

## You Shall Call His Name Jesus

Fr. John Konkle

### *Jesus Saves Us from Our Sin*

In the midst of his perplexity over the news that his betrothed, Mary, is with child, the righteous Joseph is comforted by an angel in a dream:

Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call his name Jesus, *for he shall save his people from their sins*. (Mt 1:20-21)

Jesus' name, which means "savior" or "deliverer," is given to him because of his mission in this world: to save us from our sins. There is a tremendous difference between saving us *from our sins* and saving us *from the penalty* for our sins. The penalty for speeding on the highway is a fine; to be saved from paying the fine (e.g., the officer lets us off the hook; someone else pays it for us) is quite different than being saved from speeding (e.g., from the impatience that gives rise to our hurriedness). It is one thing to be saved from the penalty of anger toward a friend (e.g., the friend is willing to reestablish a relationship with us). It is quite another matter to be saved from our anger: to no longer be angry, and not simply toward this person at this time, but to be delivered from the passion of anger quite generally.

The teaching that Jesus came to save us from our sins permeates the Scriptures. When St. John the Baptist announces our Lord to his disciples, he does *not* say "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away *the penalty* for the sin of the world," but rather, "the Lamb of God who takes away *the sin* of the world" (Jn 1:29). So too, the Psalmist: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed *our transgressions* from us" (Ps 103:12). It's not that God is removing the penalty for our transgressions from us, but our actual transgressions. Similarly in the suffering servant texts of the Holy Prophet Isaiah: He bears our sins (Is 53:4,11,12), not simply the penalty for our sins. St. Peter, in referring to these prophecies, says: He "*who bore our sins* in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sin, might live to righteousness" (I Pt 2:24)—again, not the penalty for our sins but our actual sins. And St. Paul similarly teaches, "He gave himself *for our sins*, that He might deliver us from this present evil world" (Gal 1:4). Examples are easily multiplied.

Being saved from our sins involves undergoing a transformation. Salvation is not so much a change in God as it is a change in us. The difference is important. Many of us feel resigned to living with our anger, fear, envy, anxiety, gluttony, vainglory, and so forth. We don't think we're

ever going to change. We develop a type of contented frustration with our minimally transformed life. A quiet hopelessness sets in. Our unbalanced belief that Jesus saves us *from the penalty of sin* feeds, and even justifies, this spiritual malaise. “What’s really important,” we tell ourselves, “is avoiding the punishment for our behavior; since Jesus has saved us from that punishment, the spiritual bondage that we feel now is simply the transitory price we pay while we’re waiting for other-worldly freedom.” Salvation becomes fire insurance for our incurably inflamed soul.

### ***Sin is Missing the Mark***

We tend to align “penalty for sin” with “sin” because we think of sin as *breaking a law*. The common thought is that breaking a law deserves punishment. I’m speeding down the highway (breaking the law), and I get a ticket (deserved punishment), which is the penalty for my “sin.” In this way of thinking, “sin” is an ellipsis for “penalty for sin” because the two are so intimately linked. Sin, *amartia*, however, more fundamentally means *missing the mark* as when, for example, a backpacker follows a wrong compass bearing and misses his destination. Once he realizes this, he’s not inclined to say “I’ve broken a law,” but rather “I’m lost.”

The practical difference between “breaking the law” and “missing the mark” is quite pronounced. Jesus, the good Shepherd, comes to seek and save the lost, even as he sought out Adam and Eve hiding among the trees in paradise (Gen 3:8-9). The thought isn’t that the Good Shepherd is going to whip us (deserved punishment for wondering away) when he finds us. Rather, when we experience ourselves as lost, we become particularly attentive to any noises or voices that indicate the presence of one who could help us. And, if we are attentively listening, we’ll hear his voice and follow him to green pastures, and be carried on his shoulders to the rejoicing community (Jn 10:2-4; Lk 15:4-7). So, in a *legal* understanding of salvation, we are unpunished and unchanged; but in what we might call a *shepherding* understanding of salvation, we are restored and returned to the celebrating community.

