

“The Outcome of Your Faith” / I Peter 1:3-9 / 27 April 2014

“An inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading...an indescribable and glorious joy!”

Do you hear the exuberance in this reading from First Peter? It's not every day that you hear a string of adjectives like that. Nobody really knows who wrote First Peter, but he sounds happy, doesn't he? Just give me one of whatever that guy's having!

For all its florid language, this text offers a clear description of faith: its outcome is joy, a joy that carries us through suffering, a joy that is the salvation of this world.

But what is this talk about an inheritance—imperishable, undefiled, unfading? I don't really know much about inheritances. There are new television commercials that features twenty-five men named Ronald McDonald, all of them testifying to how much they love the new breakfast menu at Taco Bell. The point of the advertizements is that the real Ronald McDonalds of the world prefer Taco Bell to McDonald's. The very first Ronald McDonald who appears on one such ad is a man I know well. He's a big, nearly bald fellow with a booming deep voice. The ad opens with him standing in front of an old-fashioned staircase, in a Victorian-looking yellow room, and declaring that he is indeed Ronald McDonald. And he is! Ron is the undertaker in the little town where we lived before moving back to Pittsburgh. Now, in all truth, that town is forty miles from the nearest Taco Bell—in Olean, New York—but I liked the place. The funeral director there was Ronald McDonald; the mayor was named Jesse James, and the sheriff went by the nickname “Yogi.” Ron gets most of the Protestant funerals in town, and so he and I have done at least two dozen services together. It doesn't say so in the Taco Bell ad, but the staircase and the yellow room are in his funeral home, a place that I know all too well. Ron was on the “inactive rolls” at my church. He only ever darkened the church door if he was accompanied by a casket. And I was on the inactive rolls of the Rotary Club where Ron was president—or I should have been, since I was to Rotary what many people are to church, which is to say that I showed up twice a year, said a prayer, and hoped that I would get credit for having been there. He's a jovial man with a dark sense of humor—which is fitting when you consider that he's an undertaker named after a clown. I still hear from Ron every once in a while. He sends me irreverent religious jokes that he finds on the Internet, and he's even said that he'd like me to come back to town to do his funeral when the day comes—a request that I take as a high compliment.

Years ago, long before the Taco Bell ads ever made him famous, I asked the real Ronald McDonald why his parents picked the name Ronald for him. It seemed to me a little bit unkind to name a child after a famous clown. The jolly undertaker got quite serious, perhaps even a little defensive. He said, “I've been around longer than that clown! I'm Ronald McDonald III! That name is my inheritance, and if I had a son, he'd be named Ronald McDonald IV.”

All inheritances perish or fade with time, perhaps with the sole exception of the names we inherit. Leona Helmsley left 12 million dollars to her Maltese dog when she died, seven years ago, and I wonder how that dog is doing today. You can inherit money, but it goes the way of all money. You can inherit houses, but everything built with hands will come down sooner or later. You can inherit land. In fact, human history is the story of people vying for land that they can hand down to their children. Much of our Bible is about how the people longed for, and attained, and tried to keep their land, a dry piece of earth at the crossroads of all the great empires. They traveled far, and fought hard, and cried many tears, and labored long for a piece of land to call their own, an arid little corner of the world, a place the size of New Jersey. But even land can be taken away by war or eminent domain, or ruined by drought, or infestation, or industrial poisons. Up to this point in my life, I've only inherited two things: a beautiful old antique bed and my middle name. Both the bed and the name came from the same ancestor, a German Reformed minister who spoke no English. I sometimes slept in the bed as a child. My mother was born in it—albeit on a different mattress. Anyone who sleeps in our guest-room sleeps in that bed. But it will end up in a landfill or an antique store someday. The name alone will last. My name will be forgotten, with time, but it won't go away. What kind of inheritance is “imperishable” as the writer of First Peter claims?

