# The Most Important Variable

# 1 Samuel 17:32-49, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13 and Mark 4:35-41

# A sermon preached at Baldwin Auditorium on June 21, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Jennifer Copeland

“At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” That’s what God said to Israel when they were in exile; past tense, e-d on the ends of those verbs, listened and helped. Listened when, helped me how, they must have wondered as they sat down and wept by the waters of Babylon, forgetting all about Egypt. But as Paul’s congregation would know and we know now, God did help them—again. Just like they got out of Egypt, they did return from Babylon to begin anew trying to understand what the day of salvation is all about.

When I was a child, as Paul famously said in another letter to these recalcitrant Corinthians, I thought like a child. Me too. When I was a child, more accurately a newly ordained United Methodist minister at the wise old age of 24—which is sort of like being a child—I thought meaning was all wrapped up in what I said. I knew what I meant when I said it. Now I know, more of the meaning is wrapped up in what people hear, how they hear it, and who they hear saying it. It has almost nothing to do with what I say.

So, the day of salvation has about as many meanings as there are people out here listening to me say it, regardless of what I think it might mean when I speak it aloud to you. Among several possibilities, it might mean:

* heaven in the sweet by-and-by;
* Armageddon and all that word implies for the Left Behind lovers;
* Or it could mean when school teachers are paid a living wage in NC.

Whatever you think it means, listening friends, Paul says, it is now. Now is the day of salvation—exclamation point. That news should either make us really happy or really afraid, as always depending on our listening location.

Some of you probably know by now that I’m about to change jobs, but really I’m not changing very much about how I do my job. Just like before, I will advocate for living wages, care of the environment, health care affordability, food security; in short, I will advocate for the day of salvation. And like Isaiah told the Israelites in Babylon and Paul told the Christians in Corinth, I will continue to tell anyone who will listen: Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation!

* Not after summer break
* Not after finals
* Not after you graduate
* Not even after you get tenure
* Not after the children are grown
* Not after the mortgage is paid
* Not after any of the things we think we have to finish first.

Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.

In other words, dear listening friends, what are we waiting for before we begin living into the day of salvation? How long will we remain hostage to our insecurities and captive to our fears? We don’t need more oil to turn into carbon; more food to pour into the garbage disposal; more stuff to stuff in our closets. We make more money and we buy more stuff because we’re afraid there might not be enough. I heard once from a source I can’t recall—no footnote here—that God has given the creation everything necessary for life and God has given the creatures, us, everything we need to flourish. But God has left it up to us to share this abundance with each other, to live into the day of salvation.

Now, let me be clear, I’m a Methodist. We are not people of guilt and coercion. We are people of grace and action. So, when Paul reminds us of these words from Isaiah—Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation—I believe that’s good news. That’s the news we’ve been longing to hear even while we are captives in Babylon, or Roman occupied Israel, or allies of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina. Yes, indeed, even in Charleston, the day of salvation is good news. We don’t have to wait for the return of the exiles, the invasion of the Visigoths, or new gun control laws. We can live today as redeemed and reconciled people. We can live today into the salvation that is already ours.

I am not nearly as naïve as I was 27 years ago when a bishop laid hands on my head making it my job to tell you these things. I know, as I said, earlier, that what is said and what is heard are sometimes very different. Let me give you an example from my new job:

1. Through our work on behalf of immigrants we know that undocumented workers pay over $3.5 million in state and local taxes every year. Some hear that as responsible citizenship for those who are not even citizens. Others hear that as income taxes paid through a job that was taken away from an American citizen.
2. Through our work in health care we know that 19% of North Carolinians who needed to see a doctor last year did not do so because they could not afford it. Some hear that as a need for North Carolina to become a fully participating partner in the Affordable Care Act. Others hear that as the need to do away with government oversight and support the private sector.

Now we see the dilemma. The same statistic heard quite differently. What we hear is further complicated by who is saying it. Lots of people dismiss my claims as the chatter of a bleeding heart liberal—or worse. The precise labels we affix to one another are beside the point, because the act of labeling does the job. Labels are dismissive. Labels prevent us from having a name and a life of our own. Labels prevent others from seeing the person God created us to be. Labels mean we don’t have to understand each other.

But what if there is more to me than the labels? Turns out, I might be naïve, liberal, or worse, because I was raised by public servants: one a public school teacher and one a state forester. I worked all through college and have spent the last 16 years doing ministry on a college campus—not exactly high profile or lucrative work. This could explain something about my views. Turns out most of us see the world the way we’ve been taught to see it. We see it through our life experiences: good, bad, or otherwise. So, knowing what a person has experienced helps us know the person. It helps us understand why they say what they say. It helps us appreciate why they hear what they hear. It helps us move beyond the labels.

