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Searching for Salvation
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Good morning. It's wonderful to be back here with you again this morning.

And...I've brought a very belated holiday gift...I have a little riddle for you this morning. What do the movie the Terminator 4, evangelical Christian websites, and a Belgian Brewing company have in common? Any guesses? Just shout them out!

Any more? They are all in the top ten google responses for the word salvation. they also happen to all be things I am not going to preach about this morning!

When I was working on this sermon, I thought it might be helpful to look into the etymology of the word salvation. So, I typed the word "salvation" into the google search engine. Well wow! Suddenly I found websites asking if I was sure of my salvation, promising the plan for salvation and dialogues of people asking if they could lose, had lost, or will lose their salvation. This was a much more anxiety inducing google search than I had planned for in my quick etymology check.

There are all sorts of salvation promised on the Internet and in our broader world: Salvation from your sins, salvation in the next life, eternal salvation,

salvation from the fires of hell, salvation from damnation and the wretched condition of humanity. The list goes on and on. Trust me.

To be honest, I am not so concerned with salvation from the wretched condition of humanity. I actually believe this life is filled with many daily gifts of beauty, the sun's rays, the stranger on the T who bends down and hands me my gloves that I dropped, the surprise holiday card or greeting, a warm hug and the community sitting in front of me right now as well as listening on the radio are just a few of the daily blessings that grace our lives.

And to be even more honest, being the good ultra-Universalist that I am, I am not so worried about the next life or the fires of hell as I am concerned about heaven and hell in the here and now.

The isolation we sometimes feel from the Divine love, from each other. The sadness that punctures our lives unexpectedly. The anger and rage we fail to control that consumes us. The tears that know no solace. These to me are very real manifestations of hell in the present.

And what of heaven? The glimpse into another's soul. Seeing yourself in someone else's eyes. Sharing a warm meal after a cold long day. Children playing, running, and shouting with joy. Waking up in the sunlight, going to sleep in safety and peace. That's heaven.

And what of salvation? I think sometimes we all need saving, but not the kind promised in the websites I found this past week.

Sometimes we need salvation from ourselves. From the quiet doubts that rest in our hearts, or the way we beat up on ourselves, not taking courage in the great and immense love within our hearts. Sometimes we need saving from abusive relationships or violence that scares us into submission.

And sometimes...we aren't the ones that need saving. Sometimes we have to decide to be the vehicles, the only medium in this world for divine love. Sometimes, we need to swallow the fear or doubt, and step into the storm with a loved one, friend, or perfect stranger.

But sometimes, well really most of the time, it seems overwhelming and exhausting to talk about reaching out and working toward our common salvation. A lot of the times, it's tiring to work with others and so tempting to just want to "go it alone."

When I was a kid I loved games, especially those you play at family picnics...like balloon tosses or tag. But there was one game I never really liked...the three legged race. How many of you have ever played this game..raise your hand...where you have to race against a other teams as you are tied to someone else? It's tough because you are tempted in the race to hurry up, but without careful coordination with your partner you fall flat on your face! I wasn't

very good at this game. I just wanted to hurry, and really resented having to be tied to someone else, even if they were my cousin. Inevitably, we fell face first, watching the more coordinated teams pass us.

I think life is kind of like one big three-legged race. We are always tied to our neighbors, through invisible connections. We are connected through the beauty of this life and our love as well as through the pain and suffering.

None of us are untouched in this world by the pain and suffering resulting from injustice. In this morning's responsive reading, Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us that "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." I just love that phrase, an "inescapable network of mutuality." It's a beautiful articulation of the world, and a frightening one at that. It means that we are inextricably tied to the injustices of our neighbor; we are inextricably tied to the suffering and the pain.

And so it is we search for salvation. In our hearts, in the face of a friend who can't leave his or her abusive relationship, in the letter we write to a senator complaining of the injustice that inner cities schools don't have enough funding, in the march on Selma, in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Our salvation is bound up in each other.

And that can be terrifying, overwhelming, and yes even defeating. When I recall the story of Martin Luther King Jr's march on Selma it seems insurmountable.

I imagine King's phone ringing. On the other end is James Bevel, one of the lead organizers for the Southern Christian Leadership Council asking King to publicly support a march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, the state capital. It was a march directed to the Governor of Alabama George Wallace, asking him to protect voting rights for Black Americans. Asking Governor Wallace about the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson. Asking Wallace for justice.

Bevel was only 28 years old when he made that call.

King answered with public support, though initially was not planning on attending the first day of the march because of his schedule.

Shortly before the march, Wallace boldly declared, "there will be no march on Selma."

March 7th, 1965 the civil rights activists showed up anyway. The marchers begin to leave Selma only making it six blocks past their initial start. It's a familiar picture to some of us. Pettus Bridge, named for a confederate general, served as the only barrier between the civil rights activists and the police battalion waiting on the other side.

