

“Jesus As Savior”

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – March 24, 2024
Palm Sunday – Lesson: Mark 11:1-11

Gracious God, on this Palm Sunday, as we begin Holy Week, we pause to remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. As we recall all that transpired there so long ago, may we prayerfully honor and contemplate the meaning of those final days of Jesus’ earthly life. And may our hearts be open this day and all days, as we listen for your Spirit’s message and call to each of us. Amen.

Today, we conclude our Lenten sermon series based on the book, *Freeing Jesus* by Diana Butler Bass, as we consider the idea of Jesus as *savior*. This is a common title for Jesus and one that is very familiar and comfortable for some people. And for other people, savior is a name that is more challenging and less comfortable for a variety of reasons. Wherever you find yourself on that spectrum, I hope you’ll find something beneficial in this reflection.

The name savior might be one of the most familiar and popular titles for Jesus in modern Christianity (especially in American Protestantism), but that wasn’t always the case historically. Diana Butler Bass points out that in the four gospels, Jesus is only directly named as savior a couple of times:

First, in the Gospel of Luke when the angel proclaims to the shepherds those familiar words we hear every year on Christmas Eve, “to you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior*, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And, of course, then the shepherds go meet him.

And the second gospel reference ought to ring a bell for those of you who are in our Gospel of John study group. In chapter four, after the Samaritan woman encounters Jesus at the well, she shares the good news with her community. After checking out Jesus for themselves, they then tell her, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the *Savior* of the world.” The Samaritan villagers claim this title for Jesus and this good news for themselves.

In addition, in the New Testament there are two uses of savior in the book of Acts, only one in the undisputed letters of the apostle Paul (in his letter to the Philippians), eighteen in all of the other letters combined, and zero in Revelation. That’s it.

Other names for Jesus including Lord, teacher, Son of God, and Son of Man are much more popular in the New Testament texts. As is Messiah (in Hebrew) or Christ (in Greek) which both mean “anointed one.”

It may have taken a while, as the Christian tradition developed over time, for savior to catch on as a title for Jesus. However, the Hebrew root of the name Jesus does mean “the Lord (YHWH) saves.” So, Jesus’ very name already expresses God’s saving work. And it is clear that Jesus’ first followers and the generations of early Christians that would soon follow were concerned with salvation on various levels and had faith in God’s power to save.

As Mark tells the story, on that first Palm Sunday when Jesus and his disciples staged their march down from the Mount of Olives to the Jerusalem city gates, the people were shouting words from

Psalm 118: “Hosanna! (which means ‘save now’) Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

“Save us now,” they cried out. To God? To Jesus? To both, perhaps.

What kind of salvation were they longing for? What salvation could and would God bring and how would Jesus, the “anointed one” of God help bring it?

I think their call for salvation probably had many layers and dimensions to it.

On an individual level, some were probably longing for release from any number of personal struggles, sickness, suffering, grief, lack of hope.

On a communal level, they were also longing for rescue from Roman imperial occupation and from the oppression and exploitation that accompanied it. Probably many of the people who joined that crowd were fairly poor – day laborers and working-class folks. Some may have been more middle-class merchants and artisans.

And they were all there in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover – to remember the story of their ancient ancestors’ escape from enslavement and exploitation in Egypt. That was, for them, a central example of God’s saving work in the world. And now their own generation was longing for such liberation again because there was a new Pharaoh in town and his name was Caesar.

This processional into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives that day was more than a parade. It was a protest march; it was a nonviolent demonstration against Rome and all it stood for.

I think that the longing for salvation that the crowd expressed that day in their shouts of “Hosanna” was very much rooted in this moment and in this life. They longed for the Kingdom of God, for God’s Shalom – for peace, for a just social order, for loving relationship with God and within all creation. Salvation meant *deliverance* from domination and oppression. Salvation meant *liberation* from all that enslaves, binds, and prevents true freedom. Salvation meant *restoration* and renewal of the world. They didn’t invent this vision that day. It had been their hope for generations.

And salvation meant *healing* of all that was sick, all that was unwell in this world. Healing is actually in the word salvation itself, as Diana Butler Bass points out. Like a salve that heals, the Latin root of salvation is *salvus* “which originally referred to being made whole, uninjured, safe, or in good health.” (*Freeing Jesus*, p. 76)

Jesus the *savior* is Jesus the *healer* – one who brings health and wholeness. That is certainly a theme that the gospels proclaim many times over.

But, as we know, one peaceful march into Jerusalem didn’t overthrow Rome. I don’t think they really expected it to. It probably did bring hope and resolve to the people who participated.

But it also drew negative attention to Jesus from the Roman authorities and their local collaborators. And, when we couple this event with the more direct disruption that he caused in the temple a couple of days later (when he turned over the tables of the money changers), Jesus ends up arrested, condemned, and crucified by the end of the week.

