*, explaining, “For he will save his people from their sins” [Mt 1:21]. Christmas is the story of the birth of the Savior. There is a sublime choral piece by the Russian composer, Chesnokov, sung at Christmas with the simple lyrics: *Salvation is created, in midst of the earth, O God, O our God. Alleluia.*

I. WHEN JESUS WAS BORN SALVATION WAS CREATED

- A. **Turn to Luke 1.** Here’s the sequence: Zechariah, a priest, is told that he and his wife Elizabeth are going to have a baby in their old age, whose name is to be John, and he will go before the Messiah to prepare the way for him. Then the angel Gabriel appears to Mary telling her that she will be the mother of the Son of God, the Messiah. Then Mary sings praise to God. Then John is born and Zechariah praises and prophecies about what his birth will mean. As I read these I realized that different aspects of salvation are highlighted. Let me show you.
- B. The angel who appeared to Zechariah told him about the son who would be born. In **v.16** he said, “*He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.*” **Which tells you that God’s people had become like the lost sheep and they needed someone to bring them back.** Just like the people we read about in **Is. 8**. Remember how John the Baptist preached repentance, and then baptized people in the Jordan River to show that their hearts were ready for a Savior? Jesus came to save those who have wandered far from God. *Illus.:* Years ago I was getting a cup of coffee at the gas station on my corner on my way to church on a Sunday morning. Sy was in there—a rumped, sad-sack of a guy with an aching heart. “*Preacher,*” he said, “*what are you talking about today?*”

“Well, actually,” I said, “I’m preaching about how God the Good Shepherd goes searching for lost sheep.”

“I’m a lost sheep,” he said.

- C. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary he emphasized another aspect of salvation: **vv.31-33**, “*You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*” The Savior is the great King. **A king was not just someone to run the country, but the champion of the nation—the person who would lead them to victory over their enemies and bring them peace.** More than that, the Messiah was the one God would send **to bring all the promises of God to pass.** We are saved because we have God’s own King to usher in his kingdom of peace forever. *Illus.:* In the story I’ll tell on Christmas Eve, a poor mother, hearing from the wise men of the king they seek, says, “*For such a King I have waited all my life. And if I weren’t so poor, I would send a gift of my own to such a child.*”
- D. The angel spoke to Zechariah about the wayward of Israel but when Mary sang her praise to God she thought of another group of Jews—people whose hearts were like hers—people who honored the Lord but were beleaguered by proud and powerful tyrants. Still there are such people who have no one to defend them. Jesus, the King, was born to save them—to be the answer to their helpless prayers.

Look at **vv.50-53**,

*His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.*

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

*He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.*

*He has filled the hungry with good things
but he has sent the rich away empty.*

God saves humble, helpless people who have waited for him.

- E. Now we go to Zechariah's song—a prophecy really, delivered after John the Baptist was born. **Vv.68-74...**
*“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because **he has come to his people and redeemed them.**
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us [a champion]
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”*

There are two aspects of salvation linked together here: (1) that the Messiah has come to redeem his people, and (2) that he will save them from their enemies. Throughout the Old Testament the *only* reason Israel was ever conquered by enemies was because they refused to love and serve God. They were their own victims. The enemies of Israel, no matter how mighty, were only able to prevail because they had become the hammer of the Almighty, seeking to bring Israel to their knees in repentance.

When Jesus the Messiah came, he provided a means to redeem us from our sin, so that enemies lost the secret of their strength. Redeemed people—people whose sin is paid for and whose sin has lost its grip on us—are protected.

The effect is there in **v.74.** With enemies powerless we are free to serve the Lord “without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”

So salvation sets us free from our enemies so we may serve the Lord now and forever. Like the psalm says, *“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”*

SUMMARY: So when Jesus was born salvation was created.

INTERLUDE: Some 30 years after Jesus' birth John the Baptist, his cousin, became a voice crying in the wilderness, "*Prepare the way of the Lord.*" And hundreds of Israel's wayward people repented of their sin and were baptized. It was like a national Saturday night bath to get ready for church the next morning; to get ready for Jesus. Jesus came, announcing, "*Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.*" The nation divided over him. He was crucified by his enemies. Satan struck his heel. God the Father condemned and forsook him on the cross, and the very sun fled away. Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world and died. God accepted his sacrifice and Jesus rose from the dead. Then he ascended into heaven where he intercedes for us. **When Jesus was born salvation was created but...**

II. WHEN JESUS COMES AGAIN SALVATION WILL BE COMPLETED.

The book of Revelation relates the final chapter of the salvation story. Let me highlight three ways our salvation was completed:

