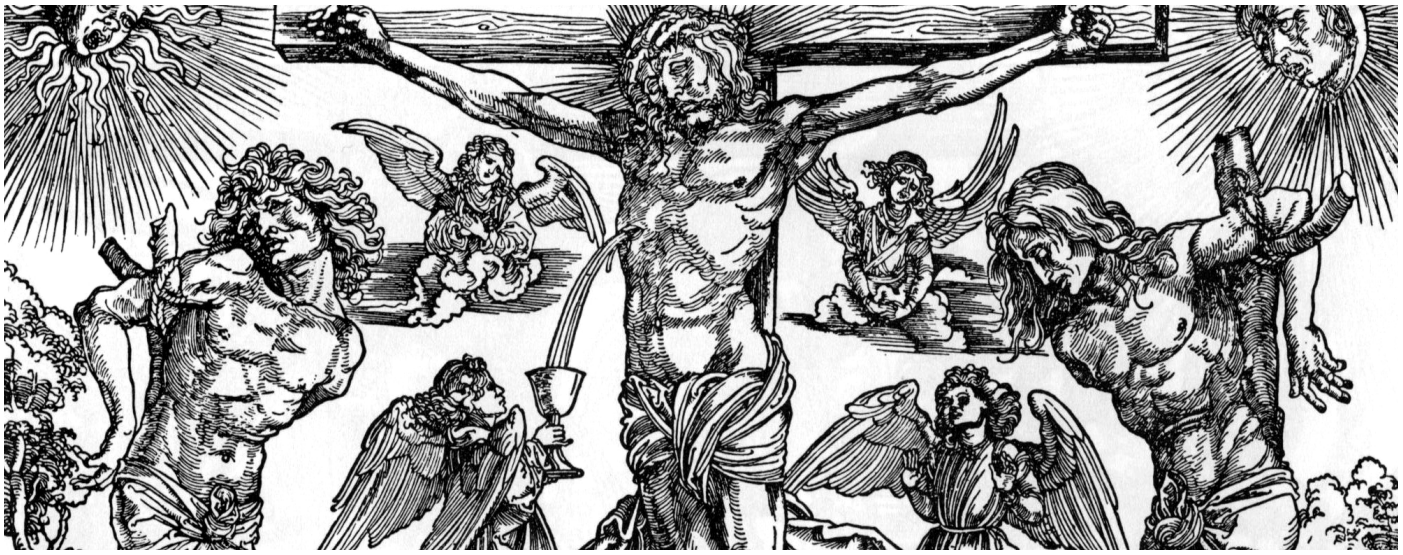

Salvation in a Race-Conscious Age

Piotr J. Małysz

Nine years ago, I was about to move away from the reassuringly-Lutheran walls of Valparaiso University (after a brief time there as a post-doc) and the no-less-Lutheran fields, farms, churches, and rhythms of the surrounding countryside. I was moving to the American South to start a new position as professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School, an interdenominational seminary on the campus of Samford University, a Baptist institution in Birmingham, Alabama. I expected a very different world—different not only from the New England setting where I had felt so at home during my graduate studies and early pastorate, but also unlike the familiar, even if at times rather nationalistically-flavored, Lutheranism of the Midwest.

What I was bracing myself for, however, wasn't all yet. More surprises still awaited me. I was nearly done boxing my library when I received a phone call—an accentual culture shock if there ever was one!—from a Lutheran congregation in Birmingham. I remember it taking me a moment to grasp exactly what was being asked of me. My interlocutor showed remarkable patience and persistence, even when I was ready to throw in the towel. That in itself was testimony to the urgent desire that was being relayed to me. The congregation, Saint Paul, needed a pastor; they couldn't quite afford one; a worker-priest was their only option; would I be their pastor; oh, they were an African-American congregation—would that be a problem? I had no time to ponder how they'd managed to track me down. Despite the strange accent, or perhaps precisely because of it, this felt like a truly divine call!

