

## “‘Are You Saved?’ Asked the Woman: A Sermon on Redemption”

It is years ago,  
 we are living in Dorchester on the first level of a triple-decker condominium,  
 baby #1 is not yet a year-old,  
 Baby #2 is not even a dream, because you would have to be sleeping to dream,  
 And who can sleep in the first year of parenthood?  
 I am still in seminary, Karen is back to work full-time supporting us all.  
 How did we do it? We sometimes wonder,  
 And if we were to use God-language the answer would be *by the grace of God*.  
 Three blocks from our home we found a day-care provider  
 Who could watch Emerson for 2 and ½ days a week.  
 Her name was Angela, but everyone called her Auntie Angel,  
 And it was to this angel, because that’s really what she was for us,  
 That we gave our child three mornings a week  
 so that Karen could get to work on time,  
 And, in the autumn I’m remembering now, so that I could make it my 9a.m. class,  
 Which was two hours of lecture on something called Systematic Theology.  
 It actually was much better than it sounds.

*“Here he is, Angel”* I said to her as I handed over the round ball that was our son  
 At that point, swaddled and diapered and warm and, to us, perfect.  
 She takes him, cradles him in her arms, and then she says:  
*“I heard from your wife that you are in seminary. You want to be a pastor?”*  
*“Yes,”* I say.  
*“What kind?”*  
*“The good kind,”* I say, and I wasn’t being flip, because this was during the time  
 When Boston clergy we were all over the news for doing horrible things.  
 She laughed. *“No, what kind of church?”* she says.  
*“Unitarian Universalist,”* I say,  
 And in a moment of foreshadowing for the rest of my career she gives  
 Me a puzzled look.  
 And so I go on to explain in one long stream of run-on sentences everything  
 I have learned in school about our faith, our history, our theology.  
 I don’t even take a breath. I don’t even pause:  
*“...you know, it’s a free faith, no dogma, you know,*  
*but you can’t believe anything or everything.*  
*I mean, you can believe some things, but not other things,*  
*But the minister doesn’t tell you what to believe.*  
*Have you heard of R.W. Emerson? He was one of our ministers.*  
*That’s who Emerson – my Emerson – was named after.*  
*Not Emerson the race-car driver, Emerson Fitapaldi..*  
*Emerson the preacher.*  
*Have you been to the Boston Garden? Not where the Bruins and Celtics play,*  
*The other garden near the Common.*  
*We have a couple really important churches right around there,*

*And all over New England. We're pretty well-known.  
You haven't heard of us? Really?!?"*

I wasn't much of an evangelist.  
But Angel listens dutifully. She doesn't interrupt.  
And then still holding my son, my beautiful, baby son that was  
As perfect as I could imagine, she says:  
*"But are you saved? Are your people saved?"*  
And there is silence.  
And there is more silence.  
And now it's her turn to preach, only she is better me.  
Angel, who I admire, who is holding my perfect son, is telling me  
That we are born with sin, and that the only thing that can save  
Us is Jesus.  
*"Have you of heard of Jesus?"* she asks, smiling, mimicking my earlier tone.  
And then Angel goes on to quote the Bible, the Bible she has memorized,  
The Bible I haven't taken a class on yet.  
*"In John, Jesus says 'I am the way, the truth, the light,  
And the only way to the Father is through me.'"*  
And she says her pastor tells her that Jesus died for her sins and my sins.  
And even though she didn't say it, I wondered:  
And you mean my little Emerson's sins, too?  
Little Emerson who is round and swaddled and warm, and to us,  
As perfect and free of sin as any person can be?

Well, you won't be surprised to hear that was the last time  
that Angel and I talked about religion.  
We agreed to disagree.  
But you know how you imagine conversations in your head,  
The words you wish you would have said to your boss or your spouse  
Or your mother-in-law or your theological adversary?  
That's how it was for me for a long time when I thought about Angel.  
*"There is no hell, Angel, I have said in this one-way chat,  
drawing on our Universalist roots,  
No hell, no hell!  
And there is no original sin! And no eternal damnation!  
Who needs saving, Angel? Who needs to be born again?  
Angel, you and I were born right the first time!"*

And in this imagined conversation Angel is converted to my thinking.  
She is moved by the logic and the optimism of our faith enough  
To call herself Unitarian Universalist.  
She leaves the question of salvation behind. And I win.  
Notice how we always win in these imagined conversations?

But (and this is the hinge the sermon open and closes on)...  
But then the years pass. Life happens. We fall down. We get up.

Or at least we try.

And whereas once I would have and did smugly dismiss Angel's question:

*Are you saved? Are your people saved?*

Now I feel – stay with me here, don't get nervous –

Now I feel more curious, more nuanced, less reactive; yes, more mature.

And now I'm reading how that word – *salvation* –

In the Hebrew it originates from means literally to 'make wide,' as in:

Make wide enough to survive the tight places.

As in: when life shows you a wall, here is a crack, an opening,

Or even a door.

And with that meaning in mind, now I'm remembering other parts of Angel's life,

How she once told us that her husband died only years before,

And how she was left to raise two boys and support them all by herself

In a city and in a school system that offered few openings, few opportunities,

So many tight places, little salvation.

And now I'm wondering:

Does Angel's question sound a little more real, a little more relevant to us?