When Jesus states that he did not enter the world to judge it but to save it (Jn 3:17), he goes on to explain how we so easily experience his saving efforts as judgment. The sense of judgment that comes from experiencing sin as breaking a law arises because Jesus is the Light that has come into the world, but we love darkness more than the Light because our actions are evil. “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light lest his deeds be exposed” (Jn 3:19-20). We would rather hide, even as Adam and Eve did in paradise, than to have our sins be seen. Why? Because our fear is tied up with the expectation that we’re going to be punished (1Jn 4:18). We hide from the Light because we are afraid of being punished for the sins that the Light reveals. But just as light makes darkness flee so love casts out fear, the fear of punishment (1Jn 4:18). In this way, experiencing our sin as a violation of the law invites us to experience Jesus as the judge coming to punish us, and engenders in us an understandable fear,

but experiencing our sin as missing the mark invites us to experience Jesus as the Good Shepherd searching for us, and engenders in us the desire to follow him.

### ***God is the Refiner's Fire***

The fear of remaining in the Light should not be dismissed lightly for remaining in the Light is to remain in God's presence, and our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). Remaining in his presence is the very means of purification from our sins; it is how he saves us. The persistent image of our purification in the Prophets and throughout Patristic literature is that of a refiner's fire.

The Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come into his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire. "Behold, he is coming," says the LORD almighty. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his entrance? Or who can stand at his appearing? For he comes as a refiner's fire and as launderers' soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit, *refining and purifying as silver and as gold*. And he will purify the sons of Levi, and *purge them as gold and silver*, that they may offer to the LORD a sacrifice in righteousness. (Mal 3:1-3)

In God's presence, we are like silver being heated to a molten state, which allows the dross, our sins, to come to the surface, to be revealed, to come to the Light. So it is precisely our willingness to remain in the refining fire of God's presence that provides the occasion for our being saved from our sins. The Prophet Malachi emphasizes how difficult this "remaining" is by the rhetorical questions, "Who can endure the day of his entrance? Or who can stand at his appearing?" The image calls to mind Moses before the burning bush (Ex 3:1-5), Job seeing God (Job 42:5), Isaiah in his heavenly vision (Is 6:1-7), the three holy youths in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace (Dan 3:1-30), the three disciples on the mount of transfiguration (Mt 17:1-8), and countless other recorded encounters with God.

The silver, which may have looked good from the outside before it entered the fire, *reveals* the dross buried within it as it turns molten in the refining fire. Similarly, being in the presence of God *reveals* the sins from which he wants to save us, but it does not *remove* them, for God does not save us by force but only in cooperation with our freedom. If, when our sins are brought to the Light, we hide from them by running into the darkness, by leaving the presence of God (getting out of the fire), the dross will descend back into the silver and remain there corrupting us from the inside out. "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ... If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1Jn 1:6,8,10).

The only way we can stay in the Light, in the refining fire of God's presence, is to agree with

God about what he has revealed to us about ourselves. “If we keep walking in the Light as he himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin. . . . If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jn 1:7,9). Confessing our sins, agreeing with God about what he has revealed to us, does not make them magically disappear; it is rather the way in which we give them, offer them, to Christ, who willingly bears them for us. “He carried our sins and was tormented for us, and we pondered him in pain, wounded, and suffering” (Is 53:4 (LXX); Mt 8:17). In this way, the one who knew no sin became sin for us in order that we might become the righteousness of God in him (2Cor 5:21).

Jesus saves us from our sins, then, “by contact”—so to speak, for by remaining in his presence and freely admitting what he reveals in us, we give him our sin and he gives us his righteousness. We are becoming light as we remain in the Light. This is what it is to do the truth, to remain in the Light, and St. John contrasts this practice with those who run from the Light to hide their sins by saying, “But he who does the truth comes to the Light in order that his deeds are manifested, that they are being produced by God” (Jn 3:21). What is the work of God that is manifested in those who remain in the Light? It is precisely that they are being transformed into light, transformed into all that human beings were meant to be, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) instead of the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). As we are purified, our lives become a sacrifice of righteousness.

### ***Practicing the Presence of God***

There are many practices we can do to enter into and remain in God’s presence; here we consider just a few: **Prayer:** Prayer is communion with God, and yet Jesus tells a parable to teach us “to pray at all times and *not to be discouraged*” (Lk 18:1). What’s discouraging about prayerful communion with God? Why is it difficult to continue in prayer without growing discouraged? Because the dross which comes to the surface by being in his refining presence manifests itself to us as distractions. All manner of worries, fears, interests, plans, fantasies, and the like come to mind while we are in prayer. They grab our mind, our attention, because we have a certain attachment to them. We grow discouraged because we interpret these distractions as a sign of failure that we are not even able to be attentive to God for a few moments. Instead, we need to experience them as the attachments coming to the surface from which God wants to cleanse us. If we grow discouraged and give up on our prayer, they sink back down inside us. But if we give our distractions to him, he takes them away—purifying us little by little, one distraction at a time.