Nine years later, I certainly know my bearings better. For one thing, the accents, together with the very human expectations, joys, anxieties, and sorrows wrapped up in them, don't throw me off guard. Together, we've also been through a lot—the ups and downs of congregational life in an urban setting where most white folks don't venture, and in a neighborhood which itself has long been in transition, or disarray, or may actually have just turned the corner, but barely, tough to tell. Even though I can't quite call this my Bonhoefferian moment, since I didn't seek the situation out, I am immensely grateful.

Learning Salvation's Breadth and Depth

First and foremost, I have learned an awful lot. I don't mean simply getting the hang of the practical aspects of congregational life, such as expanding my pastoral catalogue of cultural pitfalls, human needs, and Christian responses thereto, or navigating both chanted liturgies, so familiar to me from Europe, and African-American spirituals, and spirituality. Rather, thanks to the witness of the good people

of Saint Paul, I have, in serving them, found much theological food for thought—of the sort, I believe, that is not irrelevant for our present cultural and political moment. Even more than that, in mulling over the experience, I have come to realize that it places our very identity on the line.

Learning, of course, remains an ongoing journey. Each day I do my best to live up to my calling and, by God's grace, to do right by the people who have sought me out and now look to me for spiritual guidance. But the journey also has its milestones, and every now and then the road opens up onto unexpected vistas. Then it's time to pause and take it all in. Now, when I speak of theological insight, one of those surprising vantage points, I categorically do not intend to say that all I have learned is how discerningly to apply the theology I have known all along. Theology practiced in the academy certainly lends itself to such a top-down approach, prizing as it does the finality, or even ease, of theological pronouncements. What we theologians may not sufficiently recognize is that this approach comes more by way of temptation than of learning. The learning I have in mind has come, rather, through examining the very theology I know and allowing the practical to open up, within that theological vision, layers and avenues I was scarcely aware of.

Specifically, I have over recent years gained what I believe to be a deeper insight into, and appreciation for, a more robustly biblical understanding of salvation. That is, salvation understood not as inner peace and assurance of the self's continuity after death, but as no less than a remaking of reality, a renewal of the earth and the heavens that is already under way. Salvation as a vision genuinely unparalleled in its breadth.

We are no less than caught up into this remaking of reality. Just this is the crucial, sweeping aspect of redemption I wish to insist on here. The new is not confined to our hearts. It is not merely a repentant posture of the believing individual which, when sustained, guarantees future personal reward in some great spiritual beyond. That is too paltry and pale a view of the transformation that is at stake. Why? Because Christ's cross stood not in the sky but in the midst of the world! It didn't take place for God's sake but for ours. The cross, to begin with, is essentially about God allowing the godless world and His godless people to taste the fruits of their godlessness, as if there were no God, as if they were gods themselves, to their hearts' content . . . *only not*.

We are no less than caught up into this remaking of reality. The new is not confined to our hearts. It is not merely a repentant posture of the believing individual which, when sustained, guarantees future personal reward in some great spiritual beyond.

Let's be even more precise: at Golgotha, the sinful world is delivered up to its ways and forsaken. Here God speaks His "As you want it, so be it!" permitting the world to inflict death, ostensibly (so both the Jews and the Romans believe) for the sake of life and survival and peace. If only they'd known what they were doing, what they were all caught up in! At the cross, rampant self-justification yields its bitter fruit in humans' judging their fellow man to death . . . and then surely another one, and another. Bereft of God, the world beholds its end, but that end is a far cry from what was meant to have come of it. The world is thus allowed to play its tragic comedy out to its bitter end. It finishes itself off. But—in history's greatest juxtaposition—the world is so delivered up to itself *in Jesus's passion*. He is the people, indeed all humanity, given over to themselves, their own self-preservation and world-making . . . so that the world wouldn't, in the end, be forsaken, not for good, not ever. At Golgotha, human judgment and self-seeking run amok are firmly clasped within God's own judgment on His god-less creation. And the wages of sin is death. Innocent though He is, Jesus must die.

