

Sunday Sermon – Feb 5

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You know, today is a very special and unique day in the life of our culture and even, shall I say our world, for today is a day where a large percentage of our culture will gather around for the joint adventure of a sporting event. Now, there will be hundreds of millions of individuals, even possibly a billion+ that will observe from a distance, but for a couple of hundred individuals, today is the day that they have been spending their entire life working toward. Every amount of energy and effort that they put into working out and scheming and game-planning and all the training and the fitness is all for this one game on this one day. Is it possible that in your life today it's eerily similar? What if it were possible that everything that has happened in your life, every experience that you've had, every conversation that you've participated in, every place that you've journeyed is for today in this place and at this time because all of that is just preparation for you to hear what God has for you today?

You see, today is a special day on the athletic field but it could be even a greater day in your personal life when you hear what God has for you today. So here's what I want to encourage you to do: I'm just going to pray over us, just a few moments of silence in this room, ask the Lord to prepare your heart but ask him to silence the voices that would get in the way.

Let's pray.

Lord, there is a great number of us in this place that have had today on the calendar circled for many days and even, in fact, weeks and months, anticipating what will transpire later this afternoon but, Lord, I believe that you've had this day circled on your calendar for eternity. You have been waiting, you have been anticipating, you have been desiring us to be in this place at this time for you to give us this message. So Lord, open our ears and open our hearts but somehow supernaturally would you silence all the other voices? They may be well-intended, they may be friends, they may even be family but, God, I pray that you would silence their voices and that your voice would be the only voice we hear. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning I want to encourage you to open your Bible to the Gospel of John 1. Now, as you're turning to John 1, today we're going to be dealing with a subject matter, we're going to be dealing with the word "salvation." Now, when you hear the word salvation, many of us think, well, that's a church word or that's a Christian word. Allow me to share

with you it's really a human word. Allow me to explain. The word "salvation" in the dictionary simply means "to be delivered from or to be kept from peril or travesty in one's life." You see, that's not just a Christian concept or a biblical concept, that's a human concept and I would dare say today that every single human being whether past, present or future, is on a journey exploring the concept of salvation.

Now, we know that there is a multitude of religions and belief systems in the world, and every one of them at some level teaches how you can avoid or escape peril or danger or destruction in one's life. But you may be thinking but there are those that have absolutely no belief system. Oh, you're right. They don't believe in a deity, a higher power or any of a religious nature but did you know that those who claim no belief are absolutely on a journey of salvation as well, for in their philosophy or in their education or in their study or in their agenda or their propaganda, what are they really desiring? They are desiring that what they perceive as the perils or the dangers of this world, they will hopefully be delivered from.

So the word "salvation" is not a "exclusive Christian term or a church word," it's a human word. But today we are going to see what sets Christianity apart. What is so different of how the Bible addresses this subject matter than everybody and everything else in the world, whether they are religious or not. And in John 1, beginning in verse 11, speaking of who Jesus Christ is, we're going to find the answer to the salvation question according to the word of God.

It says,

11 He came unto his own, and his own received him not. 12 But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: 13 Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

You see, when we talk about salvation from a biblical perspective, the first thing that we notice here in verse 11 is that it was initiated by God. Somebody's got to initiate the process. In most belief systems, salvation is initiated by man. What we see here is its initiated by God because it says, "He came to his own and his own received him not." So God initiated the concept of salvation and he has a plan.

Notice what verse 12 says: he desires for us to become the sons of God, the children of God. He wants us – now listen to this – the Creator of the universe wants you to be a part of his family. He wants you to have a relationship with him. Now, to completely understand this, we've got to work our way into Ephesians 2 because Ephesians 2 shares with us a list of things of who we were before we were in Christ and who we are now that we are in Christ. And some of the terms that the Bible uses to describe who we are before we are in that relationship, the Bible says that we are aliens, we are foreigners, and we are

strangers. And I know sometimes those words have a cultural or even political overtones today but let's just think of this in terms of our relationship with God.

Every single one of us grasps the difference between a stranger and a son. Allow me to illustrate: if somebody comes and knocks on your door this afternoon and you don't have a clue who they are, you're going to pretend you're not at home. Now don't lie just because you're in church. I do it. You know you do too, because when somebody is a stranger, we don't know their motive, we don't know their agenda, we don't know what's happening, but when somebody is a child, unless they are absolutely covered in dripping mud, I open the door to my children. And when they are covered in dripping mud, I just say, "Please, never mind. Get cleaned up before you come in." Nonetheless, when they are a child, there is a different relationship there.

