

After a brief hiatus last week to sing praises to God, we are resuming this sermon series about what it means for us to have had God become embodied in the Nazorean man called Jesus. So far we have

- reflected on what Jesus has meant to each of us during our unique faith journeys;
- considered why it is that God decided to become human 2000 years ago? What was happening then that made it the time for God to literally step into our lives through birth and growth and human interaction?
- We have focused on both Jesus' gender and his ethnicity and how this affected his encounters with people who were "different" from him.
- And, we have looked into how Jesus was called to live his life, and how he issued a call to those who want to follow

All of this is being done in order to help us, that is, the Church, steer our focus away from some assumptions about our religious life, and place it squarely back on what the gospels are telling us about how Jesus lived his life, and how we, as those who desire to follow Jesus, ought to orient our lives.

For this series, I'm picking and choosing a few themes from a series of prompts I created, like: Me and Jesus - Jesus and Ethnicity - Jesus and a Call - Jesus and New Life...etc. Two in that list included "Jesus and Liberation" and "Jesus and Salvation." I had planned to treat them individually. But the more I thought about what they meant, and the more I thought about these concepts *in*

*relation to Jesus*, the more I came to see them as one in the same idea. Let me explain.

Liberation is pretty straight-forward. It is the setting free of one who is held bound. We are reminded of Jesus' call to liberate folks when Luke tells us Jesus read aloud from the scroll of Isaiah, (4:18-19)

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me.  
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release to the prisoners  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to liberate the oppressed,  
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And there are plenty of stories in the gospels of Jesus healing and liberating. Perhaps one of the most moving stories of Jesus proclaiming "release to the prisoners" is found in Luke 23, when Jesus was being crucified with two criminals. One derided Jesus, saying, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" While the other one chided the first, saying "Don't you fear God, seeing that you've also been sentenced to die? 41 We are rightly condemned, for we are receiving the appropriate sentence for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.' 42 Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'" Jesus' response transformed the man from "criminal" to a fellow beloved child of God: Jesus replied, "I assure you that today you will be with me in paradise." (23:39-43)

In this moment, Jesus not only liberates the man from his sentence, Jesus invites him into eternal glory with God. Jesus has saved the man from all that had driven him to live apart from God, and presumably because of his crimes, apart from his neighbor, and redeemed all of it - **both liberating him and saving him in that moment. Liberation and salvation are bound together as acts of the Christ.**

In this story, these “criminals” stand in for all humanity who have the opportunity to choose to say Yes to God (the one who said “Jesus remember me...”), and to say No to God (the one who insulted Jesus). As I think of it, the one who scoffed at Jesus, echoes the voice of the devil who in the wilderness tempted Jesus to “save himself” -- thereby choosing The Adversary over God. One of the greatest temptations we have, as well as one of the greatest ideas that binds us up, is the belief that we can persevere through this life under our own power - on our own. We forget how necessary, and freeing, life together can be. As well, how freeing it is to rely on God.

This idea leads directly to the story we heard from John’s gospel today - the raising of Lazarus.

Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, have all said Yes to Jesus. They are not only followers of Jesus, but Jesus learns of Lazarus’ sickness when the “sisters sent word to Jesus, saying, ‘Lord, the one whom you love is ill.’” Jesus cared deeply for these siblings.

Let's pause for a moment and allow me to share with you what the name means: Lazarus = "whom God helps" (a form of the Hebrew name Eleazar). So, the one whom Jesus loves, the one whom God helps, is being threatened by some dis-ease.

Hmmm...sounds like "Lazarus" could be **anyone** who claims their help is in God - those whom Jesus loves (*remind with the song "Jesus loves me this I know"???*)

Our lives are reflected in the stories of the gospels. This Lazarus was bound by some deadly illness. The spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead" reminds us that **we are all bound** by a variety of deadly illnesses: profound hurt and brokenness handed to us by life, as well as the separation from God and neighbor handed us by sinfulness. *There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Jesus, the balm, set off to be with Lazarus.

There's ALOT going on in these 46 verses -- too much for one sermon.

However, within our themes of liberation and salvation I'm going to pick out three scenarios. The first is the encounter Jesus has with Martha on his arrival to Bethany. (A couple of quick notes on names here: Bethany = "house of misery," and Martha = "she was rebellious." Both suitable names for the place where death had brought misery to those who loved Lazarus, and the sister who rebelled against the status quo in order to follow Jesus.) Martha is completely confident in Jesus' life-affirming gifts - "Lord, if you had been here,

my brother wouldn't have died," she says to Jesus. "Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you."

23 Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha replied, "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day."

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. 26 Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27 She replied, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, the one who is coming into the world."

Martha says, Yes. Martha says, Yes. Martha says, Yes, Lord, I believe.

Her faith will come to test in a short time when everyone heads to the cave where Lazarus had been placed and Jesus calls for the removal of the stone at the mouth of the tomb. Martha wavers for a moment. She says to Jesus, "Lord, the smell will be awful! He's been dead four days." 40 Jesus replied, "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you will see God's glory?"

For the benefit of the gathered crowd Jesus speaks a word of prayer, and then calls for Lazarus -- "the one whom God helps" -- to come out. And the body of the one whom Martha had said would be stinking came out -- hands tied, feet tied, face covered.

