Deborah Sokolove: Jesus Saves, or Binding up the Broken-Hearted

A Sermon for Seekers Church
The First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2005
by Deborah Sokolove

Jesus Saves, or Binding up the Broken-Hearted

This is really two sermons. When I originally signed up to preach today, I simply wanted to introduce the Advent season, and talk a little about why the lectionary is filled with readings about the end of time rather than the baby Jesus. Before I get to that, I want to talk about Seekers and salvation. Things may seem a little disjointed, but I hope to tie the two together before I get to the end.

I think it is not possible to live in an English-speaking country without encountering the slogan, “Jesus saves.” What does that mean? I suspect that all of us, at one time or another, has been asked by some earnest, often young, person, “are you saved?” Before I was a Christian, I used to wonder from what they thought I needed to be saved. When I asked, the answer usually was some rather literal-minded version of either “hell” or “death.” Since I did not believe in an afterlife, and was not particularly afraid of dying, this kind of answer never seemed like a very persuasive reason for converting to Christianity. Nevertheless, it turns out that I did need to be saved, after all. I needed to be saved from

fear, from pain, from sorrow, from loss. When I let him, Jesus does save me from all that.

The word “salvation” comes from the Latin *salus*, which means both health and safety, an all-encompassing well-being. When we are saved, the word implies, we are both healed of our bodily afflictions, and kept safe from further harm. In the Hebrew Scripture reading for the third Sunday in Advent, Isaiah proclaims that he is sent to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, which includes not only bringing good news to the oppressed and setting the captives free, but also comforting all who mourn, and binding up the broken-hearted. God promises to bind our wounds, to tend to us as a mother comforts a hurting child. This comfort **is** salvation.

It is not only those who have no material goods, those who live under political oppression, those who suffer from serious illnesses who need this kind of salvation. The whole world needs to be saved from its brokenness, to become whole. Everyone is broken in some way. Each of us, rich or poor or comfortably middle class – we all need to be saved. We all long for the eschaton, the end of time, the reign of God, for peace of Christ. That this eschaton is realized in the eternal moment of here and now, if only we have eyes to see it, is the good news that Jesus came to proclaim.

How do **we** proclaim this good news? There is a saying attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi that says, “Preach the Gospel always. If necessary, use words.”

When I first came to Seekers, it seemed to me that this

congregation embodied the words of Jesus, spoken to his disciples at that last meal he had with them, as he faced the cross. He said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” [John 13:34-35] For many years, Seekers preached the Gospel through loving one another, and through loving each person who walked through our doors.

Lately, though, I have been wondering if this is still true. Look around: we are shrinking in numbers. When I first came to Seekers in1990, there were regularly 60-70 adults in worship, and ten to fifteen children of varying ages. In the intervening 15 years, most of those children grew up and left for college, and many of the adults who had been vitally involved left for a variety of personal and professional reasons. One of the hopes that some folks held about our move to this location was that we would attract families from the neighborhood. While this has happened to some extent, we have not grown in the ways that many had hoped. In the last few weeks, most Sundays have seen fewer than 40 adults, and frequently only one or two children. Today, recognizing how many have left us disaffected in some way, and how many of us that remain seem to hurt one another and/or seem somewhat joyless, I am beginning to wonder if we still love one another as Jesus loves. If not, how we can rediscover that mutual joy and trust that once was our hallmark? How can we, as a congregation, be saved?

One path, I suggest, is to look at ourselves in a new way. According to some traditional markers, this could be seen as a dying church. However, it occurs to me that perhaps we are not dying, but rather consolidating. Perhaps we are returning to the older, Church of the Saviour, model in which a very small

group of highly committed Christians invest their lives in a common journey, both inwardly and outwardly. Perhaps if we could stop worrying about how small we have become, or how hard each of us is working, or what might attract new families, we could rediscover the joy that binds us to Christ and to one another. Perhaps we might begin living again in the already/not yet reality of the promised, heavenly end of time, where every broken heart is mended, and tears are wiped away from every sorrowful eye.

Last weekend, I got a glimpse of another vision of the end of time. I was at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion. This is a four-day extravaganza of papers, lectures, panels, and other events held every year right before Thanksgiving. This year, more than ten thousand graduate students, scholars and professors from theological schools and university departments of religion came from all over the country, and even around the world, to share their latest research, meet old friends and spend their annual book-buying allotments. One night, about 75 folks gathered to watch a screening of the first “Left Behind” movie.