Do you know that that's God's plan for your life? God's plan is he wants you to be his child. He wants you to be a part of his family. So how did he do this? What is the process by which God initiates to accomplish this task? Well, notice what it says in verse 11, "He came unto his own." This is what separates, this is what makes Christianity so distinctive from every other faith system. Now work with me, every religion in the world, every belief system in the world, if you begin to kind of dig down and really look at it introspectively, every one of them is on a journey trying to attain God's attention or "the god's" attention or somebody's attention. They are trying to get "up to" God. What does it say here about the one true God? He came to us. In fact, that's God's story from the very beginning.

In fact, you go back to Genesis 11 and humanity has been making a mess of things for eight chapters. It began in the Garden of Eden, went into the whole Noah's Ark experience, but by the time we get to Genesis 11, God has said, "I need you to disperse. I need you to go out." Humanity came together and what did we do? We decided we were smarter than God so according to Genesis 11, we humanity, attempted to build a tower into the heavens to "thumb our nose" at God. Now, how could God have responded to this? He could have just taken care of us with fire and brimstone. He could have just eliminated, annihilated, but according to Genesis 11, what did he do? He came down. In fact, the very next chapter, he goes to a man by the name of Abram who we later know as Abraham up in the Ur of the Chaldees and he says, "Abram," he says, "I've got this incredible plan. Humanity is all messed up. They have alienated themselves from me. They have ostracized themselves from me. They have become strangers and foreigners to the one who created them. But I want to save them. I want to redeem them. I want them to be my children. You and your wife, much older than the normal child bearing age, do you believe that you can have a child that will begin this process?" He says, "I do." And there the story begins of God's redemption; his desire to allow us the privilege according to this verse, the power to become the sons of God.

It culminates when you get to the New Testament, the Gospels, where we find the birth of Jesus Christ, what we are going to deal with in just a moment, the incarnation, where he came to us. In fact, Isaiah the prophet said his name is Immanuel, God with us. The Jewish people had an annual feast, the feast of tabernacles, he tabernacled with us. Do

you understand God's process of salvation? It's not about what you can attain to but the fact that he has come to you. His plan is for you to be a part of his family in a real relationship. His process was knowing you could never attain him, he has come to you.

Oh, but there is a price to pay. Notice what verse 11 says, "He came to his own, but his own received him not." Now you think about this: just a few days before the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, an incredible cultural phenomena took place. Here was a man, Jesus of Nazareth, for three and a half years, miracles have been done by his hands, healings have taken place in his presence, food has been multiplied, water has been walked on, sermons have been delivered, and all of a sudden at the height of the religious fervor of their day on the east side of a temple mount there in Jerusalem, on the back of a donkey, this Jesus of Nazareth comes strolling in. The Bible records that tens of thousands of people had palm branches and they shouted, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

It seems like a pretty good welcome, does it not? It seems like his presence was desired. Here's the problem: though he came, he was not received. You see, a few days later through a circumstance of events, he would find nails in his hands and in his feet, a crown of thorns upon his head. He would be held up on a place known as go Golgothat or Calvary for all to see. Crucifixion of this one. The Bible records later in the Gospel of John 19, that at the foot of that cross, only five people were present: one whom we know as John the Lord gave us this Gospel we're reading, and for young ladies. You see, he came to his own, he came to humanity but we received him not.

But we can get even more specific than that. When it says he came to his own, we know that from Abraham and Isaac and Jacob there were 12 tribes, one of which was the name of Judah that the Bible said that this Messiah, Jesus, would be a descendant thereof. All throughout the Scriptures every week he goes to the synagogue, he engages with the teachers and the scribes and the leaders of his day, yet it would be these individuals when in the courtyard of Pilate's palace there in Jerusalem, would make this statement to his face, "May his blood be on us and on our children." He came to his own, those who he celebrated year after year and week after week with and not even those who sat next to him in the synagogue received him. Those who walked through life with him did not receive him. He came to his own and his own received him not.

But we can make it even a little bit more narrow. You see written in the biblical record that though Jesus – and we'll talk more about this in just moment – had a supernatural incarnation and birth. He had what we might call half brothers and sisters. There was a family in his home. From the Gospels it says that they said, "Jesus, your mother or your brethren, they are waiting on you." He said, "Who is my mother? Who are my brethren but those who do the will of my Father which is in heaven?" There is no record of any of his family, any of his brothers, sisters, though they may be half, any of his cousins, relatives with the exception of one whom we know as the apostle John, of any of them following or believing in him on his way to the cross. He came unto his own and his own received him not.