I try to imagine how those marchers moved forward. Seeing the line of police blocking their way, scared for their own lives and the families they would leave behind if violence ensued. Yet, they marched on. The day would come to be known as Bloody Sunday. King would not be with them on Bloody Sunday, but the events at Pettus Bridge would propel him to join the marchers in Selma, even requesting federal protection from President Johnson.

Taylor Branch, author of *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* describes the scene. After issuing an order to cease the march, Major Cloud, writes Branch, “addressed his front unit without the bullhorn: “Troopers advance.” The blue line of elephantine masks moved forward with slow, irregular steps, overlapping and concentrating to curl around the front ranks of marchers. With nightsticks chest high, parallel to the ground, the troopers pushed into the well-dressed formation, which sagged for nearly four suspended seconds until the whole mass burst to the rear, toppling marchers with accelerating speed as troopers hurtled over and through them.”

The remainder of the story is memorialized hauntingly through black and white photos, journalist reporters, and accounts by marchers as well as police officers.

But we know that the story does not end there. The civil rights activists would try two more times before finally crossing Pettus Bridge and continuing for

54 miles arriving in the capital of Montgomery on March 25th. In the wake of the march, a Unitarian minister James Reeb will have lost his life. Countless others will have lost jobs, family, and security. Following the march, more lives will be lost.

The American people will be forever changed by the disturbing images of police brutality and violence. It was a violence that shook us to our core. That showed us hell raining down on earth through human hands.

Martin Luther King Jr. preached a strong atonement theology, claiming that, “Unmerited suffering is redemptive.” While I find the events of Pettus Bridge horrifying, and the civil rights gained from King’s movement breathtaking, I am troubled by the use of suffering as redemptive. I believe that the marchers on Pettus Bridge were already redeemed, in their love and support of each other.

Rebecca Parker writes in her book *Proverbs of Ashes: the Search for What Saves Us* that “whatever restoration we find comes always with the legacy of the harm done to us. Nothing erases violence, but sometimes, the power of presence gets us through, literally saves us to live on, to heal, to work for justice.” Parker frames violence and suffering not as the source of salvation or redemption, but rather the work of justice as the salvific force.

The march over Pettus Bridge, literally crossing that bridge, was our country’s salvation. It forced white Americans to look into the eyes of those being

beaten, and to see the stomping out of divine love and light. It forced the government to become more deeply involved in the personal injustices as well as the statewide injustices.

Our salvation is bound up in each other. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Pettus Bridge is a metaphor for the distance between where we are and where we can be. The distance that is often marked by our fears, doubts, cynicism and indifference.

The challenge in seeking salvation is taking one step at a time. In seeking the little, manageable steps that lead to the big changes.

I think this morning's second reading from the Gospel of John, the story of Lazarus' resurrection, is a helpful illustration. Normally this is a passage about resurrection, a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection. And yet it is a resurrection story, but I think it's also a salvation story. For me the most important piece isn't the resurrection of Lazarus, or the miraculous healing, or even the emotional weeping of Jesus at the death of his friend. I think the most important part comes at the very end... through the last words of Jesus "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his faced wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

I try to imagine how terrifying that event would be today. Here the beloved Lazarus has been dead for four days. His body has been in the tomb, with his family and friends mourning his passing. He is resurrected, they are standing there in complete disbelief but Lazarus can't move, can't speak, can't even open his eyes until they unbind him. And think of it, Lazarus has been in that tomb for four days. It couldn't have been a pretty site. I wouldn't have wanted to go near Lazarus, let alone untie him! But here Jesus does the miraculous resurrection leaving the work of unbinding Lazarus, removing the cloth from his face and the ties upon his hands and feet that work is left the community.

Our salvation is bound up in each other. One tie at a time we can loosen the knot around our neighbor. One knot at a time, they can loosen the binding from our eyes.

I would ask you this morning to quietly consider in the silence of your heart, what may be binding you. What is heavy upon your heart? What takes life away from you, keeps you from fully living into this life? It may be a small doubt nestled in your heart, or it may be an enveloping loneliness...I would encourage you in this season of the possible to think of someone in your life who you could reach out to in the next week, asking them to help you undo the knot. Who would walk with you over the bridge?

The struggle for justice begins in our own hearts, one day at a time.

We are not Martin Luther King Jr. We are not the figures of change, like Barack Obama, who hold the public stage and microphone for the world to listen when we call. And yet, we are the voters who go to the polls, who decide who will be inaugurated this January 20th.

And yet, someone had to pack the lunches for the marchers on Selma. And yet, someone had to unbind poor Lazarus. And yet, someone is waiting for you.

I wish you blessings and courage on this life journey, searching for salvation. May love and kindness unfold before you.

May it be so. Amen.