

1 Tim 1:12-17- Saved!
Sermon
15 Sept St John's Maadi
16 Sept Zamalek Cathedral

A few years ago I was staying at the Christian retreat center Anafora – on the desert road between Cairo and Alexandria. The bishop who owns that beautiful place likes it to be as natural as possible, and for that reason he does not allow bright lights to be used in the evening. Light bulbs are not stronger than 30 watt – you cannot read with that light. Quite amazing in a society where neon-lights in the living room are considered romantic.

In Anafora the nights are jet black. So if at night outside you lay on your back to watch the skies you see stars. Millions of stars. That is an absolutely amazing experience for us who live in the light-polluted environment of the city.

The sky was pitch black and against that very dark backdrop the lights of the stars seemed especially brilliant. For the first time in my life I saw falling stars – one after another. It was amazing - and no, for your information, they were not EgyptAir.

In the verses we read from the Apostle Paul to Timothy, Paul speaks of his own pitch black past. **‘I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man’**. Against that backdrop he speaks of the bright salvation that God made available - for him and for all mankind.

Throughout the centuries in all churches in all cultures, Christians have rejoiced in this *salvation* and in the fact that they have been saved.

In daily speech we use that word *save* in different contexts. Someone can be saved from a fire – out of gravely dangerous circumstances. We also use it in the sense of preservation so that something never enters into dangerous circumstances. We keep our money safe by putting it in a safety box for instance.

Paul tells us what he was saved from. He points to his past behavior - when he was a persecutor of the early Church. He was saved from the dangers of sin and from its eternal consequence of separation from God.

He had been the bounty hunter for the Jewish leaders who wanted to destroy the Church of God. Not for the money, but because he really believed he was serving God by killing Christians.

He truly believed that he did God a favor by as a blood-dog hunting for the rabbits. The rabbits were people who had left their Jewish religion as defined by its leaders in order to become followers of Jesus Christ.

Just as even today many belief they serve God by forcefully punishing people who leave their religion.

Serving God by killing people... what an absolutely horrendous idea for people who have come to know God as the Father of Jesus Christ. But there is hope, even for such people, and Paul is the prime example.

Paul describes that dark period in his life as one of **ignorance and unbelief** – in Arabic we would call that his own time of jahilliya and kufaar. Every person on earth, before being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ lives in that state.

Paul does not use his ignorance as an excuse for his violence, but a fact is: he was in complete darkness about the nature and love of God as expressed in Jesus and as confessed in his Church. Therefore his efforts to serve God were so totally misguided.

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoi wrote: **to know God**

is to live. Paul did NOT know God; to reverse Tolstoi's words: To not be related to the maker of heaven and earth, to not know the creator of life, means death.

But Jesus Christ himself intervened in Paul's life by revealing Himself in a bright light. In the book of Acts you can read a full description of this event that occurred on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus.

It was life-changing - without the intervention of God's real grace he would have remained a Pharisee and a persecutor of the Church until his dying day.

Paul summarized that crucial moment in a few words: **'I was shown mercy [...] and the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus'**.

The words **'poured out on me abundantly'** are one long compound word in Greek – **hyper-pleo-nadzo**. That is a tough one, not just in pronunciation, but in meaning as well. It means something like: given in fullness from above, given in exceeding abundance.

Paul speaks of magnificent mercy given to him. Very real God-size mercy. Much more powerful than the wicked past of the apostle, even though he calls himself the *worst of sinners*, or the *chief of sinners*. If you meet with God and the size of his mercy, you also begin to understand the size of your sin. If Christ had to die for us, how bad must our sin therefore be.

For Paul, the fact that God intervened with grace - even in his awfully bad life - was clear proof for the belief of the Church - the belief that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

The statement: **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners** was possibly part of an early creed, or maybe a sentence from a song of the early Church.

In a letter in the year 1521 to his friend Philip Melanchton, the German reformer Martin Luther made a statement about sin that has often been quoted:

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a

true, not an untrue grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness but, as Peter says, we look for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. . . . Pray boldly, he says to Melancton, you too are a mighty sinner.

Martin Luther is not condoning sin but encouraging courageous honesty about our miserable state, and faith in a Savior who is greater than our sin.

Get real, he's saying. As long as we're in this world we're sinners. There's no use putting up a clean false front and pretending as if we never trip on our journey. And there's also no reason to be afraid of that fact. The truly sensational news is not that we have sinned but that we have been saved by grace.

What an encouragement for us. Paul's example of his wicked pre-Christian life is great comfort to people who feel that they have messed up so badly that salvation is not for them.

It can be a great comfort to people who feel that they have tested God's patience one too many times and are certain there is no hope left.

It can be a great blessing to those who feel that the experiences of their life have left them as "damaged goods" and unsuitable for any worthwhile use.

Christ picked the chief of sinners to demonstrate to us today what his mercy and power can do in our life as well. Recognize that you sin boldly, Luther said, and trust boldly in the grace of God.

We must never belittle sin. Modern society may make fun of the Biblical concept of sin - and in a sense that is not strange. Paul only realized his sin and the eternal magnitude of it **AFTER** God has shown him his mercy.

Likewise, we begin to also realize how deeply we are infected with this poison of rebellion against God **AFTER** we have met Him in the face of Jesus Christ. In the light of Christ we see better how dark our darkness is. And because of the darkness we see how bright His salvation is.

