

WGUMC August 21, 2016 “Your God at Work”  
Philippians 2:1-13

Political commentator Dick Morris has written a book called "Armageddon" about how Donald Trump can save America from Hillary Clinton. Actress Jennifer Lawrence has said, "If Donald Trump is president of the United States, it will be the end of the world." They are only two of the many public figures who talk about this presidential election in apocalyptic terms. It does seem like this election is very different and in some ways very scary.

Instead of obsessing about the campaign, we'd better spend our time trying to “work out our [own] salvation with fear and trembling,” as Paul says in his letter to the Philippians. And that's the passage I want to unpack this morning. Before we talk about what it means to "work out our salvation," we have to contend with the fact that there is no longer any agreement on what we need saving from (other than politicians). People are afraid of a lot of things, but these days

burning in hell is nowhere near the top of the list. Fewer and fewer folks buy that hellfire and damnation story anymore.

Thank God!

Rob Bell is a pastor who a few years back ignited the evangelical world by challenging the traditional Christian notion of hell in his book, *Love Wins*. But mainline Protestants have been rejecting that notion for years. Many of us have long been convinced that an all-loving, all-powerful God could not let the better part of humanity get away and burn in the eternal fires of hell. That would be called *Love Loses*. And who could believe in such a loser God, let alone live and die for one?

It makes you wonder where we ever got that picture of eternal torment in the first place. From the Bible? Not from the Hebrew Bible. The ancient Hebrews, like modern-day Jews, didn't really have much of a notion of the afterlife. The closest they came is *Sheol*, a Hebrew word for the realm of the dead. But *sheol* wasn't a place of punishment; everyone went there.

So there is no equivalent word for “hell” in the Old Testament at all.

There only starts to be mention of a hell in the inter-Testamental period, which was a time when the Persians and Greek empires controlled Palestine and influenced Jewish thought. That’s when you start seeing references to Paradise, a Persian concept, and *Hades*, the name for the underworld in Greek mythology.

But even in the New Testament, written in Greek, *Hades* shows up only ten times. Another Greek word for hell, *Gehenna*, only 13 times. By contrast, the word “heaven” shows up in the Bible 567 times (229 times in the New Testament). Now those numbers should tell us something.

What they tell me is that when it comes to thinking about hell, we've probably gotten more ideas from Dante's *Inferno* than from the words of Jesus. Let's listen to what Jesus says about this whole damned business.

For one thing, Jesus rarely mentions hell (and almost exclusively in the Gospel of Matthew), but he talks an awful lot about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. [Matthew 13] And the most amazing thing of all: Jesus comes to his disciples and says, “the kingdom [of God] is among you.” [Luke 17:21] In other words, “I’m here, so heaven is here, too.” By definition, wherever Jesus is, heaven is.

And that changes the whole conversation about salvation. The Gospel is about heaven. It’s not about hell. (If it were about hell, it wouldn’t be “good news.”) Also, heaven isn’t a place, it’s a person, a presence. As John the Baptist and Jesus both say, “Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near.” [Matthew 3:2; 4:17] That's Good News, because if the kingdom is near, so is the king.

Salvation is simply being in the presence of God, living in God's kingdom. And what we need to be saved from is being in the absence of God and missing out on the kingdom. So we need to work out our salvation to be sure that we don't miss out on the fullness of life and the awesomeness of love that is available to us in the present, in the presence.

Missing out on God's love is my working definition of hell. Not living in the presence of God is what Jesus calls being lost in the “outer darkness.” [Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30] Making choices that take us away from the love of God is like throwing ourselves in the “furnace of fire.” [Matthew 13:42,50] Never having the courage to embrace a life that is real keeps us cowering in the corner, weeping and gnashing our teeth. [see above and also Luke 13:28]. “Outer darkness”, “furnace of fire”, “weeping and gnashing”—Jesus used all of these images in Matthew to talk about the hell that people were living in, the hell Jesus came to save us from.

So why does Paul say that we have to “work out our salvation”? Didn't Martin Luther say that our works won't earn us salvation? Isn't that the main point of the Protestant Reformation? Our own experience tells us that our works can't save us, but God's work in us can.

The way it works is that God's grace pulls our lives into alignment with Christ's life. Gradually, God gives us the same mind that was in Christ and puts us on the same path with Christ. The path we're talking about here is the path of humility.

The Christ hymn says that Jesus didn't use his equality with God to lord it over other people. He emptied himself of all that power and authority, and he took the form of a slave. Jesus came among us as a servant not a sovereign. The Gospel of Mark says, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” [Mark 10:45] And in his life of serving and giving, he was obedient to the very end, to the point of death—even death on a cross.

So this is how we let God work out our salvation in us: by serving, not being served; by giving, not taking away; and by putting our faith to work and being obedient to the very end.

You won't hear this "me last" message this election year. But Jesus isn't up for re-election, and God's kingdom doesn't need anyone to make it great again. If we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, we do so knowing that it is not on account of us but on account of God who is at work in us, enabling us both to will and to work for God's good pleasure. [Phil 2:13] No matter which candidate gets the most votes, we can be sure that love is going to win in the end.

You've seen the road signs: "Your tax dollars at work." And you often see a bunch of pylons and road construction equipment but not a lot of actual work going on. But with God, there is always work going on, though sometimes we don't know it because God doesn't put up road signs. More often

than not, we have to be the road signs. We have to tell the story about where God is at work in our world.

For years John Brewer has been a sign for us that God is at work in our world. But John is going to be married in October and is anxious to begin a new chapter. He will be leaving us as praise band director about the time we are hoping that Bob will be returning to us after his knee surgery. But the fact is that none of us know how this is all going to work out and what worship will be like for us from here on out. This church is in a reconstruction zone as we go through a lot of staff transitions this year. So it's really important that we come together in these next several months and be signs that God is doing the work here and showing us the way.

I believe that if we work out our salvation together, God will turn our fear and trembling into the love and hope that our world is longing for, that we all wish we could vote for. So let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Amen.