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“God’s Love in the Music of Stevie Wonder”

A Sermon in Five Parts and Five Songs

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Portrait of God's Salvation: Endurance

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death. They were sawn in two. They were killed by the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy.

Hebrews 11:35-38

We have different perspectives on faith, in part because, in the Bible, there are at least five different ways of understanding faith. Each of these five has a basis in scripture and our experience.

The author of Hebrews praises those who endured, who kept faith when it was hard. Even when they were tortured, they refused to give in and go free. They preferred something better: God's hope. Scripture tells the stories of brave people who were in chains, sawed in two, murdered in cold blood; stories of vagrants wandering the earth, homeless, friendless, powerless—making their way as best they could on the cruel edges. The world did not deserve them. The hope is that their faith will inspire our faith.

The writer continues: Do you see what this means—these pioneers who blazed the way? It means we had better not quit. Keep our eyes on Jesus, who endured

everything—persecution, sorrow, the cross. Our hope is that we will endure the suffering that comes to those who believe.

One way of seeing God's salvation is endurance. Those who live with this view know that we are surrounded by suffering. If we are a member of a persecuted minority, if we are trying to overcome abuse, if we pray for strength more than any other prayer, then our understanding of salvation is endurance. Life is hard. The troubles we had yesterday will come again.

While the characters and settings change, the plot stays the same. Things go wrong. Suffering is the constant. Sadness lingers at the edge of joy. We are tempted to try not to feel. We give up. We grow cynical.

But it is also true that hope comes through suffering, like a refining fire. Difficulties can bring healing. The Spirit helps us keep on keeping on. Faithfulness begins in the belief that we are not alone.

Stevie Wonder said, "Life has meaning only in the struggle. So, let's celebrate the struggle. I want to take all the pain that I feel and turn it around."

In *Shelter in the Rain*, Wonder sang,
"When sad is bad and bad is worst
there's not a friend in sight.
When joy has disappeared
and your future isn't clear,
when the final candle's flickered out,
sing of comfort in pain, shelter in the rain."

We are looking for shelter, a hope in which to put our trust, a love that will see us through hard times. When we have done everything we can, we need to know that God is our shelter in the rain.

Portrait of God's Salvation: Forgiveness

Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, 77 times."

Matthew 18:21-22

Simon Peter's job is to bring up subjects everyone else is too polite to mention. Sometimes his questions are pointless, but this is a good one: "How many times do we have to forgive?" Peter wants boundaries within which he might be willing to practice Jesus' way. The Jewish tradition is three strikes and you are out, so Peter's being charitable when he suggests seven. But instead of complimenting Peter, Jesus says, "77 times."

We are wonderfully forgiven, yet ridiculously unloving when it comes to the wrongs we suffer. We minimize the wrong that we do to others and magnify the wrongs others do to us. Forgiveness is admitting we are like other people and living in the mercy we have received.

God does not ask us to create forgiveness out of

nothing. God invites us to join in what God has already given, to cease swimming against the stream of grace. Forgiveness is not a single action so much as it is a way of life. To receive forgiveness is to give thanks for God's grace. To give forgiveness is to live in God's grace.

A second way of understanding God's love is forgiveness. Those who live with this theological understanding struggle with temptation and sin. If the most important element of worship for us is the confession and assurance of pardon, if we worry about the mistakes we made yesterday and the ones we will make tomorrow, then our view of faith is centered on forgiveness. We try to change, but we keep messing up. We never get it completely right. We don't do the good we wish we did. We keep doing the wrong we don't want to do.

Forgiveness is an undeserved gift from God. God forgives the unforgivable, loves the unlovable, and accepts the unacceptable. God invites us to respond with gratitude.

Stevie Wonder wrote Ms. and Mr. Little Ones as a hopeful lament that takes sin and forgiveness seriously. He sings of the hopelessness of pornography, gun violence, verbal abuse, and drug abuse. He asks for forgiveness for allowing misery, and calls us to do the best we can.

Portrait of God's Salvation: Justice

*The spirit of the Lord will rest on you,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,*

*the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge
and reverence for God.
You will delight in obeying God.
And you won't judge by appearances,
or make decisions by hearsay.
You will treat poor people with fairness,
and will uphold the rights of the land's downtrodden.*

Isaiah 11:2-4

The Hebrew people were on a long losing streak. The great kingdom of David, once strong and majestic, had corrupt leaders who took bribes and ignored the needy. The kingdom has fallen. Israel, the northern portion, has already been taken, and Judah, the southern section, is on the brink of defeat and deportation.

Isaiah sees a day when the temple will be gone, the walls of Jerusalem rubble, nothing left of the people of Abraham, Moses, and David. But then Isaiah sees a genuine leader, filled with wisdom, courage, and kindness.

The new king will not be open to bribes, “not judging by appearances,” will not be convinced by propaganda, and not “making decisions by hearsay.” He will judge the poor with fairness, and will respect the rights of the downtrodden. This king will not sit back and let market forces dictate who gets too much and who gets nothing. He will care for those who are left out.