So whether it's humanity as a whole, the Jewish people as a group, or even his own family that he celebrated with, we can get more specific than that. There were 12 individuals that he gave and poured his life into. For three and a half years, he ate with, walked with, poured into these individuals. In our 20 first century, we would say he disciplined them. Yet what do we see in the biblical record? One by the name of Judas would betray him for 30 pieces of silver. Most of the others would scatter in the night of his crucifixion. Oh, but there was one named Peter, Simon Peter, the same guy who earlier said, "Jesus, you're the Christ, the Son of the living God." What did he do on his crucifixion night? What did he do? He denied him, claimed he never met him and even cursed somebody out because of. He came to his own, his own received him not. I want that to soak in for just a moment. Whether a "disciple," family member, part of the same culture or heritage, or just a representative of humanity at large, his desire is for us to have a relationship with him. Rather than having us go to him, he came to us and what happened? He paid a price. We as a whole did not receive him.

You see, the Lord initiated what we know as salvation but even in spite of all that I've shared, he still implemented it. He still wants to implement salvation in our lives. How does he do that? Well, he has a plan. This passage says that we are to be born. That's what it says, "born not of blood, or flesh, or the will of man but of God." You see, God's plan for salvation to deliver us from peril, God's plan to deliver us from the darkness and the hardship of life not only now but in the hereafter, is he wants to allow us the privilege of being born again.

Notice what it says: you are born. Later in chapter 3 of the Gospel of John, we are going to meet a man by the name of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was religious. Nicodemus was intelligent. Nicodemus had it going on. Jesus said, "You must be born again." He said, "I don't quite get this." You see, when God implements salvation in your life, do you know what he wants to do? He doesn't just want to "restore the old," he wants to redeem you. He wants to give you a new start. He wants to give you a new life. He wants to give you a new beginning and a different ending. That's his plan, is for you to be born spiritually again.

Here's the question: what about the process? Notice what it says in verse 12, it says that we have "received him, that he gave us power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." The process by which salvation is made real in our lives, it says this birth is by belief. Now, sometimes, at least in my life, I better understand something not by hearing what it is but by being made clear what it is not. And in this one single verse, verse 13, the Lord makes it very clear how not to be saved. The Lord makes it very clear how not to be born again.

Notice the first thing: it doesn't happen by blood. In other words, when it comes to salvation and the forgiveness of sins, it does not matter who your parents are. It doesn't matter who your grandparents are. Now, for some of you that's a bad thing and for others it's a good understanding and revelation, but it has nothing to do with your genetic background.

Now, you may be thinking, "Well, do people really struggle with that? Do people really think that because of who their parents or their grandparents were or were not, they are either good or not good with God?" Absolutely. Many of you have heard of what we call the first Great Awakening. It started in the early 1700s around 1720. It went almost all the way up to what we know as the American Revolution. A time period that started in the middle colonies, went to the upper colonies, down to the southern colonies where the Spirit of God moved revival. The flames were all across the country. Men like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield and others, an incredible move of God, one so significant that a good majority of the higher level institutions of academia in those days were started for the purpose of training preachers primarily. Yet the first Great Awakening, one of the reasons that people prayed for it, one of the reasons that it was so needed in our culture is that we, that's here in the United States, a great portion of residents had adhered to a belief system known as the halfway covenant. Now, you may not be familiar with the halfway covenant but here it is: if you are a member of a church in good standing, if you have a relationship with Jesus Christ, then when your child is conceived and born, so do they.

You see, we even in this land, have fallen for the same trap. We think that because of who we are born to or not born to, makes us either good or not good with God. The religious leaders of Jesus' day struggled with this. Remember John 8, they said, "Your parents not good, our parents good." Jesus said, "Don't look to your earthly parents, look to your heavenly parents. Do you have a relationship with God himself?" It's not by blood.

But notice this next one: it is not the will of the flesh. Let me summarize this: it doesn't matter what you do or you don't do, you can't do enough or do not enough to base your salvation on. In other words, it's not about do I have good versus bad or have I been charitable versus selfish, there is nothing that you can do to "earn" salvation.

