

***“Freeing Jesus: Our Lord”***

Philippians 2:1-11; Luke 6:46-49

4th Sunday of Lent

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In the book, “Freeing Jesus,” Diana Butler Bass walks us through her own spiritual journey while also providing a robust theological framework to push up against. Just as we considered the language of Jesus as Savior last week, Diana distinguishes the shift toward Jesus as Lord.

Often, we hear the two words brought together: “Jesus, my Lord and Savior.” However, as we untangle these terms, Diana Butler Bass shares another moment when she experienced the distinction, as a classmate of hers commented, “Jesus can’t just be your Savior; he must also be your Lord.” She expresses an *aha* moment, when she came to understand that *Savior* touched on personal salvation while *Lord* encompassed the whole world. Diana writes, “I was riveted by the idea – Lord, Master of all, a God who cared about justice and peace and things that happened here on earth. Admittedly, the Jesus I encountered as a teenager could manage to save people from sin and death, but maybe there was more. Maybe Jesus could save the world.”

As we consider the Bible Wisdom teachings, we can be mindful of this broader and deeper possibility of Jesus.

In the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul the Apostle is writing to the Christian congregation he had established in Philippi. That community was made up of his strongest supporters in ministry and this is considered to be one of his most personal letters. Scholars agree that this is one of four “prison epistles” that he wrote during his two years of house arrest in Rome.

As we mine this text for meaning, let us be mindful that many people who study this passage acknowledge that many of these verses have been used to abuse people who are not in positions of authority by demanding servitude and prescribing self-denial, which actually runs against the grain of what Janet read to us this morning. Instead, Paul is challenging those in authority, - those with status to lose - to humble themselves and exhibit the good news of the gospel to those who are most vulnerable. So, in saying

that Christ emptied himself of his divine status, Christ's act of humility leads to salvation and freedom for all. The call to follow the example of Christ is the call to seek salvation for others.

As we reflect on what Paul is urging us to consider, listening again to what Jesus was teaching directly to the people he was walking among, is especially powerful.

We heard the final three verses of chapter 6 from Luke's gospel. Let's think a bit first about how this chapter begins. Jesus is being closely observed by the Pharisees who question his actions during the Sabbath as his disciples pluck heads of grain from a field (which is considered work). And on another Sabbath day, as he is teaching in the synagogue, he cures a man with a withered hand. The scribes are irate because he has healed someone on the Sabbath - and then Jesus says to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?"

Luke then tells us, "But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus."

Later, Jesus goes up to the mountain to pray. He prays all night, and the next morning he calls his disciples and chooses twelve of them. They then head down the mountain with what is described as "a great crowd of his disciples" and come to a level place where "a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon" gathered.

They had come to listen to his ministry, to be healed of their diseases, and cured of the unclean spirits that were troubling them. This is where we hear Jesus's "sermon on the plain."

Jesus teaches and heals, he speaks to the crowd about blessings and woes, he counsels them on loving their enemies and reminds them not to judge others, and he shares a parable with them. This parable could actually be described as a series of images:

- A blind person trying to guide another blind person
- A person who seems to notice the huge log sticking out of his eye as he probes for the speck in his neighbor's eye
- Then we see a pair of trees, one good and one bad
- Finally, we see a pair of houses - one sturdy and the other being washed away

These images are meant to wake up those who seem to focus on the rules, emphasize the laws, the “should” and the “shouldn’ts,” but continue to miss the point. Those who often say one thing while in fact, do the opposite of what they claim is important.

The emphasis in these verses is that people have been focusing on *doing* rather than *being* - we must be Godly people before we will truly act as Godly people. Character begets behavior.

The images of the two houses—one with a foundation built on rock and the other built without a foundation—seem so clear as to be self-evident. While foundations are the least exciting part of a building’s design, we understand almost intuitively that a strong foundation is essential. It is hard to imagine anyone building a house, especially an expensive well-appointed house, with an inadequate foundation—but we do it all the time. We build houses on barrier islands—on flood plains—below sea level—and on the sides of steep hills destined to give way when heavy rains fall. We build houses on earthquake fault lines. There seems to be no end to our foolishness.

Building a house without a good foundation is dangerous. When storms and earthquakes come, they are likely to collapse or wash away. Often the occupants lose their lives as well as their homes.

This image can also be applied to our lives - we know what it means not to have the structure or the roots that equip us for the bad times. However great life might be going at present, we can be sure that we will face storms—storms strong enough to uproot us and wash us away unless we are securely rooted on a strong foundation.

In some cases, life’s storms turn out to be actual physical storms: tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, or tsunamis. In other cases, they turn out to be adversities such as illness or the loss of a job or divorce or the death of a spouse. When the storm hits, it is too late to start getting ready. We will be forced to rely on the resources, physical and spiritual, that we have in place at the time.

What constitutes a strong foundation? Often we turn to external rules or laws to drive our behavior and our decisions. As we grapple with this “Lord” language in reference to Jesus, I think the reframe that Diana Butler

Bass pointed to earlier is especially helpful – she noted how subversive it was to name this humble miracle worker, “Lord.”

These thoughts are echoed by Richard Rohr, and in closing, I would like to lift up his observations of the violence that we do to one another as a result of our poor understanding of who we should be answering to and to whom we owe our allegiance. If we truly understood what Jesus was teaching, we would recognize that our actions should be in support of one another – that we should be devoted to love. He writes,

“To say ‘Jesus is Lord’ was testing and provoking the Roman pledge of allegiance that every Roman citizen had to shout when they raised their hand to the Roman insignia: ‘Caesar is Lord.’ Early Christians were quite aware that their ‘citizenship’ was in a new universal kingdom, announced by Jesus (Philippians 3:20), and that the kingdoms of this world were not their primary loyalty systems. How did we manage to lose that? And what price have we paid for it?

Jesus showed no undue loyalty either to his Jewish religion nor to his Roman-occupied Jewish country; instead, he radically critiqued both of them, and in that he revealed and warned against the idolatrous relationships that most people have with their country and their religion. It has allowed us to justify violence in almost every form and to ignore much of the central teaching of Jesus.”

May we open ourselves to new understandings and insights, and take in the possibilities offered as we experience *Jesus is Lord!*” Amen