

This is the second sermon that addresses these verses. The former sermon sought to give these verses their wider setting, not just in 2 Corinthians but in terms of the whole Biblical message of the Gospel. So here, we want to consider them specifically--and specifically the apostle's ideas about "rescue, reconciliation, and renewal." So to begin.

There is a great theme in the scriptures which gives meaning and purpose to all of our life, and sets the framework for what we are to do as Christians. This theme is present in many Bible passages, articulated in rich and dense theology, lived out by the Lord Jesus himself, and is here in this passage. Yet this theme has routinely been ignored or at best marginalized in the church. The theme of which I speak--and have been speaking--is New Creation--the new world which God has already begun to create, and of the new life Jesus gives which leads to that new creation, and the road by which we are called to travel. These verses, then, lay out--in Paul's words--God's Gospel Plan of Salvation.

Over the last two hundred years the western world has seen a great divide in the way people look at life. And both ways are unhealthy. On the one hand, the expansion of empires and industry, of commerce and entrepreneurship, has created a climate in which the individual is what matters, and where that individual is understood look out for him- or herself. There are ridiculous advertisements from cars to instant coffee, which say "*It's all about You.*" It isn't, of course. It's all about company profits, but advertisers know that our culture has encouraged us to see ourselves as the centre of the universe, to believe that human flourishing and fulfillment come from looking after ourselves. Insofar as you think about anyone else, you think of them as an extension of

your individuality: your family, your town, perhaps even your country. By this view, there is no such thing as a real society--only individuals working for themselves. In that sort of world, you only stop to help the ragged, pathetic figure in the ditch if you recognize them as an extension of yourself – a friend or family member – or if you think that by doing so you will gain some advantage, make some useful friends, cut a perfect physique, or develop a good reputation for being a nice person. Ultimately, it's still all about Me--ourselves.

Then, religion in the western world--including much of Christianity--has become more and more--since both the Reformation and revivalism--about escaping from this wicked world and going to a better place, called "heaven". This Christian-sounding but essentially other-worldly hope and spirituality thinks it fights robustly against the self-oriented culture and materialism which has insisted that the only things that exist are things you can touch and see and money you can put in your pocket. But if, as this view does, turn Christian faith into simply the hope for escape when you die, including a way of escapist spirituality in the present, you turn your back on the theme which makes sense of the whole Bible: the theme which bursts upon us in everything that Jesus Christ did and said; which is highlighted particularly by his resurrection from the dead. A religion that pays little attention to the New Creation may feel some sympathy for the battered and bedraggled humans in pain and suffering, but its message to search persons--including ourselves--will always be that though we can help a bit, ultimately it doesn't matter because the main thing is to escape this wicked world altogether. And that, as I've pointed out, represents a diminishing, yet common, distortion of Christian faith and the Gospel.

The New Testament message of the Gospel is very different. It proclaims--Christ proclaims, Paul proclaims (and right here in these verses)--that the God in whom we believe is not only the creator of the world. But He will one day put this world to rights, bring justice to everyone and everything in Creation, and then renew and re-create it-- "*God's re-creation of the new day,*" we sing. Contrary to much that goes under the name Christianity, God is not going to abolish the universe of space, time and matter. God is going to renew it, restore it, fill it with new joy and purpose and delight, and remove all that has corrupted it. As the prophet Isaiah (35:1ff.) said, "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom, and rejoice with joy and singing; the desert shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.*" The last book of the Bible, Revelation, ends, not with the company of the saved being taken up into heaven, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, resulting in God's new creation, the new heavens and new earth, in which everything that has been true, lovely, and of good report will be vindicated, enhanced, set free from all pain and sorrow. God himself, it says, will wipe away all tears from all eyes (Rev 21:4).