Now, we understand that from a secular perspective but let's talk religion for just a moment. We're in a house of religious behavior. You are people obviously of religious interest. Boy, we get sucked into this as humanity. We do. We think if we just show up enough times at a specific place and know enough of this or enough of that, somehow, some way, it's going to be good. There are some people who think, "If I just give a certain percentage of my income to 'God,' when I get to the pearly gates one day he's going to say, 'Come on in. Welcome.'" There are some people that say, "Well, if I just go to church most of the time when I feel good and the weather is not bad, then I'm going to get in when I get there." In fact, Jesus said in Matthew 7 on the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "On that day there are going to be people who come to me and say did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not do great works in your name? Why don't we get in?" Jesus made this statement, he said, "You workers of iniquity, I never knew you." You see, in Jesus' day and even in this day, there are a lot of individuals who think that salvation comes from doing something or not doing something. I've got news for you: it doesn't matter how much you do, it will never be enough. And it doesn't matter how much you don't do, it won't be enough.

It says it's not by blood, it's not by flesh, and it's not by the will of man. As a parent, I want the absolute best for my children in everything: academics, sports, relationships, friendships, health. In fact, there is nothing that happens in my children's lives that I don't want the absolute best for them. But I've got news for them and for you: there is nothing I can do to save my children. I can't do it. I cannot provide their salvation. That's between them and God. It doesn't matter how much I love them. It doesn't matter how much I care for them and the same is for you, whether it's your physical children, coworkers, neighbors, siblings, family. I know so many people who maybe it's their parents that are lost or their children that are lost, their neighbors that are lost, and they weep over them and I'm glad they weep over them but there's nothing you can do. You know the old adage: you can take a horse to water, you cannot make them drink. When it says it's not the will of man, it doesn't matter how much you love or care or desire for somebody else, you can't do it on their behalf. When we stand before God one day, nobody gets to vouch for us. It's just ourselves and him.

Notice that last phrase of verse 13: but by God. You see, that's the process. That's how salvation happens. He says when you believe, when you understand that you are the problem and Jesus is the answer, when you understand that you have sinned and he has paid the price for sin, when you do what Romans 10:13 says, when you call on the name of the Lord, you will be saved. I've got news for you, though: there is a price to pay. In fact, one of the great scholars of Christianity in the last 100 years, a man by the name of C. S. Lewis, one of the things that he challenged in his writings was what he called cheap grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer did the same thing. This idea of cheap grace, a cerebral head knowledge without any real transformation. Luke 9:23, Jesus made this statement, "If any man come after me, let him first deny himself, take up his cross and follow me daily." You see, there is a price to pay because we have to be willing to say it's Jesus alone and nothing else. It's not half Jesus, half me. It's not a little bit of God and a lot of me. It's not a lot of God and even a little bit of me. It's all him.

So when we talk about the implementation of salvation, understand that God's plan is for you to be born again. His plan is for you to have a new start, a new beginning. That only happens through belief in Jesus Christ alone. He cannot become one of many ways, he has to be the only way.

So here we have the initiation of salvation, we have the implementation of salvation, but we need to marry those two concepts in what I want to call the incarnation of salvation. Verse 14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." The idea, the concept that Jesus Christ himself is the one who brokers this salvation ordeal.

So what is his plan? Look at verse 14, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld him as the only begotten of the Father." His plan, as I mentioned earlier, is to dwell among us.

You know, there is that word tucked in verse 14 that some of you have and some of you don't in your Bibles, it's the word "begotten." Now, some of your Bibles say the one and

only and I understand because the idea or the concept here is that Jesus Christ is the only one who can make this happen; he's the only one who could provide the necessary requirement for salvation. I get that and I don't do what I'm about to do very often but I'm going to take a little bit of liberty today because an entire chapter of my dissertation was devoted to this word, begotten. Listen to me, I know it sounds old-fashioned, I know it sounds outdated, I know sometimes you read that word and say, "What does that really mean?" Let me tell you what it means: of one gene, monogenus. When God desired to save you, when God wanted to make a relationship with you through himself, he didn't send an angel, he didn't even send a human representative or a counsel or a group. His plan – listen – was himself. One gene and, yes, Mary was a willing vessel of the incarnation but what is so critical to understand to his plan is that he provided the means. He provided the substitute. He provided the sacrifice. That was his plan.

