

“If only... then everything will be well”  
Isaiah 11:11-19; Isaiah 51:1-8;  
Acts 16:16-18; Luke 1:67-79

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I was thinking about how many times I have sat around thinking, “If only...” If only I had a new car. If only it would rain money on me. If only I were rich or famous or powerful or whatever. Thinking about if only I had something, everything would be better. All would be well. It is thinking about “if only” that I am thinking about today.

There is a children’s story about a duck named Petunia who has a nice pasture to roam around in, but always is looking through the fence at the hillside just beyond the farmyard fence. She always thinks the grass over there must be greener, must be better. So one day the barnyard gate is left open and she sneaks out. She starts going up the hill, eating the grass. Soon she notices this grass isn’t really any different than the grass she just left behind. As she goes up the hill, the grass gets drier and she realizes that, actually, this grass is worse than the grass she left behind. Then as she gets closer to the forest, a fox comes out and she runs for her life back down the hill. Luckily the farm dog comes and runs the fox off, so Petunia makes it back.

Oftentimes, we like to tell this kind of story about the grass being greener because we tend not to think about the thing that we have and how wonderful it is. We are always looking for something that’s better. Perhaps there is some element of truth to finding that which is better, but it may be that the better is not necessarily someplace else. The better may be with us and we just need to open our eyes to what it is.

In our scripture, Zechariah says his son is going to give us knowledge of salvation. I was thinking about whether my desire for “if only” stuff is really a desire for saving myself from something. And yet, as I look to the world around me, as I struggle looking at all the “grass is greener” kind of stuff, I need again to recognize where the knowledge of salvation is.

Oftentimes, and maybe some of you are like me, what I’ll do is look in a book and find the idea that I think will give me what I need. In some ways we do that with scripture. And yet, I think it’s more than finding an idea that we need. I might have a great idea, but it’s not all that I need. Because, you see, when I’m finding that bright idea, it’s *my* idea. And what I realize is that as I struggle to find salvation, it is always beyond me. I’ve tried lots of different things and been disappointed lots of different times.

Think about all the things that we may have thought. If only I can get out of high school, everything will be well. If only I get out of college. If only I get married. If only I get a house. If only I... whatever. What I continue to find is that none of this is enough and I can’t do it on my own.

As we hear Zechariah tell us about the knowledge of salvation, it is that we find this knowledge through the forgiveness that God gives, the tender mercy of God. It is the way God reaches down to us with a hand up. It's not something we can do all on our own. In fact, as much as I will look to all the things that are horizontal, all those things are really on the same level I am. To be lifted up, I need something from above and that is what our scripture is suggesting today: that God is reaching down and saving us. Even in Isaiah 11 where it talks about all the smiting and such, the wind blows through to clear a way for the people. The idea was that God will make a way. We don't always understand all that was going on in those times, but we recognize that God is the one that makes a way. In Isaiah, we hear about God making a way.

We hear in Acts, as Paul is wandering around and teaching, that this woman recognizes what he's teaching. What does she shout out? He's teaching the way of salvation. I always need to hear that, for some reason, because I'm always looking for it in the wrong places. Yet I recognize again and again that Paul is helping teach that way of salvation because God shows us the light, the light beyond. But as we think about it, as God brings us light, as God shows us the way out of darkness, as we get to see the way of salvation – it's interesting the way Isaiah puts it – it is the pursuing of righteousness and the recognizing of God's justice. It's an active work.

So often I think if only I had this then everything would be well, and yet scriptural salvation seems to be saying if only you have this then you will be able to take the steps through it all to keep going. You will be invited, in a way, into a race, into an activity, a pursuing of righteousness. Think about what you could see that would make you run to get it. If you're like me, I'm beginning to want to run for things less and less. But if there were something really important, I might want to do that.

Luckily pursuing righteousness doesn't really mean that I have to run, but it does suggest some activity. If you read through that passage in Isaiah 51, it talks about looking, seeking, paying attention. So those are pieces of that. It talks not only about what we seek, but about not being afraid of being reproached, even reviled, as we look for what is good—the way, a path.

It is a travelling from darkness into light. At the end of the passage where Zechariah talks, he says that we sit in the shadow of death and the light comes through the work of God in Jesus Christ. Now some of us may not be sure exactly what that means, but it seems to me that anybody who has sat in fear, anybody who has sat in grief, anybody who has sat in disappointment or despair, anybody who recognizes a certain amount of uncertainty and anxiety in their lives in some way sits in the shadow of death. In some ways it feels like what we're being offered is a choice of deciding whether we're going to pay attention to that shadow or whether we're going to notice the light and allow ourselves to continue to fly into it.

I think it's described in multiple ways in our texts today: the way of salvation, the knowledge of salvation, the pursuing of righteousness, our feet guided into the way of peace. It's as if there's something bigger than can really be described with one word.

Sometimes we think of one word like salvation or righteousness or justice or peace, but it feels like something that contains all of those, that all of those describe. And in some ways the best we can do is say it's a way into the light. It's a description of a movement that we make through life and it's a decision that we make each day. It's a decision that is not only about eternity, it's about today because I think that what Jesus is doing and what these passages are inviting us into is following Jesus into the way that leads to life and to life everlasting. It's a way through life to everlasting life. I think it's in some ways pretty practical. It's a decision made daily.

For me this last week, I found myself tired and when I hit moments of disappointment I found myself reacting in ways that I didn't feel were particularly kind. I recognized that I had to make a choice. Do I let the anxiety and the disappointment drive my life or do I look to God and the forgiveness that has taken away that need to make it all right, taken away everything I have done wrong as a weight that I have to bear so that I can make the decision, not by the weight that I've carried, but by the hope that I live into. If I can make the decision by the hope I live into, then I can be kind rather than react with anger.

You see, it's a momentary and daily decision to live into the light, to follow the way of salvation, to pursue righteousness, to let our feet be guided on the way of peace. Amen.