But that's not the end of the story. Jesus recognizes that Lazarus **would not be able to unbind himself**. So he calls for those witnessing the event to go and set him free. To liberate him, and let him go on living.

For God, even that which seems beyond dead, is still able to be saved.

The “unbinding” of that which holds us captive is the chief accomplishment of salvation that Jesus offers. Jesus is resurrection and life - now! There is another way of living **this life**, we don’t need to wait to join Jesus “in paradise,” ala the story of the sin-sick criminals from the beginning of the sermon.

There’s an interesting comment made by the disciple Thomas just before they left Jerusalem to go to Bethany for what would eventually be Lazarus’ resurrection. Thomas, who is known as “The Twin” (some commentators says he is our twin), says to the other disciples, “Let us go too so that we may die with Jesus.” Thomas doesn’t say, “so that we may die with Lazarus,” he says “with Jesus!” Unbinding Lazarus was risky business. Immediately after Jesus raised Lazarus, John tells us,

47 Then the chief priests and Pharisees called together the council and said, “What are we going to do? This man is doing many miraculous signs!

48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him. Then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our people.”

... 53 From that day on they plotted to kill him.

The disciple Thomas fully understood the implications of following Jesus -- he seemed to grasp that going against the will of the powers-that-be would put his life in jeopardy. But if following Jesus meant setting the captives free, then he would follow the Way of Jesus wherever it would lead.

Much of Christian tradition says that “salvation” happened when Jesus “died for our sins.” That, “God had to send Jesus to substitute for us as the only sinless sacrifice qualified to atone for sin. ...Such (an) interpretation of the

(crucifixion) asserts that God requires violence to save the world.” Such an interpretation asks many questions of a God who would knowingly subject God-embodied (Jesus) to this kind of violence. Theologian the Rev. Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock writes,

Christianity that is true to the life of Jesus Christ tells his death as the story of resistance to the Roman Empire, not as the story of how the Empire enacted God’s will. ...**The gospel writers affirmed divine presence in human flesh, in Jesus who showed them how to live, before he died, and revealed love stronger than terror, torture, or death.** In the New Testament, the apostle Paul asserted that Jesus died once to defeat the powers of death, which held no power over him, but Christians worshiped the risen Christ.

<https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-good-friday-did-god-us b 519347>

Christian's throughout time have drawn upon Jesus’ power over death to free them from all manner of powers and principalities that oppressed them. As just one example, during the Civil Rights Movement, Christians drew from the inspiration of martyrs to non-violently oppose those who were allowing White Supremacy to violently seek to uphold unjust laws. This led to many being bloodied, imprisoned, and even killed.

In the early parts of the Civil Rights Movement, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King preached a sermon in which he said:

To our most bitter opponents we say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your

physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, *and we shall continue to love you.*

We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil (*saying No*) is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good (*saying Yes*). Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you.

But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. ***We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process***, and our victory will be a double victory. (emphasis added)

Martin Luther King, Jr., sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama (Christmas, 1957), written in the Montgomery jail during the bus boycott. Reprinted in the A. J. Muste Essay Series, number 1 (A. J. Muste Memorial Institute, 339 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10012).

Dr. King and others employed a tactic that cannot be overlooked. They appealed to the heart and conscience of their oppressors in order to help them see the injustice they were perpetrating. This had the two-fold effect with which I started this sermon. Shining a light on the evils oppressing African-Americans in the country would eventually liberate them from unjust laws. But by appealing to the consciences of the perpetrators (even the silent “good” people benefiting from the injustices), minds and hearts would be changed, and people who once thought they were superior to others would be

reconciled with their neighbors. Recalling Lazarus, reconciliation helps us “unbind” one another, and is a step towards salvation.

I was going to conclude the sermon at that point. But have found the need to add an addendum, which gives me the opportunity to remind you all of an important part of our heritage as Presbyterians. We have within our denominational constitution confessions that speak specifically to saying No to any powers that seek to associate having special status with God in order to wield power over others. I will highlight three.

- *The Barmen Declaration* (1934, Germany) called out the German Christian movement which sought to raise the Fuhrer above even Jesus...it was a nationalistic religion that distorted and extorted Christianity.... Those who made this declaration put themselves clearly in the line of fire of the Third Reich.
  - In light of this confession, I was shocked and outraged after seeing President Trump, during a press conference, say about himself that he is "The Chosen One," while looking up toward the sky; as if saying God had authorized this declaration. And in a Tweet he proudly quoted someone who calls him "the King of Israel" on par with "the second coming of God." I cannot in good conscience let this dangerous and blasphemous rhetoric pass without comment and caution. I can only imagine that there are “faithful Christians” who are readily embracing such claims. I never thought the Barmen Declaration would hold cultural relevance in this country. We, like

the disciple Thomas, must be clear to whom and to what we are willing to say Yes, and to whom and to what we are prepared to say No.

- The *Confession of 1967* (United States) and the *Confession of Belhar* (1986, South Africa) each speak to Saying Yes to Christ and Saying No to structures of injustice. I'll close with such an example from the Confession of Belhar:
  - We believe that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.
  - Therefore, we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.
  - We believe that, in obedience to Jesus Christ, its only head, the church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence.
  - Jesus is Lord.
  - To the one and only God, Father, and Holy Spirit, be the honor and glory for ever and ever.

Close with: *Goodness Is Stronger Than Evil* GtG#750