

“Trainsition”

II Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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When I retired six years ago, retirees were invited to make a 90 minute video to be shown at Annual Conference. After giving a brief history of my ministry, I said that retiring is really just a simple switch: (here I remove my robe to reveal a trainman’s uniform). As Proverbs 22:6 says, *“Train a child in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.”* (NRSV)

That about says it all, I suppose. Well, not quite, since I didn’t manage to stay retired. As last week I focused on one verse, so this week I do the same:

“God says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation.”

II Corinthians 6:2, quoting Isaiah 49:8

You see, friends, **today** is all we have. No one is guaranteed tomorrow. In recent weeks Carol and I journeyed with two friends whose adult children just died; a colleague of mine whose mother died; one of Carol’s patients whose husband died; and another colleague, the same age as me, now in memory care. Although we never know whether we’ll have another tomorrow, it’s pretty certain that, at 70, I have more “yesterdays” than “tomorrows.” Now is the acceptable time.

You see, retired or working, in school or in the “school of life,” young or old, we **all** have **today**. As the saying goes, *“Today is a **gift**. That’s why they call it the **present**.”*

“On a day of salvation I have helped you,” writes Paul, quoting Isaiah 49 in what scholars call the Second Servant Song. In the 6th century B.C. life was a mess for the Israelites. Their country was overrun by Babylon. Their leaders were exiled. Their hope for national independence and religious freedom was cut off. Part of their story is told in dramatic flair at the *Sight and Sound Theatre* in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in their current production of “Daniel.” Carol and I saw it in late May and it is worth the trip.

One might think that what the Israelites needed was comfort. Nothing doing. Here's what the prophet Isaiah goes on to say: *"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."* (Isaiah 49:6) Isaiah says, in effect, "Oh, so you think God should raise you up to restore the nation of Israel? Nope. God says, 'I've got a better idea. I will give you as a light to the nations.'"

This should not be lost on us. Yes, we have been through tough times at Woodbury UMC. Yes, we are focusing on rebuilding our congregation: its morale, its membership, and its systems. But if that is all we are doing, we need to ask ourselves, *"If Woodbury UMC was no longer here, who would notice?"* Our mission remains, with The United Methodist Church, to *"makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."* Or, in the words of our founder, Rev. John Wesley, when he commissioned the early American Methodist preachers, their mission was *"to reform the continent, and spread scriptural holiness throughout the land."*

The urgency of doing this **today** was Paul's point to the Corinthians. They were not exiled physically, but spiritually. They were a contentious lot if ever there was one. Need something to fight about? Ask the Corinthians. What food is religiously proper to eat? Is it moral for a man to live with his father's wife? (Spoiler alert: **NO!**) Who is wise? Who has the best gifts? Who is the best religious teacher? How are the dead resurrected? The Corinthians could throw down so fast it would make "The Jerry Springer Show" look like kindergarten. (If you haven't seen The Jerry Springer Show, think "Dr. Phil" meets "World Wrestling Federation.") If you want to get this straight from the Bible, take 15 minutes and read First and Second Corinthians.

To the quarrelsome Corinthians Paul said, essentially, *"Stop it! Don't you Christians understand you're new creatures now? Don't accept the grace of God in vain! Don't sing 'Amazing Grace' at the funeral and then spit verbal nails in social media the next day."*

If someone wonders “Is he talking about us?”, no; or at least not knowingly. But here’s what I **do** know. It’s my little sermon secret. I’ve said it to a few of you but it’s worth saying publicly: all my sermons are really to myself. This one is no exception. “**Now** is the acceptable time, **now** is the day of **salvation**.”

This is why Paul pointed the Corinthians to the cross. If we could save ourselves, we would. We can’t. God did it on the cross in Jesus Christ. I will always remember the argument I had, well into adulthood, with my mother in the presence of my father. The funny thing is, I cannot for the life of me remember what Mom and I were arguing about! But tempers rose and with them voices, until my father - a man whose faith was deep, tested in a career in law enforcement which once put him in the path of a meat-cleaver-wielding mad-man - my father stood and shouted “*Remember the cross! Remember the cross! Remember the cross!*” And we were hushed and humbled, remembering the depth of our Savior’s love.

