

## “The God of Saving Love”

Series: *Book of Isaiah: Learning Trust*

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10 | The Message; John 3:16-21

Rev. Mary Bowman

January 11, 2026



First Presbyterian  
Church of Charlotte

My friends, the story of ALL things begins with a God who loves.<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning God created and God loved what God created.

We have a God who loves the world, a God who loves you, a God who loves me, and a God who loves our neighbors.

God loved this world SO MUCH that He gave His only Son to that world, to you and to me and to our neighbors.

And God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through Him.<sup>2</sup>

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There are many dimensionalities to God’s love.

Today we are looking at the quality of God’s love that comes to save us, a love that is steeped in salvation rather than condemnation.

You may be wondering why we would need such a love.

Why would we need to be saved? Why do we need salvation?

It is never easy to look back over our lives with an eye toward the ways that we might need saving. It is never easy to look back on the ways that we have failed and caused pain.

Similarly, it is never easy to look back over our lives and make an inventory of the ways that others have failed us and the ways that their sin and failures have brought pain and cast us into a kind of exile or prison.

In the Christian faith we use the word “sin” to indicate failure. There are different words for sin, but one that is often used — *himeria* — gives the sense that sin is when we miss the mark, when we fall short.

The Book of Isaiah begins with the story of a people who are heading to exile because they have missed the mark by turning their back on God. The people of Israel are headed to exile because of the choices they have made or the choices made by those around them.

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Exile may feel like an archaic word in our modern times.

But we experience exile when we feel estranged in some way, when we feel separated or isolated, when we lack connection to God and ourselves and others.

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<sup>1</sup> *Prayer As You Go Podcast*, “Love One Another,” January 9, 2026.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:16-21

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Exile can be a place of intense regret, a wilderness of unfathomable grief, a desert of disappointed expectations, a barren land of unforgiveness or a dry place of fear or very difficult circumstances.. Sometimes exile comes because of sin and sometimes it comes because of circumstances.

I have just finished reading a wonderful book called *The Correspondent*. The protagonist is a woman in her seventies — named Sybil — who is being forced through the events in her life to look back over her life and to try to come to terms with the various ways that she missed the mark and caused pain. Specifically Sybil is invited to deal with her unintended involvement in two people’s deaths and her family’s estrangements.

Sybil was stuck in an exile and she had gotten entrenched. She had contributed to pain and hurt around her, but she too had been hurt and she got stuck for a while in exile. But then things began to happen around her that caused her to ask questions about her exile and to consider if there was an opportunity for redemption and for reconciliation and for restoration.

Sybil’s experience is not unlike that of the people of Israel as they are brought out of exile.

As we listened to our Old Testament reading, we can’t help but notice that the images of exile and barrenness are being turned upside-down and the dry places are being transformed.

How is such a thing even possible?

Exile is a hard place to get out of on our own.

When we are in exile, we need a strengthening, saving love that comes from God and comes from other people when they offer us forgiveness and love and acceptance.

Isaiah describes a saving love from a faithful God who can see beyond all of the sin and pain we have initiated and that we have experienced from others.

God WILL come and God WILL save.

We tend to have specific ideas about what salvation would best look like . . . a new political leader, a sincere apology for wrong doing against us, a change in our circumstances, a getting even, a getting healed.

Over the years, I have watched God come and save individuals and communities, and I confess that it rarely looks like I thought it would. Often circumstances go untransformed and yet the individuals in those circumstances are transformed in some way. They are restored and renewed.

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Sometimes salvation takes the form of a future hope. Sometimes salvation comes in reconciliation. Sometimes salvation comes in a way that brings tears and wonder and joy and singing like those described in the Isaiah passage.

What I do know is that when salvation comes it is because God has come.

God comes and frees us from exile and breaks the voices of condemnation and shame that we assign to ourselves and to others.

God gives sight to the ways that we have been blind and hearing to the ways we have been deaf. God brings freedom from the prisons of condemnation that we have landed in.

As Isaiah describes it, God “energizes the tired hands and strengthens the rubbery knees. God gives fearful souls courage and the remembrance that God is here, right here, on his way to put things right and redress all wrongs. He’s on his way! He’ll save you!”

In many ways, this is what happens to Sybil in *The Correspondent*.

I do not want to provide any spoilers for *The Correspondent* . . . so I will not go into too much detail. What I will say is that some hurts remained. There was not always a way to fix everything, but in each situation, there was still a way forward. There was an opportunity for the dry places to flower and for the one in exile to find her way home.

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God WILL come and God WILL save.

Not always in the ways that we would like, not always as soon as would like.

But God is a God of saving . . . we can see it in the name He chose when he put on flesh . . . for the name Jesus in Hebrew means the same thing as the name Isaiah . . . Jesus means the Lord is salvation. In simplest terms, Jesus means Savior.

May we trust this is so.