

Have you been saved? Have you been washed in the blood of Jesus? Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour? Pretty arresting questions, huh? I'll bet some of you are wondering if you've come to the right church this morning. I'll bet a few of you are wondering how far you are from the door.

Many other questions come to mind as I think about how I've experienced these daunting questions over the years. What will washing in blood do? What's gonna be different when I accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour? Saved from what? What happens when if I don't or I'm not? Is there really such a thing as eternal damnation? Seriously?

Have you been saved? Have you been washed in the blood of Jesus? Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour? For some these questions conjure up fear and guilt. For some the questions just get our backs up. For some who are heading for the doors, these questions are irrelevant to living a 21<sup>st</sup> century life of meaning and purpose. For others that language is like breathing and to imagine anything different is to imagine not being a faithful Christian. I have hunch these and other perspectives live right here at Lynn Valley United Church.

When I was young man in the church, trying to figure out my place in the tradition, I remember a Christmas Eve service that my friends attended. These friends were on fire for Jesus – worshipped at a fairly charismatic, theologically conservative church. We became friends when we performed in a community production of Oklahoma. They were interested in where I was getting some of musical training, so they came to Christmas eve at Knox in Calgary, to hear the choir. Not unlike our 7 pm service here, there was lots of caroling, lots of choir participation, the reading of Luke's version of the first Christmas. And there was often the reading of a more general, related kind-of story. On the night in question, one of my new friends was so incensed by the lack of "alter call," biblical preaching, and the lay it on the line salvation threat, that he stood up in worship, during Joy to the World....and stopped the service. From a very powerful vantage point high above the pulpit in the transept balcony, he began to say "wait there's more....and he began to preach."

Well when the real Christmas eve preacher turned to the organist to say "wait," the organist heard "go on," and with a four manual Cassavant pipe organ at his finger tips, and feet on the pedals, he cranked up Joy to the World, completely drowning out my friend. In a fit of rage, he threw his him book down onto the main floor of the nave and ran down the stairs...and out the side door.

The minister ran after him while we sang, and brought him back and invited him to sit with him behind the pulpit for the rest of the service, which he did. The minister told us later that he realized he didn't know what kind of violence might have ensued when he chased the guy. He might have had a weapon. It was all great drama for one Christmas eve and an experience I'll not forget. So when I hear those arresting questions I just offered, I don't hear them as invitation, I hear them as weapons and I'm reminded of that Christmas eve at Knox so many years ago.

There are many ways of coming to faith. Some of us are nurtured in the faith from the time we are very young. I would venture to say that this is the experience of most of us. We were brought to church by our parents, we met friends the same age, married, had children, grew into active middle age, married off our children, welcomed grandchildren, and retired. All within a stone's throw of the influence of the church community. Being baptized, and confirmed and finding our place in the life of the community was a natural progression of our commitment to the church.

Others of us come to the faith through the influence of relationships. For example; we meet the woman of our dreams and her family is connected to a church. We show up because we want the girl...simple as that. And we reckon that the way to get the girl is by getting inside her life and on the good graces of her parents. Pretty soon, we're hanging around because it feels like us...regardless of the girl.

Some of us come to faith by crisis or by conversion. That is to say, an experience in our lives has brought us to the very edge of our capacity to cope, to very brink of what it means to be human – it may be an addiction, it may be the death of someone we love, it may well be the birth of someone we love. We have this experience, we are brought to our knees, and in the grip of guilt, or shame, or grief, or joy, we meet the One who walks with us every day.

I returned to the church at 19 because I wanted a choral music experience, believing that all famous actors, singers and dancers got their performance starts in the church choir. It was all about getting musical experience for me. The problem was there were just too many Sundays when I thought the preacher was only speaking to me. I've never left.

All of these experiences bring us into contact with the notion of salvation. They're equally valid ways of being "born again," of being born of water and the Spirit. All of these experiences are equally valid ways of coming to say yes to the liturgies of baptism and confirmation. All of these experiences have the potential to put us on the path of Christian discipleship.

As Stan mentioned, the church has been confounded for 2000 as to why Jesus himself was baptized by John. If Jesus was the almighty son of God, the perfect lamb of God who would

take away the sins of the world, the sinless man taking on the sins of the world, why was he baptized? While Matthew's telling of the events omits it, Christians remember from the other three gospels that John the Baptist's was a baptism of repentance and the remission of sins. From what was Jesus repenting when he took his turn to go into the waters of baptism?

Actually, if we take Matthew's version of the story at face value, and don't consider the other accounts of the same event, we're given a reason. It's to fulfill all righteousness. Subordinating himself, John says to Jesus in that moment "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me." And there Jesus says to him "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

We don't know much about Jesus' formative years, the gospels are pretty silent about what he was like as a child, a gangly pre-teen, a teenager and finally a young man. But I would venture to say that as a good Jewish boy, raised in a good Jewish family, Jesus grew into his faith, nurtured by a loving community, mentored by a hardworking father, loved into wholeness by a doting mother. Let's remember that the gospel of Matthew is considered by most scholars to be the most Jewish of the gospels – written primarily for a Jewish audience, most interested in the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. The gospel of Matthew's theological agenda is to show readers and followers how the Messiah of Jewish prophecy – Messiah in Hebrew, Christ in Greek; the anointed one – came to be embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

The fulfillment of all righteousness is the reason behind Jesus baptism and making good on his promises is what Jesus seems to have done with his baptism. The season of Epiphany is extraordinarily long this year – that time in the church calendar between when the magi visit, and the beginning of the season of Lent. Through these next couple of months, we will explore how fulfilling righteousness was the commitment Jesus kept in his wandering ministry. We'll also discover that the author of Matthew's is interested in empowering the "messianic" community. He's interested in encouraging those who would follow this path of Christian discipleship to be the saving, healing, generous, grace in whatever community they find themselves.

It seems to me that Matthew is more concerned about what happens after we are "saved," "baptized," "washed clean." Fulfilling all righteousness is what Jesus did with his baptism. Fulfilling all righteousness is what we might do in our practice as followers of this Jesus of Nazareth. Fulfilling all righteousness is about our unique and personal discipline of regular prayer, regular study of the scriptures, regular worship. Righteousness fulfilled means supporting refugee families and the people of the Dominican Republic and the people of the downtown eastside and the homeless on the North Shore. Righteousness fulfilled means nurturing one another in caring community and reaching out to those in our community wrestling with life on the North Shore in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There was a church newspaper ad in the 80's that read "at Lynn Valley United Church, you're welcome regardless of colour, race, sexual orientation, gender – or the number of times you've been born." And that's true here. Just like Jesus, when we say yes to path of Christian discipleship (and even when we don't) we claim our belovedness...because baptized or not, that's who we are. And when we make the same baptismal commitment as Jesus, to fulfill all righteousness, we take our place in servant leadership. So you've been saved. Now what? The only time Christ comes again is when we, his followers, go out into the community, serving in his name. Amen.