

I have always been fascinated by stories of survival. This past Wednesday at the 11:30 service, I shared the story of a man named Mark Inglis, who endured thirteen days in freezing temperatures in a mountain cave. He survived, and though he lost his legs to frostbite, years later he ended up climbing Mount Everest on prosthetic legs. Another survival account I’ve never forgotten is the true story of an eleven-year-old girl who saved her mother and infant sister after their SUV plunged into an icy river. She was able to escape out of the window and leap over an electric fence before leading rescuers back to the accident site, only to discover that more than one vehicle had taken the same plunge. This eleven-year-old’s persistence saved her family and others from certain death.

Here’s another survival story. A large group of people were wandering in the desert, and their camp was overrun by poisonous snakes. Now, their method of survival was unconventional, to say the least. Those who were bitten and filled with venom looked at a bronze statue of a snake on a pole and they lived! God had told them to do that. By doing what God had said, they were saved from a horrible death.

Sometimes we Christians and especially we Christian preachers can lapse into lazy language. Here’s a perfect example. A Christian preacher might stand up here and say something like: “Jesus saved you,” and think, “I’ve done what I came here to do.” But there is an obvious question here, isn’t there? Jesus saved me—from what? Unless we are careful about the “from what,” “Jesus Saves” could mean anything.

But those survival stories give us clues. Mark Inglis was saved from freezing to death by a search and rescue team. The people in cars in the river were saved from hypothermia and drowning. The children of Israel in the desert were saved from death by venom poisoning. They were saved from a death that was a punishment for unfaithfulness. Now we’re getting somewhere. This snake story tells us that God can create a situation where people are saved from the deadly consequence of their wrongdoing. And what is absolutely fascinating is that Jesus used the bronze snake incident—where God used an unconventional method to save his people from death—to make a direct comparison to himself.

Jesus makes the comparison explicit when he says: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

What’s Jesus saying here? First, He is very clear in pointing out that there are two potential final outcomes for people. One is “eternal life.” The other is “perishing.” ‘Perishing’ is the outcome that Jesus wants to save us from. And so, He is also very clear in saying how He is going to create the outcome of eternal life for you and me. He tells us: the snake on a pole foreshadowed a man on a pole, or rather, a cross. Lifted up from the earth on a wooden device of execution, Jesus would become the one to look to for rescue. To look to Jesus and believe that

He's going to make a difference is to be saved from death of body and soul. To lift up your eyes to see Jesus on the cross; to be sure that He's doing it *for you* is to know that you have life with Him ahead of you. The sins that should have condemned you have been expunged from your record—all mention of them is gone—because Jesus erased them with His blood. This is the good news that changes hearts and lives. You are saved from hell and the fear of death by Jesus' death and resurrection.

So...is that the final word on Christianity? Certainly, the work of saving us from death is complete in Jesus. Only He could do what needed to be done, and he did it. So where does that leave us?

Listen again to what the apostle Paul writes in today's Epistle: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

That is Ephesians chapter two verses eight through ten. Now, I have confession to make. Once upon a time, I was at a church conference because that's one of the things pastors do. We become conference veterans. Anyway, I was sitting there listening to the presenter, and he asked the group, that if you knew Ephesians 2: 8—9 to raise your hand. Well, I went to Lutheran schools and I was a Lutheran pastor now, of course I knew Ephesians 2: 8—9, so I put my hand up and almost all the hands in the room were up. Then he asked us to recite Ephesians 2: 8—9 and, differences in translation notwithstanding, it was almost unanimously spoken word for word. But then came the moment of truth. The presenter then asked if anyone knew verse ten, to raise your hand. I was so embarrassed, because I could not. Not even a sense of what came next. I glanced around the room and I was not alone. That did not make me feel much better. Because here, again, is what we were missing:

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Did you hear that? We are not only saved from something; we are saved for something. We saved for the purpose of doing good works in Jesus' name—there are acts of love and service that God has prepared beforehand for us to do! The opportunities for us to serve are waiting for us. God has set the table; we just need to show up with a servant attitude.

If you've ever wondered what you are supposed to be doing, here it is. Walk in the good that God has prepared you to do for others. A little word of advice—from experience? Learn verse ten. And live verse ten. It is what you have been saved for.