Still, even so understood as God's judgment on the godless, the cross is far from being the end of the story, a spectacle and punishment, as if that could change anything! Because what takes place is inscribed into God's judgment, God does not, and will not, simply sanction the unexpected outcome of all human judging (unexpected, that is, to its perpetrators). He has another judg-ment solely of His own to deliver. Thus, what is equally important is that the resurrection of all flesh truly already had its beginning the first day of that week some two thousand years ago. There,

with the empty tomb, God overrode all "better" judgment on the part of human beings, showing Himself decisively to be Life-giver, the sole Re-Maker of His creation, and the true Preserver of His people. In the cross, the world as we know it, hell-bent on running the full course of its godlessness, has found its end and limit. And that limit, in the end, is God's determined gift of life. Now one of us already is on the other side of death. He is there as God's faithful covenant partner and human creature true to its Maker that He was—rejected for our own unfaithfulness, given over into the hands of sinners, and yet also vindicated for His faithfulness exercised on our very behalf. The One who with His whole life was a man for all humans lives. Hence He lives also for us! Just this is the good, indeed great, news of Jesus's cross and resurrection.

The resurrection of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth means that God's kingdom has broken in. It has invaded the world as we know it. Where the world has said God is no good, God displays His goodness and shows His favor. Where the world has pronounced death, God says life. Where the world judges, "It is better for this man to die, so the people could be saved," God says, "I elect and preserve my people; and even more, if I make Abraham's children out of a barren couple, I can make them out of stones, even out of gentiles!" The world's ways are no longer a given or inexorably final. All this leaves us little time for bargaining or making decisions other than to repent, to let go of the world's ways, and to live from the new and unexpected—to live from the possibilities God's kingdom has opened up and which the living Jesus, living eternally for us as our neighbor and friend, sustains.

Scaling God Back

To be sure, believers may yet be groaning in distress, but groaning precisely because we are simply awaiting the disclosure of who we already are: Christ's brothers and sisters, and all of us children of our heavenly Father. But we may also be groaning—and this is the central point I'm getting at—because that disclosure, the disclosure of God's ways with us, is paradoxically so hard for us. "Hard?"—

At Golgotha, the sinful world is delivered up to its ways and forsaken. Here God speaks His "As you want it, so be it!" permitting the world to inflict death, ostensibly (so both the Jews and the Romans believe) for the sake of life and survival and peace.

one may ask. You see, what I worry about is that many of us, especially white Christians in the modern west, have by this point in time lost sight of the explosion that has happened in the midst of the world in the life—continued now for us—of Jesus Christ. Many of us, it seems, implicitly or explicitly, imagine salvation only as a sort of enhancement of the present, something rather resembling the status quo and its well-tried and well-trodden ways, only with dead grandma back at the table, student loans forgiven, and credit card debt erased. We picture Jesus coming round every now and then to pat us on the back and have a laugh with us, or inviting us over for dinner. A rather paltry but admittedly pretty reassuring and familiar vision. Nothing too radical, too new, or newfangled. If the world ever comes into view in its broader scope, it is always our world, preserved and saved, with a better version of ourselves planted at its center. (With less debt to be anxious about, how could I not be better, even a better person?)

Søren Kierkegaard's analogy for this kind of ersatz gospel remains quite apropos.[1] If a rich person, passing by in a Tesla (to give Kierkegaard's imagery a bit of a facelift), should step out of his car and give a homeless hobo a thousand dollars, we will express our astonishment at such rare and unexpected generosity. We will praise the driver's regard for another who ordinarily is socially invisible and will laud the driver's social consciousness and sensitivity. But if that same Tesla owner should invite the poor stinking wretch into the car and, after a short conversation, offer the hand of his daughter in marriage (this is Kierkegaard's image, perhaps even more outlandish today), we cannot but be scandalized. Even in America, where the sky is seemingly the limit, we will denounce the craziness, rail against the lack of prudence, and condemn the impropriety of the driver's action. The reason is simple: the deed does not merely improve the ways of the world; it doesn't just make life a bit better and make us feel good about reality. Instead, the driver's action subverts the world's ways, offending against our very sense of propriety, proportion, merit, justice, and reality itself.