In case you don’t know about the “Left Behind” phenomenon, it is a series of twelve books and, as of a few weeks ago, three films which dramatize what will happen to those left behind on earth after the Rapture. Widely read among conservative Christians, the books have been at the top of the New York Times best-seller list, with the series as a whole selling over 62 million copies. As the conference program guide noted, “The novels and films are an explicit attempt to . . . deliver [a] very specific dispensationalist end-times doctrine . . . within the fundamentalist subculture . . . For this reason, many aspects of the story are relatively inaccessible to those outside the fold of evangelicalism.” The people with whom I

watched “Left Behind” were, generally, interested academics from outside that fold, curious to see for themselves something that many had only heard about, and to discuss its implications. When it was over, the woman sitting next to me said, “Would someone please tell me what was going on?”

I am not going to try to describe the “Left Behind” series; nor to explore the differences between dispensationalism, covenentalism, and supercessionism; nor to explain what is meant by post- or pre-tribulationsim, millennialism, or other technical terms that refer to the order in which events might happen at some future date. While all of this is interesting if we want to understand how some Christian groups or individuals think about the end times, I would rather think about my neighbor’s question as it applies to the Revised Common Lectionary readings in this season of Advent. What is going on in these readings, and what might that mean for our lives as members of the Body of Christ?

There are four Sundays in Advent, and for the first three, we do not hear anything about the angel Gabriel, Mary and Joseph, or any of the other comfortingly familiar Christmas stories. In this season, the theologians remind us, we are not waiting for the baby Jesus, but rather for the coming of the one who will save us. This theological truth is illustrated in the many medieval Nativity scenes in which a crucifix is anachronistically visible, often hanging on a post near the Holy Family, as they huddle among the animals. The point of the infancy stories is not that we should coo over the baby in the manger, but rather the point is to make the Incarnation a concrete reality. The story we will read from the Gospel According to Luke on Christmas Eve gives us tangible, if somewhat spare, details about a Jesus who was a real human being, born in difficult circumstances, lived a life of love

and service, and was killed by the authorities in a particularly public and painful way. It is this same Jesus whom we recognize as the eternal Christ, God Incarnate, who saves the world through his fully human life, death and miraculous resurrection.

Because it is the coming of the one who will save the world, rather than the birth of a baby, however holy and special, that we await in Advent, the lectionary readings for the season are filled with images of the end of time. The biblical and extra-biblical texts that are meant to reveal something about the end of time are called apocalyptic, from the Greek word that means, “to reveal.”

Today, we read two of these apocalyptic, eschatological images. This first is the plea we heard from Isaiah, “O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence. . .” The second is a prediction that the Gospel According to Mark attributes to Jesus: “But in those days . . . the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Human One coming in clouds with great power and glory.” What are we to make of passages like this?

In his excellent and highly readable book, *In God’s Time: The Bible and the Future*, New Testament scholar Craig Hill argues that we cannot understand Jesus without his understanding of his own role in the coming end of time. According to Hill, a non-eschatological Jesus is no Christ at all. Like the producers of “Left Behind,” many Christians find signs of the imminent Second Coming in every hurricane, earthquake or

Middle Eastern battle, and predict the date of the Rapture according to complicated charts of the bowls, seals and trumpets of Revelation. In contrast, Hill writes,

> *For every Christian captivated by the subject, there are many others who either ignore or dismiss it. The reasons are plentiful. The matter may seem peripheral at best, incomprehensible at worst. Biblical language about the end strikes some as vindictive and offensive. Many find the whole thing an embarrassment. What generation has not read itself into the biblical texts, only to be proved wrong? Worse still are the myriad of silly, sometimes grievous acts that have been committed under the intoxicant of prophetic expectation. . . .Regrettably, the Book of Revelation in particular has a lamentable history as the favored text of miscreants and dupes. . . . For still others, End Times belief is an unwelcome inheritance from the family's primitive past, an uncouth relative who should have been shown the door long ago. Ancient ideas about a "new heaven and a new earth" are so time-bound as to be irrelevant. Indeed, some modern biblical scholars have taken considerable pains to construct a "historical Jesus" respectably free of such barbarity." [pp.2-3]*

Unwilling to simply dismiss what he considers a central concern of the biblical record in general and of the ministry of Jesus in particular, Hill continues,

> *[I]t is important to recognize that Christian faith is grounded in the triumph of God. To give that up is to jettison the core of historic Christian belief. . . . It is dishonest not to admit the problems inherent in the biblical expression of this hope. To avoid the hard questions is to retreat into a naïve and ultimately unsatisfying faith. These texts are troublesome, but they have something vital to say to contemporary Christians. [p. 3]*

One of the things that these texts have to say to us, I believe, is not the vision of doom and ultimate salvation portrayed in “Left Behind,” but rather a vision of ultimate peace, justice and love. In the world of “Left Behind,” those who are saved (plus all children under some unspecified age) are spared the terrors of the coming tribulation when they are Raptured away from earth without warning, leaving behind the unsaved “sinners.” The unsaved, we discover, will suffer war, fire, famine, flood and other terrible events until . . . well, I have only seen the first movie.