A third way of understanding God's salvation is justice. If the part of church that matters most to us is working for social justice, if we love caring for those who are downtrodden, then our faith is centered in justice. Those who live with this theological view understand that we are surrounded by self-interest. So many don't have a chance. So many seem destined to lose.

God is on the side of the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. We have to be on their side, too. We have to live toward justice as if justice was already here. Our longing for justice leaves us unsatisfied with what is, but we believe in an eternal hope.

Stevie Wonder writes, "What I'm not confused about is the world needing much more love, no hate, no prejudice, no bigotry, more unity, peace, and understanding."

Wonder sang, "If It's Magic," a song about justice and its preciousness, warning that if we are not careful, justice will be short-lived. He sings that we need justice that is everlasting, always shining, never leaving, justice at the end of it all, magic that will not end.

Portrait of God's Salvation: Fulfillment

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. The reason the world doesn't know us is that it didn't know him. Beloved, we are God's children now.

1 John 3:1-2

The writer of First John believes the church is filled with saints. He writes to people like you and me and says, "You are nothing less than the daughters and sons of God. See what love God has given us that we should be God's children."

If we don't feel like God's children, it is because most don't treat us like God's children, but we are God's children now and will be God's children forever. We have different experiences of being our parents' children. For some of us, it wasn't easy to feel cherished by our mother and father. But John says that our experience as our parents' children is not as deep as the truth that we are God's children. We belong to our heavenly parent, the one we were always meant to know and enjoy, with all of God's children.

A fourth way of understanding God's salvation is belonging. If we see faith as a journey towards satisfaction, serenity, and contentment, then our faith is centered on fulfillment. We long for improvement, discovery, and growth. Those who live with this theological understanding think we should be more joyful. Inside us there is an emptiness, a void, and a fear of being rejected. We try to be who others want us to be, until we don't know who we are. And we still don't feel like we belong, but by God's grace, we are part of a family held together by love, and the joy that comes when we give ourselves to one another.

Stevie Wonder wrote, "These Three Words," a song that explores racism, and the way isolation and loss permeate daily life. He begins each verse with a question, inviting us to reflect on how consistent we have been at telling our

loved ones we love them. When our imagined response proves to be less than satisfactory, Wonder implores us to tell our family and friends how much we love them. Don't take your loved ones for granted. Let them know how much they mean to you through the simple act of saying, "I love you."

God offers wholeness and fulfillment. We have a taste of it in the giving and receiving of love. We long to belong to one another, fulfill our potential, and become our true self.

Portrait of God's Salvation: Coming Home

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the covering that is spread over all nations; swallowing up death forever.

Then God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and will take away the disgrace of God's people, wherever they live, for God has spoken. It will be said on that day, "See, this is our God; we have waited for the one in whom we have hoped. God is the one for whom we have waited. We rejoice exultantly in our salvation."

Isaiah 25:6-9

500 years before Christ, the poet Isaiah has been through the destruction of his beloved Jerusalem, the cruelty of the Babylonians, and the pain of exile far from home, but when he looks off in the distance, he sees lights on a mountain. As he moves closer, he hears a swing band and people laughing. He catches a whiff of barbecue.

Isaiah writes, “God is going to throw a blowout of a party to end all parties—a feast of the finest foods and vintage wines, seven courses, each more scrumptious than the last, a feast lavish with desserts.”

Nothing reduced fat, no flavor-gutted lite anything. Everything is home-cooked. This is a reunion. This is a homecoming feast. We will be with people we love and in no hurry to leave. We will lose track of time, because reunions do not get any better than this one.

And chew on this, the mouth-watering feast the prophet describes is still only a pale comparison to what’s to come, because God’s homecoming will go on forever. God will swallow death and wipe away every tear. No one will weep anymore because the feast will never end.

None of us will have to pay for our ticket. God’s taking care of everything. The best part is the guest list. Everybody is invited home—young and old, good and bad, and upper crust and bottom dweller. Anybody who wants to come has a place at the table.

A fifth way of understanding God’s gift of salvation is coming home. If our favorite Bible story is the prodigal son, if our favorite line in any hymn is—and this is my favorite line in any hymn—“no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home,” then we live with this understanding of faith, and longing to find our way home. We know what it is to feel alone and isolated—even when we are surrounded by people.

The world is big and it makes us feel small. We need to find our home in God. We need to believe that our existence is itself a gift. We need to live in awe. We need to sense God with us. We need to know God’s hope.

We need the God who will help us endure, give us forgiveness, work for justice, become who we are meant to be, and welcome us home.

Stevie Wonder wrote, “Did you know that true love asks for nothing? Her acceptance is the way we pay.”

Our problems are real, but when our lives are hard, when our load is too much to bear, and we find our home in God. God promises that we are not alone. God is around us and within us. God will hold us forever.

In “Have a Talk with God,” Wonder sings that praying is a way of knowing God’s peace, of recognizing we have a home with God.

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