We are all composites of both nature and nurture and most of this is much more stable than we think. We actually don’t change very much after we become adults. We take our cues from the people and places that have formed us, and if we’re completely honest with ourselves, we might admit we’re not nearly as free as we think we are. We have fixed ways of thinking that were mostly given to us through both nature and nurture.

Reams of scientific data and psychological analysis support my claims. I am not saying this to create a controversial sermon. We do make choices, but those choices come within a limited set of variables over which we have little control, like our DNA. None of us get to pick that—yet.

Hard to believe, isn’t it, that on the cusp of another wide open presidential election season, who we will finally vote for as President of the United States has probably already been decided by forces beyond our control—by how I already think and what I already do? How many of you out there already know which party you will vote for on Nov. 8, 2016? How many know which person within your party of choice you are rooting for to get the nomination? Political analysts, spin doctors, even the opinions of others rarely sway us because of the variables that have already made us.

Even scripture, it seems, provides us little commonality because we all already read the bible a particular way. For me the day of salvation is good news; for others the day of salvation is a threat. Depends on how we have been taught to read. Or worse, if we have not been taught how to read the Bible, we are captives to the loudest voices in the town square; they will tell us what it means. A retired ethics professor at Duke Divinity School was famous for instructing his students, of which I was one, NOT to give Bibles to children. He told us, all those churches out there presenting Bibles to 3rd graders, or confirmation classes, or even high school seniors should be reeled in for their irresponsible behavior.

I’m sure Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into the common language of his people so everybody could read it and not just those who knew Latin, turned over in his grave every time this lecture was given. But, of course, what the teacher meant is, we have to be taught how to read the Bible and how to define concepts like the day of salvation. If not, then we’re right back where we started from sharing opinions that are not really our own opinions anyway, but only the sum of the variables added up by our lives at the moment we blurt out what we think.

Years before I was ever told not to give Bibles to 3rd graders, when I took my first religion class at Duke University, I thought someone had handed me the keys to the kingdom. All those inconsistencies and contradictions and downright impossibilities contained in scripture were unlocked for me by the magnificent tool of historical critical analysis. It all made sense and I knew as soon as everyone else used this magnificent tool, it would all make sense to them as well. At last Christians would be “one in the spirit, one in the lord, and together all unity would be restored.”

But then you know what happened, right? The disunity became more pronounced. Now we didn’t just separate along lines of infant baptism v. believer’s baptism, or predestination v. free will, all mostly ways of interpreting the Bible. We split over the Bible itself. Denominations divided, faculty were fired. We quit talking about war and peace, poverty and wealth. We quit talking and went to labeling. Infallibility v. inerrancy; inspiration v. literalism. The Bible merely echoes our attitudes. The day of salvation only assumes the hue of our lives.

When Paul writes this letter to the Corinthians, he’s naming this truth about us. We let all sorts of variables shape us and tell us who we are without paying attention to the only thing that really matters, the day of salvation. In the midst of our DNA, cultural influence, patriotic allegiance, or any of the other things we tend to rely on when making decisions, we should rely on the day of salvation. We should rely on the promises of our God who has said, I have listened to you, I have helped you. We’re often told, history is the best predictor of the future. If God has listened in the past and history shows God has; if God has helped in the past and history shows God has; then I predict God will listen and help in the future.

Paul supports my theory. Look at all the things that happened to us, Paul says. We should be sad, but we’re not; we should be poor, but we’re not; we should be dead, but we’re not. Look at what we’ve been able to do, Paul says, by looking at the world through the day of salvation. Now remember, I’m a Methodist—grace and action—so I’m going to come down on the side of salvation as being a good thing. God is listening and God is helping. I believe that seeing the world through the lens of salvation, changes the world.

So, where does that leave us on this day of salvation? How do we move out of the center and hear afresh the claims of the Gospel? We start by recalling the history. Where was Jesus when people were hungry? Where was Jesus when people were sick? Where was Jesus when children were excluded? Where was Jesus when a lone gunman opened fire at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church? Read the record. How did people respond to Jesus when they realized where he was? Were they happy or frustrated? Were they pleased or annoyed? Did they support him or thwart him? Read the record.

Then think about Paul and his claims in today’s Epistle reading. Where was he when people hungered and thirsted for righteousness sake? What did he put up with so the truth of Jesus’ life might be shared with all? Read the record. How did people respond to Paul? Frustrated, pleased, supportive? Read the record.

And now think about yourself? How do you respond to Isaiah, to Jesus, to Paul? Does their witness excite you or scare you? Are their directives a threat to your way of life or a promise for something better? What do you hear when someone says, now is the day of salvation? What will you do with this possibility in your life? Don’t just read the record. Be the record. Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.