One of the great difficulties in preaching the gospel in our time is that everyone assumes that the Gospel hope is, ultimately, "*to go to heaven when you die,*" as though that were the last act in the drama. It's what I call the "default answer" people have in their minds. It's part of the "shrunk gospel" we have grown up with. But this answer is badly wrong! It is woefully inadequate! As I've said, heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world! God will make new heavens and new earth, and give us new resurrected bodies to live and work and take delight in his new creation. Nor is heaven--as I've tried to make clear-- our "home" contrary to many Christian songs and

sermons. No, the “good news” of the Christian gospel is that this new world, this new creation, has in fact already begun. It began when Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead on Easter morning, having faced and beaten the double enemy, sin and death that had corrupted and defaced God’s lovely creation. This makes one ask oneself: Do I really believe the Resurrection of Christ’s has affected and affects this world I live in?

In terms of a Great Story--like one Jesus told--the world, and we humans within it, are in a mess, left for dead on the side of the road. Much of the secular world walks on past. It doesn’t worry about other people’s problems, because there’s a profit to be made and power to be grabbed. But much of the religious world walks on past also, because it believes that this created world really doesn’t matter. We’re going to leave it soon and go somewhere else. In an odd way, there are mirrors of each other practically speaking.

But in contrast to both, the Gospel says this: the living God has come with healing and hope in Jesus Christ, has picked up the battered and dying world, and has bound up its wounds and set it on the road to full health. This deeply biblical theme--so virtually completely forgotten in much of the Western Christianity and the church--makes glorious sense not only of the whole sweep of biblical thought but of the very specific and practical works which we ourselves in this church act to support--be in the Samaritans, Living Water for the World, Heifer International, and many other works of evangelism and common need through our denomination.

Friends, we are here because, whether we’ve thought of it like this or not, we know in our bones that looking after merely ourselves isn’t what life’s supposed to be. That isn’t the Story that matters. Rather, in Jesus Christ we are called not to save

our-selves from the world but to bring salvation to the world. We are here because we are committed to the pilgrim way, the way that leads to God's new Jerusalem, and because we know that on that road there is healing: *"then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy."* The New Creation has begun in Jesus. The pilgrim highway leads all the way from the cross and empty tomb right through to God's completely New Creation. It is the way of healing, reconciliation, and hope. As the psalms celebrate, *"your God is coming with judgment, coming with judgment to rescue you,"* (Ps 72). And the good things we do--some of which I just mentioned--are not just good and needful, but they are a genuine anticipation of what will happen, an advance foretaste of God's restoring judgment, of the New Creation in which all wrongs will be righted, all hurts healed, and all sorrow, pain, suffering, and death banished!

The work of the Church, and for each of us as "ambassadors" to use Paul's word in our vs. 20, is work which embodies both in what it does and in how it does it, that way of Jesus--that pilgrim way, which stands as a sign of contradiction before the two misleading and dangerous paths I spoke of earlier. When Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, he did so deliberately to shock his audience. "Who is my neighbor?" asked the lawyer. Jesus turned the question back on him: in this story, who turned out to be neighbor to the man in the ditch?--the hated and perceived enemy of the day, the Samaritan. Like so many of Jesus' brilliant stories, it operates at several levels. At the simplest level, of course, it is a spectacular invitation to a life of self-giving love, love in action, love that's prepared to roll up its sleeves and help however it can. But at the next level down, it's a story designed to split open the worldview of its hearers and let in a

shaft of new and unexpected light. Instead of the closed world of Jesus' hearers, in which only their own kith and kin were properly to be counted as neighbors, Jesus demands that they recognize that even the hated and feared Samaritan is to be seen as a neighbor.