So what is the process? Grace. That last phrase of verse 14: full of grace and truth. Allow me to differentiate between grace and mercy. I think we need to hear this. Mercy is not getting what you deserve, grace is getting what you don't deserve. Mercy is not getting what you do deserve, grace is getting something you don't deserve. What does it say? That when he dwelt with us, when he was incarnated, when he came to be our substitute, his process was grace. That means he wants to give us something – listen – we don't deserve. When you read about, for lack of better terms, the benefits of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, there is nothing that you can ever do to deserve it. You don't deserve forgiveness. You don't deserve a new start. You don't deserve, according to John 14, a mansion, Revelation 22, streets of gold. And for those of you who think I'm being overly literal there, if it's a mansion, streets of gold, if it's only half of that, isn't that good enough? Come on, folks. We don't deserve that. All because of a relationship?

I remember some years ago my family experienced an event that I'm sure many of you have, the barrage of Christmas cards. You know the feeling, if you do not keep up with Christmas cards every day they come in the mail, you will get behind quick and those cards will stack up and sometimes we fall into this trap that we've got more life than we do time and when it comes to the Christmas cards, we just open, look and we just throw them to the side. We don't pay a whole lot of attention to it. Now, don't act holier than thou, you know you've had that moment too. It's not just me, okay? There are times that even though our friends and our family went to great pains to get a picture of all their kids and it looks like they're actually happy in the photograph, that we just kind of quickly dismiss.

Several years ago that was one of our experiences. Just life, it's part of it. You know, when people give Christmas cards, sometimes it's a single card, sometimes it's a foldout. Some of you, nothing wrong with this, I mean, you give us like an annual update of your family in detail like 8 to 10 pages. That's fine, nothing wrong, but every now and then because of maybe a profession you're in or access that you have, it's not just a simple card or a letter, sometimes and I'm not putting pressure on anybody here, please hear me, sometimes there are gift cards and such things such as that. Now, I've been one to give gift cards at the season and while we're having a time of transparency, can we just be honest, if we're going to put gift cards in a Christmas card, aren't we going to go to

wherever we're going and ask for the least possible denomination? I mean, seriously. It's a Christmas card, right? We're sending it to the masses. We're sending it to people who we have at some level a relationship with.

Well, a card came through, I opened it up and a gift card fell out. It was to a local place where you could do some home remodeling, purchase things for your home. Didn't think much of it. Thought, "That's a nice gesture," put it in my wallet. Didn't give it a second thought. But about two or three months later, my wife and I decided that we wanted to update part of our house and she decided that we needed some new poles. Y'all did notice the pronoun switch there, right? She decided that we needed some new poles and so we went to said store and we began to look around and shop and, you know, if you're in one of those places of life, you don't exactly know what you want, what's going to look good, so you buy a sampling of them and put them on the shelves and just kind of look at which one you like best. So we are in the process of doing so and we purchased a couple of them and I was about to pay for it until my wife reminded me, she said, "Don't you have a gift card here that somebody gave you?" I said, "Oh, I forgot about that. Let me get that." So I get this gift card out and I give it to the young lady, the cashier, and all seems fine until she gave it back. It was one of those moments in life that I'll never ever forget. She said, "Sir, here's your card back. You have a balance of \$992." Yeah, \$992. Who gives \$1,000 gift card in a Christmas card and then doesn't say anything about it? I called this guy up from the parking lot. I said, "Have you lost your mind?" I said, "What possessed you to do that?" He said, "I just wanted to give it to you." I didn't work for this guy. I'll be quite honest with you, we didn't have any kind of real special relationship. I had never done anything "special" on his behalf. But because of our relationship – listen – he gave me something I didn't deserve. There is nothing that made me worthy of that.

That's what grace is. When it says that Jesus was full of grace, understand he desires to give you forgiveness, you don't deserve it. He wants to give you a new start, you don't deserve it. But out of that relationship he wants to give you that which you do not deserve.

Finally, there is the price to pay: truth. I never thought in my life, and it has occurred, that we would get to the point in our culture where we are actually debating what truth is. You know, Winston Churchill had a great quote years ago, he said, "There is something interesting and kind of funny about truth, you can dismiss it, you can deride it, the problem is there it is." When it comes to truth, it either is or it is not. And it says that Jesus came in grace and truth. You say, "Well, why is that a price to pay?" Because Jesus either is the truth or he is not. He can't be one of many or the best of some, he either is or he isn't.

