

“Freeing Jesus: Our Savior”

Luke 2:8-11; John 4:39-42

3rd Sunday of Lent

Message for March 20, 2022

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As I mentioned in describing the theme this morning, to the surprise of many of us, the word, “Savior” shows up only twice in the Gospels. So, this morning, our Bible Wisdom teachings included both of those texts – one from Luke – the familiar Christmas story, and one from John. What Janet read for us today was only four verses of the well-known story of Jesus speaking with the Woman of Samaria.

Maybe we should revisit the earlier verses of that chapter before moving on. The Gospel of John, chapter four, begins with Jesus traveling through Samaria on His way to Galilee. In the Samaritan town of Sychar, Jesus sits to rest beside a well. His disciples go looking for food. Jesus requests a drink from a woman at the well. She is surprised by the request, as historically it is understood that Jews and Samaritans do not get along.

Jesus says if she only knew His identity, she would be asking Him for a drink, and He would give her *living water*. She questions Him about this living water, and He replies anyone drinking normal water will eventually thirst again but drinking His living water will mean they will never thirst again.

She asks for some of His living water, and He tells her to fetch her husband. When she tells Him she has no husband, Jesus says that he knows this. He also says that He knows she has been married five times and that she is currently living with another. The woman believes that Jesus is a prophet, but she points out that Jews and Samaritans practice different religions. Jesus says that the time has come for all people, regardless of religion, to worship the one God in spirit. She tells Him she knows the Messiah is coming, and He reveals that it is Him.

The woman runs back into the town and tells the people there she has met a man who knew everything about her and that she believes He is the Christ.

The text that was read to us emphasizes the gift of direct experience. This woman realizes that Jesus knows everything about her, and she also sees

him ignoring all convention and interacting with her directly – a woman, a person whose faith would normally call for ignoring or avoiding any interaction, someone whose marital history could easily be turned against her. She has such a powerful experience; she runs to share it with the rest of her community. Then, others in town invite Jesus to stay, and over two days, they each come to believe – not because they heard it from others, but because they came to know it through direct experience. And through this experience they recognize Jesus as Savior of the world.

Some people have pulled specific words and phrases from this story and images. Rather than embracing their own lived experience, they have used the concept of sin and the necessity of salvation to control other people. As a result, we struggle to understand the deeper intention of these words.

Diana Butler Bass notes, “We often think of being ‘saved’ as being rescued, and when it comes to Jesus as Savior, the popular conception is one of Jesus snatching believers from the perils of hell. Jesus saves us by taking us to heaven.”

That is not, however, what the word ‘salvation’ means. She explains that “The word ‘salvation’ comes from the Latin *salvus*, which originally referred to being made whole, uninjured, safe, or in good health. *Salvus* was not about being taken out of this life; it was about this life being healed. In this sense, *salvus* perfectly describes the biblical vision of God’s justice and mercy, peace and well-being, comfort and [calm]. This is the dream of a saved earth - one where oppression ends, mercy reigns, violence ceases to exist, and all live safely under their own ‘vine and fig tree.’ Jesus the Savior is the one who brings this dream to reality: he is peacemaker, light of justice, and the good physician. Jesus saves in all these ways and more.”

Earlier this morning, I described some of the meanings that, over time, we have attached to words such as “sin” and salvation. Many of us experience guilt and shame because of others’ interpretations. This can cause a cycle of disconnection with the Divine. If we picture God as utterly holy and humans as completely sinful, we can create such a chasm that there is an unbreachable distance between us and God.

Certainly, our feelings are not just limited to shame or to guilt. There are many feelings and behaviors that cause us to feel separated from the Divine. The theologian, Marcus Borg, writes, “Some people do not feel

much guilt...guilt is not the central issue in their lives. Yet they may have strong feelings of bondage, or strong feelings of alienation and estrangement.”

For such people, the conventional rendering of Jesus as Savior, the one who takes away whatever is sinful and unclean in their lives, makes no sense. Borg insists, however, that there are other things from which one needed to be saved: victimization, meaninglessness, suffering. Jesus offers the “good news of ‘coming home’” from exile in the wilderness. Borg writes, “For some, the need is liberation; for others, the need is homecoming; and for still others, the need is acceptance.” No matter our experience or our deepest needs, Jesus saves.

Looking at Jesus through this lens provides us another way to experience and understand the Divine. Jesus as Savior can be experienced as a guide and companion when you feel lost or lonely - when you are experiencing wilderness times or going through grief. Jesus as Savior offers the potential for wholeness.

Butler Bass highlights the words of the second century Greek bishop, Irenaeus, who said, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.”

THE GLORY OF GOD IS THE HUMAN BEING FULLY ALIVE!

If we get caught up in worrying about our mistakes, about whether we’re good enough, or whether we’re acceptable in the eyes of others, how can we possibly be fully alive? How can we be in full relationship and honor the kind of life that God is calling us to?

Living fully is the biggest challenge – even bigger than our worries about sin! The author, Kathleen Norris, is another writer and thinker who explores the meaning of “salvation.” She notes that the Hebrew word for “salvation” means literally “to make wide,” or “to make sufficient.” Norris points out that in the Gospels, it is often physical healing that people seek from Jesus – relief from illness, paralysis, leprosy. When Jesus says to those he heals, that their faith has saved them, it is the Greek word for “made you well” that is employed.

What is fascinating about us as humans, is that even when this healing, this wholeness, is made available to us, accepting salvation is never easy.

Remember the Israelites – after being led by Moses out of Egypt, they started complaining as soon as they hit the desert! They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exodus 14:11). What God had done, of course, was to set them free from what had long held them in bondage. But they, as any of us might, began longing for the devil they knew, rather than face the unknown road ahead.

So maybe, where we get stuck is that we struggle with the freedom, the health, the acceptance, and grace that is offered us.

As we move through the coming week, I invite us to be mindful of this wisdom from Diana Butler Bass: “Sin is the rejection of the beauty and goodness of God’s image in every person. Jesus lived such fullness perfectly, and he revealed the deep wisdom of that truth; Christ the Word speaks this into the world. The Light of the World, the flame of our hearts. Jesus saves.” Amen.