Over and over, Jesus was making it plain--to all who would see--there is no "us and them." We're all "us." And as ambassadors, we have an authority, but not our own. The authority we have is a given authority. It's the authority of Jesus Christ and his gospel--the Gospel that God in Christ was "*not counting people's trespasses against them*" calling--beckoning, reasoning, showing every good reason, like an ambassador-- "*to be reconciled in God.*" Why? Because--and here is Paul's form of John 3:16-- "*For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised...we no longer regard others from a human view-point...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old is past; see the new has come,*" (2 Cor 5:14-17). It's a New Day. It's a New World. It's New Creation. Jesus came and showed us there is a different way to be human in this world, and in the face of all the modern cynicism and selves focused on personal gain, there is such a thing as self-giving love, and it's glorious and it works. This is the righteous way of God in fulfilling his promises to the plan for the whole creation, back to Abraham and Israel, and "*all the promises of God which find their YES in Christ,*" (2 Cor 1:20). But here is the thing so much present Christianity misses. In God's kingdom, human beings are not only rescued and reconciled--delivered from a life of sin and death and embraced in the arms of Christ--and take their places as receivers of God's forgiveness and renewal, but are also agents of it--agents of God's reconciling

Gospel and Salvation of all things.

That's Paul's concluding point here in vs. 21. He expresses the gospel here in the self-giving love of God in Christ, when he says, "*For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin...*" It's very similar to what he says in Romans 8:3, "*For God...has [sent] his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to deal with sin...*" That is to say, God dealt with our sins and our sin problem in Christ. It's done and finished. But WE are not done or finished. God doesn't merely treat us as a problem to be dealt with. He rescues and reconciles to himself for his great and good purpose, to finish vs. 21, "*that in [Christ] we might embody God's faithfulness to his promises,*" (vs. 21).

The usual translation of this last phrase is "*that we might become the righteous-ness of God.*" But that is a little clumsy sounding, and it is because Paul is not saying that. Paul is not saying here God in Christ makes us righteous. That is true, and he says that elsewhere, and to be reconciled with God is in fact to be made righteous as well. But this whole section is about what we have become through Christ--not only people who have learned the love of God in Christ who was "made sin" for them, not only people who are new creations and part of the New Creation begun in Christ at his resurrection. But we are also those who--as he says now by the grace of God in Christ--are ambassadors--and so "*embody God's faithfulness to his promises.*" We are like signposts, and agents of this great ongoing work of God in the world. As I said, we are those who take their places not only as receivers of God's forgiveness and renewal, but are also agents of it--agents of God's reconciling Gospel and Salvation of all things. And as I have said on other occasions, We are not about Us. WE are--each and every one--to be about the work and works of God. That's what Paul's driving home here.

So when we put these verses in their larger context of the whole Biblical Plan, we see this: The whole point of what Jesus was up to was that he was doing, close up, in the then present--his healings, teachings, forgiveness, miracles of bread and wine, stilling the storms, exorcising evil, confronting discrimination, hatred, and cruelties, and everything else--he was doing close-up then, what he was promising long-term, in the future in terms of the whole Creation. And what he was promising for that future, and doing in that present, was not saving souls for a heaven-bound disembodied eternity, but He was rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way of the world presently so they could enjoy--already in the present--that renewal of creation which is God's ultimate purpose --and thus become with Christ colleagues and partners--agents--in that larger project.

And as he colleagues and agents--ambassadors of Christ--we are to act as He was here as well. The death and resurrection of Christ took place in this world because it is meant to save and transform--RENEW--this world. And the whole point of God's saving rule is that it is the saving rule of THIS son of God--the God of gentle, generous, over-whelming love, whose kingdom way was articulated in the Sermon on the Mount. Thus, it does not come by conventional force, but by self-giving love. It is the way of the cross, the way of self-denial, the way of considering others better than one self. As Paul himself put it, "*I myself appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ,*" (2 Cor 10:1). Here is how Christ's good news and will is made known in us for the world.

So what you do, and what you are, stands as a sign of contradiction to the follies of our world, because it stands as a signpost pointing along the pilgrim way, the righteous way, the highway to Zion, the road along which you travel looking for those in need of



healing and hope: the road, in fact, to God's New Creation. What we do and how we do here and now--be it painting, preaching, sewing, healing, digging wells for water, working for justice, feeding the poor, writing poems, praying, building homes with Habitat, or simply showing a kindness to friend or stranger--it will last into God's sure and certain future Kingdom to come. *"For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, that in [Christ] we might embody God's faithfulness to his promises."*

Amen.