**Contemplation:** In addition to abiding in Christ with prayer, Jesus instructs us to let his words *dwell* in us (Jn 15:7). God’s words dwelling in us is more than regular reading and study, more than having biblical and theological knowledge; it is not simply dwelling in the Scriptures, but

letting the Scriptures dwell in us—letting our hearts become a sacred home for precious and life-giving words. For the word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17) which “is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as deep as the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow; it is the discerner of the heart’s thoughts and intentions” (Heb 4:12). Divine words dwelling in us are the means for spiritual surgery on the cancers of the soul.

**Acts of Mercy:** While praying and contemplation are primarily interior activities in which we encounter the saving Christ, Jesus pointedly warns us that we encounter him in others also, especially in those whom society forgets. The sheep, those who have heard and followed his voice, will be those who gave Christ food when he was hungry, water when he was thirsty, shelter when he was a stranger, clothing when he was naked, visitation when he was sick or imprisoned—for “when you did this to the least of these, my brothers, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). “Blessed are the merciful,” Jesus teaches, “for they shall receive mercy.” What mercy shall they receive? The refining and purifying presence of their Savior in the faces of the needy.

**Holy Communion:** Our practices like prayer, contemplation, and acts of mercy are primarily personal practices, though they all have communal manifestations as well. The mysteries of the Church are, however, all essentially communal encounters with the Triune God. They are all tangible encounters of Christ coming to save us from our sins by being present with us in the materiality of this world: the waters of baptism, the chrism of chrismation, the bread and wine—his body and blood—of holy communion, the martyrs’ crowns of marriage, the stole over the head in confession, the oil of unction. The prayers of all these services reveal without exception that the mystery consists in being in the fiery presence of the living God who is purging our sins from us by his presence.

This purifying mystical encounter beautifully echoes throughout the prayers of preparation and thanksgiving for holy communion. “I am not worthy, O Master and Lord, that you should come under the roof of my soul, but inasmuch as *you desire to live in me* I approach with boldness. For you have commanded: let the doors be open which you alone have created, and you will enter with your love for mankind just as you are; *you will enter and enlighten my darkened reasoning.*” Our Lord doesn’t enter us because we are worthy but because he desires to make his home in us, and cure our blindness by his divine presence. And again: “Let *the fiery coal of your most pure body and your most precious blood* bring me sanctification, enlightenment, ... relief from the burden of my many transgressions, ... victory over my wicked and evil habits, mortification of my passions, ....” Holy communion enters us as the deifying refiner’s fire, not to free us from the penalty of our sins, but to transform us sinners into saints. And finally, of the many more examples that can be given, one from the prayers of thanksgiving: “Freely you have given me your body for my food, *you who are a fire consuming the unworthy.* Consume me not, O my Creator, but instead *enter into my members, my veins, my heart. Consume the thorns of my*

*sins. ...*” Humans are psycho-somatic unities, and it is our entire being—body and soul—that our Lord’s presence purifies.

These are a few of the many ways we participate in the presence of God, that we respond to his invitation to follow him into the paradise of his purifying presence. We know from our experience that it is often hard to remain in his penetrating Light. We are tempted to hide, but we can ask him for the desire and the endurance to remain with him. Without him we can do nothing (Jn 15:5), not even desire the right things, but with him we can do all things through his strength (Phil 4:13). For there is no other way to salvation than by dwelling in the purifying presence of his fiery Light.

***Emmanuel—God with Us:***

Immediately after Joseph is comforted and guided by the angel regarding the child whom he is to name “Jesus,” St. Matthew adds the prophetic context from Isaiah: that there would be a virgin who would bear a Son who will be called *Emmanuel* which means *God with us* (Mt 1:23). In the concluding words of his Gospel, St. Matthew records Jesus’ final promise, “Behold, *I will be with you* all days, until the consummation of the age” (Mt 28:20). Matthew circumscribes his Gospel with the loving embrace of the assurance of Christ’s presence with us. His message is clear: Jesus will save his people *by being with them*. Indeed, from paradise in Genesis to the tribulations in Revelation, he is the Good Shepherd who relentlessly knocks on the door of our heart, longing for us to open to him so that he may enter and commune with us (Rev 3:20). Absolutely nothing can separate us from the all-embracing love and light and presence of God in Christ Jesus except our own choice to hide in the darkness rather than come to the Light. May he who was born in a cave and lay in a manger for our salvation give us the resolve to prefer the Light over darkness!