Every year, on the Sunday just after Easter, the lectionary assigns the story of Doubting Thomas from the Gospel of John, and it is a great story. It assures us that doubt and faith live together. But I've preached so many sermons on Doubting Thomas that just this once, I couldn't resist the urge to dip my toe into the unfamiliar waters of First Peter. I'm drawn to the liveliness and the enthusiasm of its words. It promises "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading...an indescribable and glorious joy, which is the outcome of faith, the salvation of souls." I almost don't know what to do with such a bold and descriptive claim. But the message here is important, for it says that all the inheritances in this world will fade—whether money, or privilege, or status, or power, or land—there is nothing that can fall to us that will not eventually pass. But the inheritance of our faith—its outcome—is joy itself, an imperishable gift, and that joy is the salvation of souls. Our inheritance is joy, and it saves the world.

Occasionally, someone will ask me, "So, when exactly do people 'get saved' in a Presbyterian worship service?" Is it when you tell them that their sins are forgiven, or during the closing hymn? Are people supposed to get saved quietly, in their pews, after the Doxology and before the closing benediction? My answer is, "Yes, all of the above." In some Protestant traditions, there's time set aside near the end of each church service when people are invited to approach the front of the church, kneel in prayer, and accept Jesus as their personal Savior. This is called "getting saved," and it originated with the old camp meetings on the American frontier.

When you're sitting in the beautiful sanctuary of the Methodist church here in Mount Lebanon, as many of us do at the Good Friday community service, you could almost believe that you're in one of the smaller chapels at Cambridge or Oxford. The stained glass, the stateliness, the shadows and light, it all combines to uplift the spirit in quiet reverence. But some folks prefer their religion a little less refined. To this day the Methodist Church still has a back-country camp meeting in Clarion County, at a place called Cherry Run. Many a revivalist grandmother still takes her grandchildren there every summer in hopes that they'll experience a religious awakening like the ones that used to echo through the valleys all up and down the American frontier. The last time I was there, in the 70s, each evening sermon at Cherry Run lasted an hour and a half. The preacher would decry the evils of the world, immorality, formal religion, rote rituals, and pride. He would make an impassioned plea about the need for personal transformation. He called it "getting saved." After the sermon, everyone would sing "Just As I Am," and penitent souls would make their way forward to confess their sins at the front of the big, open-air auditorium, which they called a "tabernacle." They would repent publicly and vow to change their ways, then for the rest of their lives, they would know the exact date and place where they got saved: Cherry Run Camp-Meeting, August 4, 1967.

I have respect for people whose faith journey has followed that course, and I've known many who've been transformed for the better in that way. At its best, that system of "getting saved" is a good way to own your faith, to make it personal, and fervent, and real. It gives you a moment in time to name as the turning point when your life of faith began in earnest. At its worst, that system of getting saved turns faith inward, making it largely about avoiding private sins and securing a place in heaven. At its worst, it puts too much emphasis on the afterlife and too little emphasis on the state of the world here and now. In fact, this is what the words "salvation" and "saved" have come to mean in the popular imagination: escaping the fires of hell by setting oneself on a course for heaven. It's surely true that the church must be about personal and social transformation. I agree that our world and even our souls need saving, for everything that's wrong with this big, troubled world today is just the sum total of all that's wrong in our private lives, all that is broken in our overburdened minds, and our anxious hearts, and our restless spirits. Yes, I agree that this world and our souls need saving, but I do not believe that there is any formula out there that will guarantee a change of heart. No, true changes of heart, the kind that result in a better, more joyful world, those take time to effect. The process is cyclical and slow, and we can't always know when it began, or when it stalled, when it was at work in our hearts like a seed in the chilly earth, undramatic and unseen.

And what does our world need saved from? God's anger or its own bent toward self-destruction? What do our souls need saved from? The hell at the end of time or the many hells of the present age? And most importantly, what about this bold and ardent claim in First Peter that our very inheritance in faith is a joy that saves the world? What about the joy that saves our spirits and our world?

Sadly, the religious words that get the most airtime are the very ones that seem to have lost their meanings. Words like “sin,” and “righteousness,” and “holiness,” and “salvation,” they've been used as clubs to beat people up, and so they have a hollow, tinny ring to modern ears. “Repent” is a word that's worse for wear. For almost four years now, I've been avoiding telling you the story about the preacher who set out to paint his little white country church. It was an old wooden church, surrounded by a cemetery and rolling fields, the kind you find not far from here, and the building was long overdue for a new coat of paint. But the budget was tight, so the preacher decided to buy less paint and to stretch it out, using paint thinner. As soon as the little church was painted, he stepped back to survey his work, and it really looked pretty good. No one could even tell that he'd thinned out the paint to make it go further. But dark clouds began to form in the west, and within the hour, a downpour came and washed the paint away. Once again, it was a weathered gray church in need of a paint job. The preacher knew this wouldn't have happened if he hadn't taken shortcuts, by thinning out the paint, and so he cried to the heavens, “What am I supposed to do now?” Much to his surprise, a voice spoke back. “Repaint. Repaint, and thin no more.”