Humility. It sometimes seems to me that humility is a casualty of our modern age. Everyone seems so sure about everything. I don’t get it. Someone asked me the other day “What should I say in my conversation to so-and-so?” It took me 5 minutes to answer, because the answer was nuanced and the implications were many and complex. Why is everyone so **sure** about everything? It reminds me of the old story of the student who announced confidently “‘**Sugar**’ is the only word in the English language where ‘S-U’ sounds like ‘S-H.’” Replied the teacher quietly, “Are you **sure**?” Social media posts pulse with righteous indignation at everything. Everybody’s right, it seems, but we seem unable to remind ourselves of our common humanity and, for Christians, that despite our differences we are brothers and sisters in Christ for whom Christ died.

That lack of humility, that braggadocio, is often rooted in fear: fear of the ‘other,’ fear of change, fear for our well-being, fear rooted in insecurity. We seem to have forgotten the scriptural assertion, “Perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:18)

So let's turn to today's Gospel. Fear is at its heart. Certainly the disciples had reason to fear. They were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and their lives were in danger. On the one hand, who could blame them? As it happens, Jesus could. Granted, it was early in Jesus' ministry with the disciples when this story appears, only ¼ of the way into Mark's Gospel. Still, by that point, Jesus has cured a madman, healed Peter's mother-in-law, healed many more who were sick in body or spirit, healed a leper, healed a man whose friends lowered him to Jesus through an opening in a roof, stood up against the temple authorities who said he **shouldn't** have healed the man because it was against religious law, stood up against self-righteous religious leaders who didn't like who Jesus ate with, cured a man with a withered hand and (again) stood up against self-righteous religious leaders, and cured more who were sick in body and soul. So one might not be surprised that in today's Gospel, having calmed the storm, Jesus asked the disciples *"Have you still no faith?"*

What about us? Have we faith? Are we ready, **today**, to receive the day of salvation? A few weeks ago in my Q & A sermon, Bud Behlman asked, *"Do Methodists still call for a personal acceptance of Christ as Savior and Lord?"* **Yes!** Even if we experienced salvation long ago, are we ready, **today**, to renew and refresh it? That's what it means to sing *"O God, our help in ages past our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home!"*

Is **today** the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing, *"O come to the Father through Jesus the Son, and give him the glory, great things he hath done!"*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing *"We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion, we're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God."*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing *"Blessed Savior, Thou wilt guide us, Till we reach that blissful shore; Where the angels wait to join us in Thy praise forevermore."*

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing "*Then let our songs abound and every tear be dry; we're marching through Emmanuel's ground to fairer worlds on high.*"

Is today the day of salvation? That's what it means to sing "*To God be the glory, great things he hath done!*"

Is today the day of salvation? Because that is what it means to sing "*I've heard an old, old story, how a Savior came from glory, how he gave his life on Calvary to save a wretch like me; I heard about his groaning, of his precious blood's atoning, then I repented of my sins and won the victory. Oh...*" Not yet!

In all the transitions of our lives, salvation is at hand in Jesus, who

- was in the beginning with God (John 1:1-4)
- was the Word made Flesh (John 1:14)
- is the image of the Invisible God (Col. 1:15-17)
- is mediator between us and God (I Cor. 8:6)
- is head over all Things (Phil. 2:9-11)
- is the Light of the World, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Prince of Peace and the Lord of Lords and the Lord of Love.

In **that** Jesus we find victory: the victory of knowing our true identity as sons and daughters of the Most High, victory over fear of change and loss and death; victory of keeping the law by loving God with our all heart and mind and soul and strength and our neighbors as ourselves, because in **these** are all the law and the prophets; and seizing **today** to do these things because **today** is the day of salvation. Today is **THAT** day of *transition*. May it be ever so! Amen!