- A. Two weeks ago we looked at **Rev. 12**. An epic cosmic battle is portrayed in symbolic language, with the archangel Michael prevailing over the wicked archangel Satan and casting Satan and his vast horde of demons out of the heavenly realms. Michael's allies are believers in Jesus who triumph "*by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.*" The victory is described in **v.10**:

*"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God,
and the authority of his Messiah.*

*For the accuser of our brothers and sisters,
who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down."*

Our salvation is completed when our archenemy is defeated as he surely will be. In fact, **Rev 19** promises that when all is said and done, the devil will be "*thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where he will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*"

- B. Salvation has another great task on its 'Do List,' the destruction of this world's deadly, arrogant system. **Rev. 18**

describes the fall of Babylon. Babylon is the Bible's symbol of all that is wrong with the world—especially the pride, godlessness, and economic system that even trades in human beings. It is all a prostitute, seducing people away from God's love by her gaudy, godless ways. But she will fall, and fall suddenly. **Rev. 18:16:**

*Woe! Woe to you, great city,
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!*

There is nothing redeemable in our world's system. There will be no markets in the New Jerusalem. No currency. No merchants or tycoons or self-made men. And our response then will be, according to **v.20:**

*Rejoice over her, you heavens!
Rejoice, you people of God!
Rejoice, apostles and prophets!
For God has judged her
with the judgment she imposed on you.*

And in response to the downfall and death of this gaudy, proud prostitute of a system, **Rev. 19:1** says...

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:

*"Hallelujah!
Salvation [there it is—salvation] and glory and
power belong to our God,
for true and just are his judgments.
He has condemned the great prostitute
who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.
He has avenged on her the blood of his servants."*

Our salvation is completed when this world's corrupt and murderous system is destroyed.

- C. But of course the best part of salvation completed is what happens to us. **Rev. 19:6-9** says,

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready. [That’s us!]

Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear.”

(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.) [Those are our righteous acts we’re wearing!]

Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” [That’s us, sitting at that great feast with our Lord and Bridegroom, where he finally fulfills his promise made at the Last Supper to drink the cup of redemption with us again.]

It seems so often that we go through life dressed in such tawdry spiritual garments—spotted and torn and wrinkled. But Revelation tells us that the saints in heaven will wear white robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb, but also white with our righteous acts in Jesus’ name—with the good we do, with the truth we think, with the love we have for Christ and his people. Our good deeds are like white linen woven into the very bridal gowns we shall wear in heaven. Salvation is completed when, dressed in white, we come to our wedding with Jesus, the Lamb.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is fitting that we celebrate the birth of Christ “in the bleak midwinter,” to help us remember the darkness, because as Isaiah wrote, *“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.”* And as Zechariah sang,

*“The rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

Illus.: Some years ago I read the story of **Mary Ellen Rothrock**. In the 1960s she was a grad student in English literature at the University of Wisconsin. She wrote,

“Despair seemed to permeate the student body, especially those in the humanities.” A fellow graduate student summed it up cynically, "Playwright Samuel Becket is right. Man is just a piece of trash in a universe that's running down."

She rebelled against this thinking. She grew up attending the church where her father was organist, so she knew about God. But Jesus was merely a historical figure to her. She never heard that he died on the cross for her sins. She writes,

In college, atheism became my religion. Yet when I got into grad school, I found myself seeking to fill a spiritual void in my life. I began practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM).

I met periodically with a TM supervisor. After a year or so of meditating, I mentioned that I had a recurring thought when I was trying to concentrate on my mantra.

"It's a line from Handel's *Messiah*. Something in my mind keeps repeating 'And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.'"

That line came to Mary Ellen because, growing up in Pittsburgh, her family went every year to hear Handel's *Messiah* performed by the Pittsburgh Symphony and the Mendelssohn Choir at Heinz Hall. She wrote,

To my young mind, not only was the music thrilling, but the words seemed to come from beyond this world. I loved the joyful language: "Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.... For unto us a Child is born ... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

Her TM supervisor told her to ignore the words that kept coming to her but she wrote,

"I told myself, 'These aren't just random thoughts.' It suddenly hit me. The phrase *And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed* was an invitation from a personal God of glory to

seek him! Why couldn't he be "Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace"?

Within months, she met a woman who explained how she could have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It made perfect sense. The words she'd listened to in Handel's choruses had pointed to Jesus Christ, the Messiah. She said,

As I heard the words from the Bible, the words from the musical score made sense. The Holy Spirit convinced me of the truth: the God I'd hungered for, the personal God, loved me. "Hallelujah! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth."

Salvation created... and salvation completed.

[“The Lyric that Saved My Life” by Mary Ellen Rothrock, *Christian Reader* (from CT), Nov-Dec 1998]