Sometimes our words trip us up. When we hear words like “repent,” and “saved,” and “salvation,” we discover a whole host of emotions attached to them, and many of them negative. They have more to do with the angry religion we see on TV than with our inheritance of joy that saves the world. Words like “repent” send our imaginations running to the Westboro folks, who are not Baptists at all but an independent cult whose picket signs read, “Death penalty for fags.” Where's the joy that saves souls and worlds? No one is ever saved by hatred. If hatred could save, then we'd all be good by now.

But let's revisit this time-honored-if-faded word, “salvation” and its variations: “saved,” and “savior.” If used well, these words have power and great meaning, for if we are honest with ourselves, we will own the fact that in our sadder moments, in our less hopeful moments, when fear for the future holds us in its grasp, when uncertainty about our relationships, or money troubles, or jealousy, or the loss of a loved one, or the pain of a loved one wakes us in the night and chants its deadening after-hours chorus in our ear, we all of us feel the need for saving. And truly if ever a world needed saving, it is ours. And this is my primary complaint about the Cherry Run model of getting saved: I need saving not once in a lifetime, on August 4, 1967—in part because I wasn't even born yet—but also because I need saving again and again. “Salvation” comes from the Latin word “salve.” It's an ointment that's placed on a wound to take away pain and help it heal. To save something or someone means to heal, to make well and whole, to take away pain. Eternal life, in Scripture, is not merely an afterlife in heaven. Eternal life is the calm timelessness, the eternity, from which we all of us come, to which we all of us belong in each moment of every day, and which claims us all again in time, calling us back to itself. Eternal life is our inheritance of joy, the healing balm that is applied gently to everything in us that's wounded and broken, the healing salve that restores us to ourselves.

And this is what First Peter is getting at: The healing salve—the joy—that cures our illness again and again, that restores new life in us, it's our inheritance as children of Christ's resurrection. Salvation is anything that restores in us the deep joy that keeps us aware the we belong not to our troubles but to eternity. It's our birthright, and unlike other inheritances, it cannot be taken away. The joy that returns to enliven and renew us will bear us through all sorrow and pain, giving us strength when we have none, offering comfort when we see none, making us in every way better than we are. The joy that conquers even death is our heritage; we cannot earn it, but we can receive it. We cannot acquire it, but we can accept it. Then, once we've got that healing balm in our lives, we can share it

with the world around us. It comes when we trade our fear-filled isolation for a life lived in community with others. It comes when we surrender our selfish grasping and dedicate our lives instead, with their talents and resources, to the service of our fellow human beings. It comes when we stop dwelling on all that harms us and meditate instead on the instances of resurrection that we have seen in our lives and in our world. It comes when we stop staring inward, fixated on all that keeps us troubled and wounded, but instead turn our eyes outward to the wounds of the world that we can help to heal...by applying to them the healing salve, the ever-recurring joy of resurrection.

Will music save the world? Will beauty do the trick? Will words at last reclaim their healing power and speak wholeness to our wounds? Perhaps, perhaps. Sometimes I look at South Korea, and I wonder if that can possibly end well. At times I consider Russia, as it returns to its old ways. There are times when I think about Afghanistan, and Syria, and Israel, or the endangered planet itself. All that's broken in this troubled world of ours is just the sum total of all that's broken in our hearts and minds—yours and mine. It is not we alone as individuals who are being saved, called back into an awareness of the eternity to which we belong; it is the entire world. Anger, revenge, bitterness, pride: these things have tried to save us, and they cannot. No, child of God, resurrection is your inheritance. You were made for joy. It has saved you again and again, and it alone will save our world. This is the outcome of our faith: “An inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading...an indescribable and glorious