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Luke 2:8-14

Freeing Jesus: Jesus as Savior

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Sermon and Scripture

I'm afraid of rodents. Really afraid. I've shared this with you before. And I've told you I honestly don't know why I am so afraid of them. It is completely unreasonable. I don't mind spiders or snakes or so many other creepy crawlies, but rodents...

How about you? What are you afraid of?

Every year Chapman University does a study that asks Americans what they are most afraid of. I was expecting results like snakes, closed in places, heights...but these results were different. In 2019, 77.2% of those surveyed were afraid of corrupt government officials. Second to that, but almost 10 points lower was pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes. I appreciated these fears as they seemed more focused on the common good than my fear of a mouse running over my foot and building a nest in my hair overnight.

These top two were followed very closely, though, by something more personal. More than 60% of those surveyed were afraid that someone they love would get very sick or die. It's important to note that the survey was conducted before the COVID pandemic. Human beings have been afraid of death for a very long time. In her book, *Freeing Jesus*, Diana Butler Bass writes about being twelve years old and waking up screaming one night, afraid she was going to die. I can remember having that same kind of fear as a child, maybe some of you do too, maybe you are afraid of death even now. Bass's mom rushed to her room and when she found out why her daughter was upset, she asked

her what about death scared her. Bass responded, “I don’t know. Endless nothing. I’ll be nothing, there will be nothing. Forever. Nothing. Emptiness.” Her mom, not exactly winning mother of the year, said to her, “Don’t be afraid. You won’t know when it happens. Now go back to sleep.” But what her daughter wanted was certainty. I mean...I can understand that. Most of us are much more comfortable with certainty than we are with mystery.

The truth is, I don’t know (none of us know) what happens when we die. What I do know is that her mom’s response, “Don’t be afraid,” has not been particularly helpful in my own life. Someone just telling me not to be afraid has never made me not afraid. Yet, we’ve read in the Bible again and again that, when an angel comes on the scene, very often the first thing they say is, “Do not be afraid.” That’s true in today’s passage, which may seem a little bit out of place here in the middle of June. This is Luke 2:8-14:

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

This excerpt from Luke’s Christmas story announces the birth of Jesus, and calls him “Savior,” which, like the themes from the last two weeks, Jesus as a friend and Jesus as a teacher, is one way in which Christians understand Jesus. But, if Jesus is a savior, from what is he saving us? What are we so afraid of? When we talk about Jesus as a savior, we talk

about eternal life...living forever. Is it what happens when we die that we want to be saved from? And did the author of Luke mean that Jesus was born to save us from death when he wrote, "...to you is born this day in the city of David, a savior...?" I don't think so. Because the truth is, Luke wrote his gospel into a time and place when, had Chapman University surveyed the people, "corrupt government officials" would have been right at the top, just like they were in 2019 in the United States. Luke's audience was far more afraid of their Roman oppressors than they were of what happens when they die. Truthfully, for the ones who are the most vulnerable, in all times and places, living is often much scarier than dying.

The mystery of death is scary (we like certainty), but, based on what I know of Jesus's life and ministry, he seemed to be far more concerned about the scary things happening here, on earth. He was concerned about people who were sick, poor, alone, and marginalized. Jesus was not born to save us from God's wrath or to rescue us out of this world. God created us to be born into this world. God loves us. God is not perpetually angry at us and looking to smite us into eternal damnation.

So, what might it mean to understand Jesus as savior in a way that centers life and not death? The word salvation is derived from the Latin word *salvus*, which originally meant to be made whole, healed, safe, or in good health. Bass writes, "*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...the dream of a saved earth---one where oppression ends, mercy reigns, violence ceases to exist..." In the gospel stories, we read about Jesus desperately trying to bring that vision into focus for his followers, trying to convince them that it was possible to make what seemed like a dream, reality. In other words, it is the message of Jesus, rather than Jesus as the message that will save the world.

But that is not what many Christians have been taught, and therefore believe, about Jesus as savior. Many of us grew up in churches that presented Jesus as a savior, not because of his life and ministry, but because of his death. And here is the gist of what we were taught: In the same way animal blood was offered as a sacrifice for the Israelites' sins, Jesus allowed his own blood to be shed for the sins of all human beings. This is called sacrificial atonement.

Christians did not invent the idea of sacrificial atonement though. Atonement is the focus of the Jewish holy day Yom Kippur. According to tradition, the first Yom Kippur took place after the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and arrival at Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Descending from the mountain, Moses caught his people worshipping a golden calf and shattered the sacred tablets in anger. Because the Israelites atoned for their idolatry, God forgave their sins and offered Moses a second set of tablets. During biblical times Yom Kippur was the only day on which the high priest could enter the inner sanctum of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. There, he would perform a series of rituals and sprinkle blood from sacrificed animals on the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments. Through this complex ceremony he made atonement and asked for God's forgiveness on behalf of all the people of Israel.

