

Come and See, Listen and Learn

A sermon on Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; & John 1:29-42 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 January 2026

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Message

Salvation – reconciliation with God and with one another – is relational rather than transactional, and it begins with a willingness to see, listen and learn.

Sermon

Ask most Christians what Christianity is all about, and there is good chance that their answer will mention salvation, or being saved. And apart from the fact that being saved is not something Jesus talks about much, that's not a bad answer. But whether it is really accurate depends a bit. It depends both on what we think we are being saved from, and how we think that salvation is accomplished.

It is not something that can easily be reduced to a formula. There are stories in the Bible where someone directly asks, "What must I do to be saved?", but there is no one answer given every time. The answers range from "sell everything you own and give the money to the poor" to "believe on the Lord Jesus and be baptised." None of the readings we heard tonight asked the question, but they are passages to which we might want to pose the question.

In our reading from the prophet Isaiah, God addresses an unnamed "servant of the Lord", who as Geoff explained last week could be understood as Israel, or as the king, or as the Messiah, or as God's people generally. And in this passage, God says to the servant, just saving Israel is not a big enough job for you; "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." So we might want to ask, what is this salvation that is to reach to the end of the earth?

In our gospel reading, John the Baptiser describes the purpose of his baptising as being that the one who is the "Lamb of God" might be revealed to Israel, but like our reading from Isaiah, he describes this "Lamb of God" as one who takes away not just our sin, or the sin of Israel, but the sin of the world. So again, if "taking away sin" is a part of this salvation, then this salvation is one that reaches to the whole world, not just us.

John's description – "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" – is super familiar to us because we sing it every Sunday straight after sharing the bread and wine at the Lord's table. But sometimes things that are so familiar are seldom thought about, and there's a lot going on in this line.

Starting with the second half first, what does "taking away the sin of the world" mean? Very often in our churches we've been taught to think that Jesus takes away the guilt of our sin, or the incriminating record of our sin, or especially the punishment due for our sin. But that's not actually what John says, is it? He says that the Lamb of God takes away the sin itself.

In our liturgy each week, we confess that we are entangled in sin. It is something that ensnares us, entangles us, and corrupts and degrades us. But Jesus is taking it away. Not just taking away the consequences, or taking away the punishment, but taking away the sin itself, the sin that entangles us. Perhaps we can think of Jesus as dismantling the structures of sin, the things that lock us in to corrupt patterns, and then carting away the debris.

Back to the first part of John's description: the "Lamb of God". Many of us were raised in churches that emphasised the idea of Jesus being an unblemished lamb that is slaughtered as a sacrifice offered to God to procure the forgiveness of our sins. Among a number of problems with that, the first is that it is not nearly as biblical as it may sound.

It starts out okay. It is certainly true that John's gospel is linking this idea of Jesus as the lamb of God with a sacrificial lamb. But the problem is that the Hebrew sacrificial system had lots of different sacrifices for lots of different things, and the one that this gospel explicitly links Jesus to is the Paschal lamb, or Passover lamb, which was not a sacrifice for sin. John's gospel tells us that Jesus died at the same moment that the Passover lamb was being sacrificed in the temple.

If John had been wanting to depict Jesus as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, he would have linked his death not to the Passover festival, but to the Day of Atonement. And then Jesus might have been the Bull of God or the Goat of God, because bulls and goats featured more prominently than lambs on the Day of Atonement. The Passover lamb, by contrast, is about protection and liberation from oppression. The people themselves feed on the Passover lamb in order to be strengthened for their escape from slavery and their journey towards freedom. It is quite specifically about being ensnared or entrapped or enslaved by the sin of the world, and about being liberated from it, rather than being forgiven for contributing to it.

Now, of course, being liberated from oppression is certainly something that can rightly be described as salvation. Very much so. But I think you can see that it is a quite different image of salvation from that of going up before the judge in a courthouse and being pardoned for things you might otherwise have been punished for. And I'm not playing one off against the other. They are both aspects of what goes on in our relationship with Jesus and in his saving us. But what I am suggesting is that in order to more fully understand what Jesus is on about, we need to explore all these avenues, not just squash them all into one concept that's all about little old me and my personal sin.

One of the problems that is created when we misunderstand these different sacrifices and just squash them all into an offering for sin, is that we turn being forgiven into a transaction with a far off God. It becomes a bit like paying your taxes. You don't have a personal relationship with the taxation office, but so long as you make the transaction and pay your taxes on time, they won't give you any trouble and all will be well. Forgiveness can end up being thought of as bit like that. Providing you get your name in on the transaction, you're all good. Nothing else to worry about.

But there is really little or nothing in the teachings or behaviour of Jesus that support such an understanding or approach. In Jesus, both salvation generally and forgiveness specifically come to us as a person, inviting us into a relationship. We are not saved and forgiven by a transaction with a distant office when they acknowledge that we have filled in the right paperwork or prayed the right prayer. Forgiveness is something that we discover has happened when we encounter Jesus and are drawn into a deep friendship with him and discover that he has no interest in finding us guilty of anything or seeing us punished for anything. Forgiveness is who he is.