Crucifixion is one of the horrid things Rome did to those who they viewed as rabblers and revolutionaries (even nonviolent ones). It was a public, humiliating, and violent execution. And they intended it to send a message about who's in charge and what happens to those who question and challenge their power and authority.

When we think about this from a historical perspective, the crucifixion of Jesus demonstrates pretty vividly two dramatically different and competing paradigms of salvation: The salvation that Rome claimed it could bring on one hand. And the salvation that only God could bring on the other hand.

Caesar Augustus was also named by his contemporaries as the "savior of the world." A few decades before Jesus was born, Augustus successfully ended many years of civil war and brought the Roman empire together and into a state of relative peace. But Roman "peace" (the Pax Romana) could only really be maintained through violent means – through conquest, victory, and military control. In other words, Rome would have to keep nailing people to crosses over and over again, in a sick cycle of violence, in order to stay in power.

On the other hand, our resurrecting God refuses to let the cross win. God doesn't let the cross have the last word. I know, I'm getting a week ahead of myself! But it's important! And the crucifixion of Jesus (God's beloved one, the Son of God, the anointed one) reminds us that God is always radically and compassionately present in solidarity with all who suffer victimization of any sort.

Jesus' willingness to die at the hands of Rome rather than rise up in violence against Rome, exposes the sick cycle of violence of "Roman peace" for what it really is. In contrast, God's salvation of the world, unlike Rome's, can only be brought about through peace, be expressed in love, and include liberation for all creation.

Often, modern forms of Christianity emphasize the cross as the primary saving moment of Jesus' life and that salvation is primarily personal and comes in the form of forgiveness and eternal life after death. But I would encourage us to think more broadly about our theology of salvation because the emphasis in the gospels is, in fact, much broader and much more communal.

As Diana Butler Bass writes in her book, "all sorts of people in the gospels got saved *before* Jesus died on the cross. When Jesus healed, they experienced *salvus*, God's salvation. They followed him. Lives were changed, transformed. Disciples [gave] up riches and goods that they might inherit eternal life. Tax collectors abandoned their jobs and surrendered their social standing to eat with [Jesus]. Children, slaves, soldiers, peasants, fishermen, farmers, prisoners, the sick, the blind, the lame – when they encountered Jesus, they found salvation, the wholeness, the healing, the oneness with God that had only been the stuff of longing. Every miracle, every act of hospitality, all the bread broken and wine served, everything that Jesus did saved people long before Rome arrested and murdered him."

"It was all this loving and healing and saving that got him in trouble with authorities. He was not killed so his death would save people; he was killed because he was already saving them. He threatened a world based in fear, one held in the grip of Roman imperialism, by proving that a community could gather in love, set a table of plenty, and live in peace with a compassionate God." (*Freeing Jesus*, pp. 96-7)

I believe that God's saving work through Jesus is as much about finding abundant, love-filled life right now, as in the future. God's liberating, healing, saving love transforms both individuals and

entire communities. God's saving work of love is still unfolding all around us. And we are called to receive it and to participate in it.

God's steadfast love, grace, and faithfulness to all of God's beloved creation is the source of salvation. And Jesus, the one who demonstrated God's love so clearly and passionately, can and does still liberate us, heal us, meet us with compassion, and save us from hopelessness, helplessness, self-centeredness, prejudice, isolation, fear, worry, and so much more. We experience that throughout our lives in many different ways, both big and small.

I don't know what your experience is, but Jesus saves me in these ways all the time. Salvation is not a one and done deal. And it doesn't mean that everything has suddenly turned out perfectly, easy, or always as I hoped. But it usually means that I find the strength, faith, and support to put one foot in front of the other and carry on.

I've seen it over and over again (and I bet you have too) that God's saving, life-giving, renewing love makes it possible for people to courageously offer their own loving, creative contributions to the world – extending a hand of healing, embodying peace and working for peace, and seeking both distributive and restorative justice. God's loving, saving work in our world is still unfolding in our midst as God's people of hope and compassion, do what Jesus did and taught us to do: love God and our neighbors – fiercely, boldly, bravely, and deeply.

God's saving work is still unfolding in our very midst when people:

Feed those who are hungry in our community.

Make Easter baskets (or donate supplies to do so) so kids in our community know that they are loved and supported.

Offer support to those who are without homes or other necessities.

Show up in compassionate and caring ways for others when they are hurting.

Support others in their struggle for just working conditions.

Call out and work for peaceful resolutions to the world's conflicts and strife.

Every time we live into Jesus' call to love, we are participating in Jesus' work of healing, and liberation.

God's saving work may unfold more slowly than we'd like sometimes. It did for Jesus' first followers too. But it is happening. Have faith. Trust in God. Refuse to give up. Remember that today's worries are enough for today. And bear witness to the salvation God is bringing in our lifetimes.

Amen.