For us Americans, there are all kinds of thought-forms that

serve to reinforce such scaled-back Christianity together with its ersatz gospel. Take, for example, the mythology of America as God's people from its very inception, rather than a product of sin and dehumanization that we (yes, even we) need to face up to. The fetishization of history in the form of monuments, as if history demanded no reckoning. The insistence on law and order, as if law and order were good in themselves. In short, we are always saving the past, *our* glorious past, or returning the present to paradise, instead of living from the present- and future-opening reality of Christ's resurrection.

In this sort of made-to-measure view of salvation, Jesus can only end up a kind of Mephistopheles figure who conjures up paradise lost, making it happen and assuring it once and for all, and then gives it all to us. All you need to do is condense your soul into something called faith, which is the currency that accomplishes the transaction. And voilà!—it's now personally guaranteed for eternity, the moment lasts forever, at least on a subjective level. Sadly and frighteningly so, we are now at a point when implicitly, it seems, Jesus will no longer do, not by himself at any rate. But there is always a Donald Trump, or some other god-let, itching to be put to the test. One wonders if, like Faust, we may yet come to realize we've paid a steeper price than we thought, and not to the one we thought we had!

The upshot of all this is that our life in the world—our mission—does not come down to loving the neighbor or being reckless with compassion or even showing willingness to understand. It is not leaning into the unthinkable that God has made possible by raising His Son from the dead contrary to all human prudence and pragmatic calculation. Instead of all that, when things do get too messy, and life gets too concrete, when a claim is made on us, we desperately run into generalizations and comfortably hover above reality. From that vantage point, it is always and only the case that all are sinners and all lives matter—and everything stays the same! The "Christian" life is not about sharing in the possibilities of togetherness that have become real now that God has already made history come out right. God forbid! It consists largely in keeping at bay spirits of darkness constantly undermining and sabotaging our status-quo almost-paradise. And we know exactly who they are. And so, Jesus helps us, and we help him in return.

Now one of us already is on the other side of death. He is there as God's faithful covenant partner.

But when all is said and done, aren't we only saving ourselves for God, as if we had to and as if there was anything to save, burying the talent we've received, foolishly convinced that at long last He Himself will show up to give His stamp of approval and a final push to our project?

Sin and Grace

What fuels the pragmatic and, in all honesty, arrogant self-confidence, together with its need for a scaled-back gospel, is, to put it bluntly, sin. But here also we must immediately elaborate to prevent ascribing to sin only faux-gravity. It has been only in recent years, I think, that I've really begun to grasp the pervasiveness of sin. I do not mean some mysterious force residing in the dark recesses of our hearts; a shadowy presence, grave and yet so elusive that for that reason it ends up being practically perfunctory, an aspect of our being that we can work on or at least mitigate with the help of grace (grace functioning here as our trade-marked Christian Advil and multivitamin).

It is one thing to affirm with the *Formula of Concord* that original sin is "a deep-seated, evil, horrible, bottomless, unfathomable, and indescribable corruption of the entire human nature and of all its powers, particularly of the highest, most important powers of the soul, in mind, heart, and will."[2] But the focus on the corruption of human nature and sin's indescribability must not exclude an understanding of sin as a power that *concretely* despoils *everything* we touch—and that includes our history, our law and order, and even our Bibles and Jesus himself. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words which, back in 1933, must surely have seemed like a downer to many well-intentioned and good-natured Christians, are a salutary warning here that resounds all the more today: "We reject the false doctrine that the world, just as it is, corresponds to the original creation according to the will of God and must therefore be fully affirmed … [and that within this world] human beings [through struggle] … will bring about the end time. … We reject the false doctrine that in this fallen world there could be any orders of ultimate significance that would not be included under God's curse as a result of the fall and could thus be recognized and affirmed as the original, unbroken orders of creation. For this would make it possible for humankind to return to a world without sin and would

make Christ's death on the cross superfluous. … Only in Christ can the world be restored."[3]