The second part of the story we heard in our gospel reading is the experience we are being invited into. On a recommendation from John the Baptist, several of his followers decide to check out Jesus, and we heard the story of their initial encounter and how it then turned into an all day getting-to-know-you. “You want to know who I am, where I live, what I’m on about” says Jesus. “Come and see.” And so a friendship is born that continues to deepen and grow and become utterly life transforming.

This is what our relationship with Jesus is intended to look like too. It is not an impersonal transaction with a distant God who is a stickler for rules and regulations and getting payments in on time. It is an intimate friendship with Jesus in which we discover that we are so wholeheartedly and unreservedly loved, that nothing else really matters.

Now I am aware here that having said that the salvation of the world is not just about the sum total of the forgiveness of each individual sinner, I have focussed in on that forgiveness for the last few minutes and I haven’t said anything much about what more the salvation of the world might be. I want to redress that in a somewhat obscure way by picking up on a little detail in what Jesus says to these wannabe disciples, and see whether it might have wider implications for the salvation of the world.

It is this little phrase, “Come and see.” With these words, Jesus invites the disciples into relationship. But as I ponder these words, I think they can be seen as a sign of Jesus’s attitude to the wider issue of salvation, of taking away the sin of the world.

Now there are all sorts of ways of talking about the sin of the world and trying to summarise its basic ingredients, and no one explanation has a monopoly on the truth, so I’m not claiming that what I am about to say is the only or even the best way of describing it. But it is a way, and I hope it might prove helpful here.

Once we get wider than talking about personal salvation, reconciliation is a pretty central component of the concept of the salvation of the world. Reconciliation to God and reconciliation to one another. And much of the chaos, hostility and trauma in the world has its roots in the exact opposite of reconciliation, in our tendency to divide ourselves up into various forms of us-and-them and distance ourselves from one another and regard one another with suspicion and contempt and hostility.

Our federal government’s current attempt to create new laws against racial hatred are just one more attempt to put a bandaid on this gaping wound in our world. As important as it is to seek ways to prevent the growth and promotion of such hatreds, you can’t simply legislate them out of existence. When the neo-nazi National Socialist Network announces that it is going to disband because of these new laws, that doesn’t mean for a moment that its members have had a change of heart. It just means they are seeking to stay out of jail. Legislation can sometimes constrain behaviour, but it doesn’t change hearts and minds.

So what does change hearts and minds? “Come and see.”

What can begin taking away the sin of the world’s divisive tribalism, its contempt for others, and its hostility towards all who are different? “Come and see.”

I'm not saying "Come and see the answer." I'm saying that "come and see" is the beginning of the answer. "Come and see" is the beginning of being reconciled to one another. Suspicion, fear and hostility are maintained by distance, by ignorance, by the maintaining of unchecked assumptions and prejudices. We can believe all sorts of bullshit about one another if we don't take the time to visit one another to see, listen and learn. And if we only go to one another to take our version of the truth to them and try to convert them to it, that's just another way of maintaining the distance and avoiding having our assumptions about them challenged.

You may have noticed this too, but nearly every Christian I have known who has changed their mind to become more accepting of LGBTI+ people has begun the change by getting to know someone personally. Once homosexuality or gender diversity stopped being theoretical categories and became actual people, the misconceptions begin to fall away. Come and see. Listen and learn. Reconciliation, which is at the heart of the salvation of the world, depends on it.

It is the same with racial hatreds, and with religious hatreds. I was in Israel briefly, two and a half years ago. You find a big difference between the attitudes of Israelis who have intentionally spent time getting to know Palestinian families, and those who fearfully avoid all contact except conflict with them. A number of us in this congregation have spoken about how our attitudes to Aboriginal people changed as we got to know Uncle Den. Come and see. Listen and learn. That's how reconciliation begins.

We live in a world that increasingly siloes us into groups determined by algorithms that continually reinforce one narrow set of values and perspectives for each group. Those outside our group are portrayed as contemptible and dangerous. And people who think they are surrounded by dangerous enemies are far more exploitable, so the powers that be are usually quite invested in keeping us from overcoming the barriers and actually seeing each other, listening to each other, and learning the truth about how similar we are to one another. We are deeply entangled in the sin of the world.

If you want to break free and join in taking away the sin of the world, Jesus says, "Come and see." Come and see, listen and learn. Sin structures the world to keep us apart and to keep us fearing one another, blaming one another, and despising one another. "Come and see," Jesus says. Come and see, listen and learn. For with each prejudiced misconception that is cleared up, and each new friendship that forms across barriers of division, another crack opens up in the structures of the sin of the world, and the whole edifice of sin is one crack closer to toppling.

Perhaps the psalm we sang tonight nailed it. "Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, O Lord. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. But you have given me an open ear." (Ps 40:6) God is not interested in sacrifices for sin. Never has been. But God certainly cares whether we approach the world with open ears, open eyes, open hearts.

Do you want to know Jesus? Come and see. Do you want to join him in taking away the sin of the world and bringing salvation and healing to a traumatised world? Come and see. Come and see.