The apocalyptic texts from which this vision is drawn is the literature of those who need to be saved not so much from their own sins, but from the sins of others. It is written from the point of view of the oppressed, the enslaved, the marginalized, the broken-hearted. It is the hope of a world turned upside down, in which the meek inherit the earth.

When I was a poor, new mother living in the projects in my late teens, another young woman I knew used to preface all of her hopes for a better world with the phrase, “Come the Revolution….” Come the revolution, Rosie would say, she would have a steady, living-wage job with which to support herself and her child. Come the revolution, poor people will not have to live in cockroach-infested slums. Come the revolution, her boyfriend would treat her with respect. Come the revolution, there would be worldwide peace and prosperity. Rosie was an atheist for whom Jesus was an irrelevant myth and religion was the opiate of the masses. Nevertheless, as a struggling, single mother, she wished for a revolution that would lead to a new world in which the evil, capitalist overlords would be overthrown and replaced by a new reign of social justice and harmony.

This language of revolution is sounds remarkably like the language of apocalypse, which yearns for a new heaven and a new earth, a New Jerusalem from which God alone will rule with justice and compassion. There is no essential difference between Rosie's hopes for the revolution, and Mary's response to the announcement that she would bear a child who would save the world from its brokenness. In the *Magnificat*, which we will read on the fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary sings that God, her savior,

> *. . . scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts,*
> *brings down the powerful from their thrones*
> *and lifts up the lowly;*
> *The Holy One fills the hungry with good things,*
> *and sends the rich empty away.*

As I remember those long-ago days when Rosie lifted both our hearts with her talk of revolution, I find myself thinking that those of us who are already saved from hunger, poverty, and oppression probably do not, in our heart of hearts, hope for the coming day of the Lord described in these texts. I know that I do not actually want the world to be turned upside down. I do not want to be poor again. Having obtained the promise, I do not want to lose what I have been given. I just want poor people to have what I have, without my having to give anything up.

Rather than turning things upside down, next week's text from Isaiah speaks of leveling things out. In words familiar to most of us from Handel's ringing *The Messiah*, the prophet writes, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain [Isaiah

40:3-4, KJV]. I have not been able to hear this for many years without also hearing it as a description of strip mining, forest clearing, sub-division building, and other ecologically unfriendly activities, but lately I have come to understand it differently. While the words are troubling when read literally (after all, do we really want our valleys filled in and the tops of our mountains sheared off?) they can be heard as a metaphorical description of exactly the kind of social leveling that we advocate and try to practice here at Seekers. The goals of feminism, affirmative action, peace-making, and similar human attempts to bring about God's justice through non-hierarchical social arrangements can be seen as a kind of leveling, in which everyone may have personal dignity, material sufficiency, and a real voice in the decision-making processes of society.

I am not saying that these goals have been achieved, or that we know the best means towards them, or even that, once achieved, the world would be saved from its brokenness. Rather, I am suggesting that human goals like these embody the desperate hope that leads to words like Isaiah's.

Social justice is only one part of the eschatological vision. If social justice is the outer journey, then the inner journey is what the "Left Behind" series might describe as personal salvation. Personal salvation is, in one sense, our appropriation of the end-time promise in the eternally present here and now. It is a relational reality through which we come to know God and other people. Moreover, I believe, love is the means through which God offers that salvation, one person at a time.

This brings me back to Seekers. For many years, I said that the way Seekers preaches the Gospel is by binding up the

brokenhearted. When I came to Seekers, I brought with me a lifetime of woundedness, a heart heavy with loss and grief and rage. Through deep discussions in the School of Christian living, through silent retreats and noisy overnights at Wellspring, through years of mission group meetings, and – most of all – through many long and agenda-free conversations with Marjory, Mary Carol, Peter, Dave, Sheri, Kate, Jane and many others who welcomed me and loved me in my brokenness, I came to realize that God loves me and forgives me for all the hurt that I have caused, and continue to cause, to myself and to others. Seekers has been the Body of Christ to me in a deep, genuine, and incarnational way, and through this expression of his Holy Body, Jesus continues to save me every moment of my life. How shall we offer salvation to the next person who walks through the door?