Grasped in its *mundane* pervasiveness, sin is a deadly disease that should make us look to and yearn for grace and nothing but grace. Now, where sin's pervasiveness is tangible, so too is grace. It is not a boost to my nature or infused fortification in my struggle against the world for the world, a sacramentally-delivered IV of sorts. Even to say, with Luther, that grace is God's favor is likewise to say too little.[4] Grace is not merely a disposition, whether in us or in God. It is northing short of God's righteousness already cascading down. It is the living Jesus Christ! It is God's kingdom breaking in with its ways. We do share a terrible collective guilt; but by God's grace—by the resurrection of Jesus who now lives for us with God's entire being—we are now also called to collective responsibility like we've never imagined it before.

The coming of God's kingdom does not disempower but actually allows us all to dream big. Not because we now believe we can bring about a new kind of paradise, replacing an eschatology that can't let go of the past with a future-oriented, revolutionary one. Far from it. A concrete awareness of our sin prevents us from insinuating ourselves into God's place or even claiming to be His indispensible helpers. Rather, we can dream big because God has already seen the story of His creation through to its very end. And it's a happy one! We can dream big because the ways of the world have grown old and are no longer inevitable; they have, in fact, been set aside. Within God's story we are free, as it were, to be human, to be humane, and to improvise. Hence we can travel with those who call to us for sympathy, be on the streets when the moment calls for it, and defend the unborn and the elderly. We can be pro-life in every way, protesting against concrete acts injustice, against a law and order that allow for the trampling of another's dignity, against a fetishization of market forces that absolves us of responsibility for the neighbor even as it stifles the neighbor's flourishing. We do not have to entrench ourselves in political partisanship that derides and vilifies. Instead of acting as "organized denial of the gospel's permissions," in Robert Jenson's felicitous phrase, "[t]he church is free to be the society of those who systematically refuse to admit that nothing can be done; not because they are optimistic about themselves or their society, but because they think that Christ is risen. We can throw revolutionary pathos into the struggle for penultimate transformations." Importantly—and that is why the church's role on the ground is so important—"we can do so without cynicism and without courting disillusion for we think we know what little to expect from history."[5]

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Putting it all another way, to protest against misguided futurist eschatologies espoused by all kinds of secular social movements and then to fall into a retrotopia[6] of our own is not the Christian task. It actually is a denial of our very Christian identity. I continue to find it remarkable, but not all that surprising given what we've said about sin, how easily we can use Christianity itself as insulation from faithfully discerning the call of the Risen and Living Lord and from being drawn out into the freedom of responsibility for the neighbor. All too often one sees Christians railing against and denouncing ideologies that compete with us in terms of social vision, smug that, in doing so, they have done their job, even God's work, and yet, in all this, failing miserably at their own calling, thus renouncing true freedom and power for a deceptive knock-off. It is Christians themselves who stubbornly turn the cross into a pie in the sky and Christianity into pious opiate, all under the banner of its (and our own) preservation. Again, we must ask: Is it really faithfulness to hold on to our pristine *Gestalt* and to make sure it is never polluted by any particular issue; or is it a mark of faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus's resurrection to trust our gifts and talents to make possible properly "worldly" engagement, to make it possible for us to be there?