Not everyone has such a dramatic change story to tell as Paul - but most Christians can tell stories of the grace of God overflowing for them. How He forgave their sins.

I must confess that I can sometimes get somewhat irritated by salvation testimonies...

You must also have heard people testify to the chance in their life when they became Christians, where they fill almost all time focusing on their dreadful past. That awful former life becomes almost glamorous. How often did I hear testimonies that can summarized as: I used to drink beer, but now I am here. Look at me how bad I was.

The attractiveness of this sinful life sometimes seems to take center stage in these testimonies. Not so with Paul. Sin is not depicted as chic, clever or glamorous. Paul confessed: his lifestyle was the result of unbelief and ignorance. It was sheer stupidity.

I guess one reason why we so often hear testimonies that focus on the past and then on that one moment of conversion, is that for many Christians God's mercy and salvation seems to be focused so fully on that one moment. You must know the date and the

time and if you know it, you have arrived!

The moment when we put our trust in God is important indeed. I remember a date.... On 18 October 1975 I trusted in Christ and I decided to be his follower – because through Him God became my Father. As a teenager I had missed my own father, who had died way too young.

That first moment is **indeed** a high point in our spiritual journey. Our salvation experience begins with the moment when God pours his grace in our life, when we are reconnected with Him. When our sins are forgiven because of Jesus' sacrifice. But when we speak of that first moment, it seems that God should be the focus, not how wonderfully bad our past was. God with His mercy deserves all credit.

That first moment is the starting point of the Christian life, and it is just that. A starting point. The beginning of the salvation-journey.

In the New Testament, salvation has a past, a present, and a future aspect.

The past aspect relates to the once-and-for-all moment when we first believed. We have been

saved when we trusted in Christ some time ago; as a consequence of that bond with God through Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are engraved in the palm of God's hand forever.

The second aspect of salvation is the future one. When eventually Jesus Christ renews his whole creation, we will also be fully renewed. We will be saved, eventually.

The apostle John paints for us in glowing words how God will eventually grant us that full salvation in the heavenly Jerusalem that he describes:

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

What a complete radical makeover that will be for us. We will serve Him eternally and perfectly.

But presently - we live in the middle... between that first moment when we put our trust in Him, and the

moment when He will make all things new. And in this middle we experience the third aspect of salvation – in the here and now. We have been saved, we will once be saved, and presently – we are being saved.

Paul admonished the church in Philippi with these words: **Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling**

This means - salvation is also related to what we do with our life today. Paul has an important lesson for us in this context: He says that God saved him **to appoint him to His service.**

We are saved from sin and its consequences and kept safe in God's hands for serving Him in eternity... but we are also saved for something TODAY. That is, for serving Him NOW. God takes our life, broken, full of problems, and wants to use it NOW for His service.

Our present life, not just our eternal fate and our soul, is also part of God's interest. His interest is in renewing us, and the world around us, and He wants to do that now, and that is why He calls us to working out our salvation NOW.

We must be very careful not to carry our modern society's individualist notions into the church and into our understanding of the Gospel, as if for God all that matters is my personal relationship with Him.

Contrary to what our culture emphasizes, we are not a self-contained, self-sufficient entity. You are a member of Christ's body! That means you are not independent but interdependent. And we are also part of our families, of our societies, of the nations we live in...

When God pours his grace on us he does not pour that grace on me as an individualized soul but on me as I stand in all my social relationships. And this is the arena where the ongoing aspect of salvation has to be worked out.

Salvation is deeply personal, **but it is not individualistic.**

It hinges on my personal faith-relationship with God **but it is for serving our Lord and other people.**

It entails forgiveness and eternity and my soul **but released us from the bond of sin, we are called for a life of worship and service for our Lord ... in church, society, in the country where we live, in the nations we come from.**

When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world.

The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities.

It is impossible that salvation *through being connected through Christ with the Creator of heaven and earth* does **not** deeply impact all of our life
all of the people you meet
your political choices – **and** your private family life
your voice that speaks up for human rights - **and**
your prayer-life
your relationship with the soil, with animals, your interest in environmental issues – **and** your personal Bible reading...
Your support for the poor and your struggle against the exploitation of people – **and** your efforts to speak of Christ to your friends...

That is the one full gospel – a gospel of real eternal salvation for the soul – and a gospel of work in this world.

Just as He will one day renew the whole of creation. he today wants us to live that future salvation in our own personal life and in our whole social and national environment.

Paul's example shows:

No-one is unworthy for being used by God.

No-one is beyond repair.

No - He wants to use all of us for repairing our life – and that of others and of the whole world we live in.

This is the great impact of being connected to Him by faith. It unleashes a dynamic of faith and love in our lives that is strong and unstoppable – as long as we are connected to Him.

Paul did not focus too much on his own wicked past, but he focused on the mercy of God that was poured out on him and that surrounded him from day to day for service in faith and love.

No wonder that he wrapped his words about his past and how God's mercy redeemed his life in a doxology.

He began his words to Timothy with thanking Christ

Jesus the Lord for giving him strength
And he ends with praising God.
That is what salvation does to us... it makes us
thankful. eternally thankful.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the
only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever.
Amen