*Are you saved? Are your people saved?*

And though you and I might not share her answer –

her answer being yes, because of Jesus on the cross -

I'm thinking of the walls,

the roadblocks, the storms (our song), the tight places we are faced with sometimes,

Some of them not our fault, some of them definitely our fault.

We say we are born right the first time, we say no hell! No original sin!

No eternal damnation! and of course I think we are right to say this...

But oh how we mess up! Oh how we fall short of the people we want to be!

Oh how our lives and the world we create

cry out for openings, for doors, for light poking through...

for salvation, for redemption.

*Are you saved? Are your people saved?*

Hear me when I tell you I have no idea how to answer this question.

But perhaps it enough for us to answer what is saving our lives right now?

This is the question Barbara Brown Taylor asks in our reading Molly

Read for us – If Angel can quote the Gospel of John, I can quote Taylor

Week in and week out.

What is saving your life right now? Taylor asks.

What does your life depend on?

What is helping you to make a little bit wider the tight places?

And before I share with you some of my own answers,

Let me say here how I am indebted, even saved by my colleague Gary Smith,

Another minister I quote from liberally and often,

Gary who is retiring this year from First Parish in Concord after 24 years  
 And who, simply by my reading his sermons on line,  
 Has encouraged me by example to open my heart more to you,  
 Because religion should never be simply 'up here' in the head,  
 But also 'in here,' in the heart.

What is saving my life now?  
 Jackson is saving my life now. Who is Jackson?  
 Jackson is my new nephew, born three weeks ago to my younger brother.  
 And Jackson represents all of our children who enter our lives in our families,  
 Our neighborhoods, our church community.  
*"I can't believe they just let us go home with him,"* says my brother to me  
 Last week on the phone, clearly overwhelmed.  
*"No manual? No instructions? No license?"*  
 And perhaps this is what saves us, we who are our children's parents and teachers  
 And mentors, even those of us with no children of our own.  
 Because our children challenge us to be better than we are.  
 They watch us. They learn from us.  
 They lean on us. They cry on our chest. They yell at us,  
 Sometimes only two seconds later.  
 They require from us patience and love we never thought we had.  
 And when we mess up – and oh how we mess up –  
 We say *'I'm sorry'* and they forgive us, and we forgive ourselves,  
 And we get up the next morning and try again.  
 I speak from personal experience.

I am saved by my children, and by your children, too.  
 Next Sunday and then on Easter we will bless and dedicate  
 Two babies in our midst, and I will touch my finger to their brow,  
 Their eyes, their lips,  
 And I will say: *I bless you in the name of all that is Holy.*  
 But like I've said before –  
 Really it is the other way around,  
 Because these babies are blessing me, they are saving me.  
 And they are saving you, too.

What is saving my life now?  
 Amanda is saving my life now.  
 Who is Amanda? Amanda is one of the youth in our Coming-of-Age class  
 Who several Sundays ago when we  
 Traveled to the First Unitarian Universalist Parish in Cambridge  
 Asked us to take her picture below the huge photo they had  
 Hanging in the vestibule of their minister performing  
 The first same-sex wedding in Massachusetts.  
 Why? Because Amanda has two moms and she is proud of them  
 And proud of this faith that has given her family a spiritual home.

Amanda is saving me because she reminds me how important  
 All this is – the congregations, the parishioners, the ministers, the sermons,  
 The budgets, the pledge campaigns, the building campaigns,  
 The faith that was here before us and will, with our help, be here  
 Long after we are gone.

Because this world we live in sometimes feels so narrow, so tight,  
 And have no doubt we are the lucky ones!  
 But the world we live in can feel so narrow, so tight, so many walls  
 And when we need space to breath, to be ourselves, to find ourselves,  
 To be called back to ourselves, to stand with others so they can be themselves  
 We come to this faith, this saving faith that I know has saved me,  
 And I trust has saved you.  
 Otherwise why would you come? Otherwise why would you stay?  
 This faith, this congregation, is saving our lives right now.

What is saving my life now?  
 Can I say it after this long winter?  
 Can I say it even though it is self-indulgent and everyone might not agree?  
 Can I say Opening Day is saving my life? Can I say baseball?  
 Do you know how close I was to having us sing *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*  
 At the end of our service?  
 Very, very close.

But then our own Katie Frassinelli said she would sing for us here at the end,  
 Which reminds me....  
 Music saves my life.  
 Laura, you save my life. Valerie, your solo today saves my life,  
 (And I know I'm not alone).  
 Choir, you save my life.  
 You certainly save my sermons.

The point is this, and I love how BBT tells us -  
 She says:  
*"Salvation is so much more than many of its proponents would have us believe.  
 Salvation is a word for the space that comes to us in all the tight places  
 Where our lives are at risk."*  
 Meaning: what is saving your life now?  
 What is the space, the hand, the bolt out of the blue, that comes to you  
 When your life is at risk?  
 Answer that and we might just answer have answer to Angel's question:  
 Are you saved? Are your people saved?  
 We might just be able to answer 'yes.'

For salvation that happens in the world not apart from the world  
 Let us say Amen.  
 For souls that we meant more for spending than for saving

Let us say Amen.

For the people and places that save us day after day, hour after hour,

Let us say Amen. And blessed be.

And let us listen now to Katie and Laura...