Here one might retort: "Not so fast! We do have our list of carefully curated worldly concerns, don't we?" I reply: Slogans and battle cries, just like appearances, can be deceptive. Abortion and marriage are held as critical issues on the right. But outside those two, the right's "worldly" concern seems to exhaust itself. Besides, even if we do take this concern at face value, it is accompanied by little reflection on what, beyond survival, and, following it, a sterile notion of freedom, constitutes a genuinely human life.[7] It is no small irony that those who now chant "All Lives Matter" seem to care less that all *life* matters, that all humans deserve to flourish,

that human life has to do with being able to thrive at all the stages of our lives. There is at any rate no corresponding political zeal, let alone inkling, that actual care for the unborn might well find its proper place and resolution within the more comprehensive concern. This being the case, the embattled issues thus acquire the status of a totem pole rather than real and specific concern for life and lives. In contrast to today's self-appointed spokesmen for, and saviors of, God on the right side of the political spectrum, the early Christianity's social vision, made possible by the gospel, must seem positively staggering in its daring.[8] This is not to say that the left has gotten it right, either. Here, by contrast, an impatient, self-assured and militant naiveté with little tolerance for dissent appears to have hijacked hearts. Despite the broad-ranging social consciousness that is put forth, it is the common good that fares the least well. Both stances—insofar as they command our allegiance—spell out a *failure of soteriological imagination*, our Christianity's and our own, and implicate us all too deeply, deeper than our pristineness may lead us to believe, in the ever uglier politics of every day. These are not the talents, nor are they the gifts, we have been given.

Dream Big!

I believe I owe much of this understanding to my congregation, to the Lutherans, both living and already with the Lord, who played an illustrious, even if modest, role in the struggle for civil rights in Birmingham. For them, the gospel was so great, so liberating that it meant a way of life, even to the point of imagining the impossible. To give expression to their understanding of the gospel on a more personal level, I continue to return to Willie Jennings's touching testimony to his parents. "Ivory and Mary loved Jesus," Jennings writes. "To say that they were devout Christians is simply too pale a descriptor. A far more accurate characterization would be, 'There were Ivory, Mary, and Jesus.' Woven into the fabric of their lives was the God-man Jesus, who, rather than simply serving as an indicator of their orthodoxy, became the very shape of their stories. The stories of Jesus and Israel were so tightly woven into the stories my parents told of themselves, their lives in the South and in the North and then with their youngest children in the North, that it took my years to separate the biblical figures from extended family members, biblical sinners from the sinners all around us, and biblical places of pain from their places of pain. [Now—importantly—] I was never able to separate biblical hopes from their real hopes. They knew the Bible, but, far more important, they knew the world through the Bible."[9]

It is not Jesus, who becomes a part of our story, a guarantee that we can see it all through; it is we who are caught up into his!

To repeat, the coming of God's kingdom allows you to dream big. Not about fixing hearts, future rewards, getting rid of those you've already labeled evil, but about the explosive possibilities of what it means to be the body of Christ in God's great world-embracing act of liberation; what it means to be free for each other. To put it in the simplest of terms, it is not Jesus, who becomes a part of our story, a guarantee that we can see it all through; it is we who are caught up into his! And His is a story painted on the vast canvas of the universe itself. That is the gospel of Him who holds the keys to hades and death, and who *is* making all things new! LF

Endnotes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 84-85.

2. Solid Declaration, Article I: Orginal Sin, §11; in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 534.

3. Bethel Confession, IV.1, 2; in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 12: Berlin: 1932-1933, ed. L. L. Rasumssen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 385-392.

4. "Grace actually means God's favor, or the good will which in himself he bears toward us, by which he is disposed to give us Christ and to pour into us the Holy Spirit with his gifts." Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans (1522/1546); in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 35, ed. E. T. Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fotress, 1960), 369.

5. Robert W. Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel about Jesus* (1973; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 86, 100.

6. Zygmunt Bauman's coinage; cf. *Retrotopia* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2017).

7. To the humanity of human life, see my recent article "On Death, Dying, and Dying Well," *Lutheran Forum* 53:3 (Fall 2019), 7-17.

8. See, e.g., *Didache* 3.8, 4.8; or Justin Martyr's *First Apology* 14-17.

9. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1-2.

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