

“The Power to Save”

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Source Material: Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, pp. 59-69.

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Script: Luke 23:33-43

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Frederick Buechner gives an image in one of his writings that I would like to begin with. A man drives down the highway. In the boredom of the long drive he gazes out the window. He sees his face reflected in the window and it appears to be whipped by powerline poles, distant neon signs. He sees the wash hanging out back of someone's home. He sees dusty trees and children playing tag. Then, suddenly he looks up at the side of a cliff or a bridge abutment, and there, written in large clumsy letters in white paint that drips from the bottom, the message JESUS SAVES.

The man sees those words, painted up there along with all the other things that are there— names of schools, lovers, graduating class numbers... and his response is that he winces at the message. This is a very strange and interesting thing— both the message Jesus Saves and the wincing.

The man winces because he is embarrassed, and along with him I wince at such a form of message if I am honest with myself. Embarrassment is the emotion behind the wincing because it reminds us of "old-time" religion, of religion as altar calls, emotionalism, manipulation, the hell-fire and brimstone fundamentalism that we thought we had left behind in the 1800's. We are embarrassed by the simplistic, easy-answer magic of the Christian faith as it is cheapened by some.

Yesterday driving on division street I followed a car whose license plate was G-zus. WWJD— what would Jesus drive? I guess we now know. I think it was a Hyundai. We are also embarrassed because of the name Jesus when it stands alone— no title, nothing to soften it. Jesus Christ is something more remote, formal, abstract, theological. But Jesus— just Jesus sounds like a name— a person... a real person like Bill, Frank, Amy or Jean. It embarrasses us because it is so nakedly personal.

On another level we might wince at those letters painted up there in white because of the sheer preposterousness of the person who scaled up there to write them, to suggest that this man Jesus (Joshua Bar Joseph) who lived 2,000 years ago and in another culture could save in any sense we who live in a 70mph world where our faces are whipped by powerline poles and neon signs. Believer or not, part of us winces at the notion that the man of Nazareth could save us. Pitiful Jesus, powerless and crossed up and out by his world, his own country, his own people. How can he save us?

That is the point of those who were present when they crossed him up— the religious leaders scoffed at him, "let him save himself", the Soldiers mocked him, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself" and even a thief hanging there with him, crossed out by the world no less, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" All those present called into question the power of Jesus to save, except the other criminal.

His response was strikingly different. While he asked for salvation like the other criminal, he was open to whatever salvation Jesus had to offer, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He was the only one to see that this crossed up and out Jesus had the power to save.

But there is another way in which we might wince at those painted letters JESUS SAVES. Perhaps at the deepest level, Jesus Saves is embarrassing because what it proclaims that we need to be saved. Rich,

poor, young, old, educated, uneducated, religious, unreligious...no matter. It says, "You have no peace inside your skin. You are not happy, not whole."

We wince at such a message, because we try hard to be happy, and most of us don't do a half-bad job of it considering the odds. So to be told that you can't make it, at least alone, is something indeed to wince at.

Behind it all perhaps we wince at our own nakedness, our own need to be saved. Then we are moved to feel the pain of acknowledging that haunting question we all harbor; "Can Jesus save such a one as me?" Not that we are such sinners that we don't deserve saving, but that we are so much ourselves, so hopelessly who we are—our own small, petty selfish selves—that we find it hard to believe that we can be saved/transformed. Our wincing at the painted message leads us into the depth of our souls where we find ourselves stripped naked, in need. "Can Jesus save such a one as me?" In the end, it is our own naked need that we behold and wince at.

How about you and me? We live in a 70mph world that crosses us up and sometimes out... a world where violence, greed, hunger, relationship problems and other things prevent us from finding happiness, to say nothing of salvation. We are so much ourselves that we find it hard to change—even the smallest things about ourselves that we wonder if Jesus can even save us. Perhaps there is no hope for us. Our wincing becomes a clear recognition that something is fundamentally missing in our lives. Something is missing. We don't even know the name of it. Yet something is missing... we know it. We know it in the way that sometimes in a room with friends or family we have the unaccountable feeling that some person is missing, someone who is supposed to be there and whom we need and want to be there even though we cannot think who it is and know him only by his absence. Can Jesus save? Can Jesus save you? Can Jesus save me?

The whirlwind of our culture's orgy with Christmas is upon us. It culminates with the children on Christmas Eve. In their eyes we can see that they live for the presents they will open the next day, and in that sense we all live like children. There are so many presents still to be opened for us— tomorrow, next month, next year— and in a way it is our looking forward to them that keeps us going. The unexpected friendship, the new job, seeing our names in the paper, falling in love, the birth of a child— all of these are presents. Somewhere in the back of our minds we have this belief that tomorrow or the next day, or some fine day, somehow, life will finally present to us THE present which, when we open it, will turn out to be the one that we have waited our whole life for, the one which will fill our emptiness, which is the peace that passes all understanding, or salvation or the Kingdom of God or whatever we want to call it.

So we open our days— our presents over and over in life, until we realize that no one of them, or even all of them taken together, is going to do it. We realize that life does not have this final present to give. Paradise is beyond.

So we find ourselves in the position of the man hanging on the cross to Jesus' right— nothing to claim, nothing to offer but honesty and need. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." Jesus said, "I will."

Can Jesus, in his kingdom (whatever and wherever it is), save? Hanging on the cross this King extended the kingdom to the "good thief" and saved him from the hopelessness of being crossed out by the world. Ultimately, this world cannot give all that is needed to complete our souls. And ultimately I believe it is true. He does save. He gives life, hope and healing. He makes whole. He saves me from myself as much as from any external evil. Ultimately, if we choose to accept it, we will find that paradise he talked about— his kingdom...(this side of the grave or beyond it).

So how do we accept it? How do we draw near? I'm not sure, but our inner desire...in our wanting to draw near to him we somehow already have in a sense.

Through moments in our lives when we catch a glimpse of his love and holiness, something of his life and truth that breaks through as when we ride in a car and wince at a crudely painted sign on a cliff-side. As when we hold a newborn in our arms, as when we are taken to another place by a piece of music. As when we, without thinking, put someone else's needs above ours as Jesus did— faithful all the way to the cross.

How do we draw near? Perhaps through prayers — though not the kinds we offer here in church, but the kinds that end up being a lump in the throat... the kinds that in essence say “Remember me, even though I don't remember you most of the time.” We draw closer by steps, doing his works of mercy and justice.

As we draw nearer, we will find that “to be where he is, to go where he goes, and to see through eyes and work with hands like his, is to feel like our true selves at last.”

Freed from the prison that is our small selves, we discover coming into being within us our true selves, to be fully ourselves, and fully each other's... in the end, to become fully his at last. So be it. Amen.