Fast forward 2000 years: Here's how Bass describes sacrificial atonement from the perspective of the Bible church she attended as a teen, "If human beings are completely sinful and God is utterly holy, there is an infinite distance between the two. Sin makes it impossible for people to reach toward God. On the off chance someone did reach out to the divine, God would not reach back, because God is repulsed by sin. God's holiness would not allow any impurity to come into God's presence. What is holy and what is sinful can never touch."

You might be asking yourself, how did this connection between Yom Kippur and Jesus's activity on the cross get made in the Christian tradition? Excellent question! We can thank Paul for that. Good old Paul. Paul, who was Jewish, was writing shortly before the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, at a time when the practice of animal sacrifice was being questioned within the Jewish tradition. Paul decided that Jesus was the final sacrifice. With the shedding of Jesus's blood, human sin was covered once and for all and there would never be another need for sacrifice. And with that, the cross became the center of Christianity, not because Jesus said so, not because a bunch of angels said so, not because there was a loud thundering voice from heaven, but because Paul said so. Jesus as savior, bringing wholeness and healing to this world changed to Jesus as savior, saving people from the wrath of an angry God. Just. Like. That.

Here are some of the problems with the theology around sacrificial atonement from my perspective, though. For this to work, we have to believe that God is perpetually angry with human beings and must be appeased. We have to believe God thinks human sacrifice is a good idea and we have to believe that human beings are basically wretched and can't be counted on to ever be "good enough" on their own. And we also must believe that it's not weird that something Jesus never talked about is central to his followers' belief system. That's right, Jesus never talked about his death in terms of atoning for the sins of other human beings.

It wasn't Jesus's death that saved people, it was his life. And that is precisely why he was killed. Bass writes, "He threatened a world based on fear, a world 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." You see, oppressors need the people they are oppressing to be afraid. Once people aren't afraid, the oppressors no longer have power. Jesus spent his life saving people,

from isolation, sickness, disease, he did not suddenly become a savior at his death. It was the way he lived his life, not his death that made him a savior. His death was nothing other than cruel, unnecessary, and violent.

But Jesus's death was not the end. The followers he left behind did not let *salvus* die with him. Their stories and their actions after Jesus's death were proof that God overcomes oppression, injustice, and fear; God is a god of resurrection. Salvation is not about keeping humans out of eternal damnation. Salvation is not an escape from this world. It is about human beings being able to live in peaceful abundance, without fear, knowing that we belong to God and to each other, knowing that we are loved.

I can't end the sermon without pointing out what I think is glaring. The Church has, for a very long time, been content to keep people afraid. Sadly, the truth is, it benefits the Church for people to be afraid of God, afraid of what God might do to them if they don't believe the right things. The Church has had a lot of power because of that and I think that's why a theology based on love and inclusion is so scary to some religious folks. Certainly, that fear is illuminated this month as we celebrate Pride. How will the Church keep the people in line without fear? If people aren't afraid, will they still support the Church financially or the Church's positions on social issues?

In my hometown, once a year, one of the churches hosted an event called, "Heaven's Gates, Hells Flames." The church invited youth groups and other teens to have pizza and then go into the sanctuary for a dramatic presentation. The presentation was a series of vignettes that each ended with someone dying. I don't remember exactly how it was portrayed, but basically all of the people who died ended up in a less than desirable place following their death.

Then the lights came on, the minister came on stage, and he told the audience that they didn't have to end up like "those people." All they had to do was "accept Jesus as their personal lord and savior," and they would be saved from eternal damnation. That minister wanted every person in the room to be so afraid of God that they would say whatever he told them to say to avoid God's wrath. There was no talk of the ways of Jesus in terms of bringing about the kin-dom of God on earth. He said nothing about the people of God being on the side of the ones who are oppressed or doing anything to help anybody. It was about saving ourselves as individuals, not today, but after we die.

That is not the kind of savior we have in Jesus. Jesus is a savior because his ways center us in abundant life for everyone instead of the promise of paradise only for ourselves. How might we think differently about the Christmas story from Luke 2, knowing that the savior the angel was talking about was born, not to give us heaven after we die, but to inspire us to bring about heaven on earth? What would Christmas be like if, every year we recommitted ourselves to following the ways of a savior who desired wholeness and healing here, on earth, rather than a savior who encouraged us to focus only on our own salvation. The God revealed in the life of Jesus is not a God of anger and wrath, but a God who has a vision of love, life, and hope for all of creation, and who is counting on all of us to do part of the saving. We are not saviors, but we are participants in bringing healing and wholeness to a fragmented world. We can't save the whole world all by ourselves, but we can sure help. Amen.