It reminds me later in the Gospel of John 18, we find ourselves on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. This is the day they're going to put the nails in his hands and in his feet, and he is there on the steps of Pilate, the governor's palace there in Jerusalem. Pilate's wife has come to him and said, "Don't mess with this guy. He's innocent. He is an innocent man." Yet the religious leaders, the secular leaders have said, "We don't want this guy. We would rather have a serial killer by the name of Barabbas than Jesus." Pilate is in a

tough spot and so he goes back into his quarters, he takes Jesus and they begin to have a conversation. He says, "Are you the king of the Jews?" To which Jesus says, "Well, who do you say that I am?" And Pilate makes this grave error, he says to Jesus, "Do you not know," now he's speaking of himself, "I have the power to either keep and save your life or to allow it to be taken from you." To which Jesus responds, "You would not have that power if my Father in heaven had not given it to you." And they begin this dialogue and basically what you gather from Pilate is he is saying, "Who are you? What is your kingdom? What kind of king are you?" And Jesus says, "If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would rise up and fight, but my kingdom is not of this world. My kingdom is of truth."

The last words in their dialogue from the mouth of Pilate not answered by Jesus is this question: what is truth? John 1:14, "he came in grace and truth." The next few moments, Pilate walked out on the top steps of his palace there in Jerusalem and he had the opportunity, in my opinion, to become the greatest champion for Jesus Christ. Imagine how history would be rewritten if he said, "I don't care what you think and I don't care what you think and I don't care what y'all think, this guy is who he says he is." Do you know what would have happened? This is just my opinion: rather than three crosses on Calvary, there probably would have been a fourth and it would have been Pilate's.

You see, he had the opportunity to go down as a champion but how do we know him as a coward? Because instead of listening to the truth, he listened to the loudest voice in the room. Well, these guys are loud and these guys are getting a little louder and we have the same problem. You see, that's the price to pay when it comes to salvation. You've got to be willing to acknowledge that Jesus is the truth and no matter how much you care about, endear or love somebody else, if they are opposed to him, they are wrong. Jesus is right. That's a tough price to pay in today's world. There is a price to pay. Jesus is not the best of many or the most of some, he is the only means of salvation. That's what the Bible says. Now you have the opportunity to respond.

Let's pray with our heads bowed, our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that person today, it doesn't matter if you've been here one time or thousand times or maybe you're joining us online and you've never even been in a physical church structure. It doesn't matter your pedigree when it comes to religious behavior. What matters is where you realize where you are right now in relationship to Jesus Christ. Maybe you're that person today that it finally clicked, you finally realized that the God of the universe wants to have a relationship with you but you've been so busy or so passionate chasing down every rabbit and going down every path except the one that he has provided. I've got great news for you. Today is the day that you're ready for that relationship. Today is the day where you are ready for salvation to take place in your life. You don't have to jump through a bunch of hoops, you don't have to check off a bunch of boxes, you don't have to go anywhere, you see, he has come for you.

I would encourage you this morning just to have a real serious conversation with the Lord. I know technically we call it prayer. You don't have to talk out loud, you don't even have to pray the same words that I would pray but maybe your conversation with God

would go a little something like this, "God, I realize today that I'm the problem and that Jesus is the answer. Lord, you know the different means and the ways that I've tried. I just want you to know that I now know that they are all futile. I understand that you love me so much that Jesus was born for me, that Jesus lived a sinless life for me, that he allowed himself to go to the cross for me, and that he rose from the dead so that I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't know all the answers to the problems and questions of life but I do know this one answer, when it comes to sin and salvation, I'm the problem and Jesus is the answer. In the best way I know how, I'm asking you to save me and forgive me and I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, in just a moment I'm going to pray over us and after I say amen, I'm going to ask you to stand and you're going to have the opportunity to respond in our invitation. Maybe you're that person today who made that first time decision. We'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd love to hear from you. Or maybe that's already happened but you're like the two individuals today earlier in our service who have already believed but need to follow in believers' baptism. Maybe that's you today or maybe you're like the half-dozen folks in our first service who said, "We want to make this our church home, our spiritual place of refuge and retreat." Whatever the decision is, we just want the opportunity to engage and to dialogue and to speak with you and pray with you, whatever it may be.

Lord, as we come to this time of invitation, thank you that we don't have to somehow, some way get to you but you have already come to us. Thank you that you have made the way we could never make. You have provided the sacrifice we could never provide and you are the one who wants and desires us to be forgiven maybe even more than we want to be forgiven ourselves. So Lord, at this time of invitation, whatever the decision may be, may we do with our footsteps what you've already done in our hearts. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me. Whatever decision, we will be here at the front.