

Jesus of Nazareth – Christ and Savior

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

10 April 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Luke 19:29-40

John 20:30-31

“But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

- John 20:31

Prayer

God who still speaks,

We gather today to listen once again to familiar biblical stories

At the heart of our faith.

Open our hearts and minds to your Word this morning

And startle us once again with the truth of the story

That transforms and saves our lives. Amen.

The Bible, this portable religious library of ancient Jewish and Christian books that make up our Sacred Scriptures, has withstood the seemingly unstoppable shift toward a secular age and continues to be one of the most influential collections of religious writings in world history. The stories, poetry, prayers, aphorisms, wisdom literature, prophetic oracles, letters, and teachings bound together in this single volume have nurtured the faith of billions of people around the globe, but they have also shaped civilizations, influenced the core values and principles of societies, framed political and moral systems, and have had a huge influence on language, music, art and culture in nations as far apart as the United States and Russia.

In our corner of the world, despite the steady growth in the number of Americans who are leaving the institutional Church every year, a residual biblical influence still affects people's thoughts, opinions and behaviors. Americans still believe that all human beings are created equal and are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights, including the God-given right to full life. Our society still holds on devotedly to the ideal of *“The Golden Rule”* – of treating others as one would like to be treated – that informs our collective sense of fairness and solidarity. Among Western nations, the United States is unique in the belief that there is such a thing as a universal spiritual truth. Martin Luther King Jr. described it as a long arc in the moral universe that bends toward justice. Faith in this ineluctable universal truth makes Americans into true believers in the notion of human progress that points toward greater prosperity, goodness, and freedom if, as the late U.S. representative John Lewis put it, brave people get into good trouble, necessary trouble,¹ to pull the arc down toward this hopeful end of history or toward our salvation. America may be less religious, but millions of people in our society still carry a biblical gene in their cultural genome, which

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explains why there are quite a few of us out there who quietly hold out hope for the possibility that one day nation shall not lift up sword against nation, justice shall roll down like streams of fresh water, the last shall be first, and humankind shall have life and have it in abundance.

It is also true that the Bible remains one of the most misunderstood and, therefore, most divisive books in American history. Conflicting ways of reading and interpreting biblical texts have divided the Church and the nation, fueling culture wars that have poisoned our politics and polarized public opinion. The ubiquity and influence of the Bible in American life has been, let's say, a mixed blessing. I do not know anyone else who captured America's uneasy and complicated relationship with Scriptures with such simple and clear words like novelist Harper Lee. In Lee's book *"To Kill a Mocking-Bird,"* Miss Maudie Atkinson shares this bit of hard and straightforward truth with Scout Finch, ***"sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hand of [another]."***²

We can't deny it. There have been times when segments of the Church have become so intoxicated from heavy doses of hermeneutic arrogance that they have turned the Bible into a religious instrument of oppression, exclusion, abuse, violence, and even hate. Our Sacred Scriptures are not easy to interpret or understand and the heresy of absolute certainty often does get in the way of faithful, thoughtful, responsible, and imaginative biblical interpretation among Christians. My professor of Preaching and Worship in seminary used to compare the Bible with a scalpel. In the trained hands of a surgeon, the sharp blade has the capacity to heal and repair, but if it falls into the untrained hands, the same instrument can hurt and even kill.

Despite its potential to be misinterpreted and misused, millions of Christians in America and around the world do turn to the Bible every day searching for spiritual strength, looking for words of hope, seeking guidance for ethical choices, groping for religious answers about the ultimate meaning of life, and trying to deepen their experience of God through the writings of these ancient biblical writers that invite us to see ourselves in the metanarrative, the overarching, divine story that God continues to co-author with all of us. And the main reason for the enduring presence of the Bible; the reason why the Bible still is the best-selling book of all times with close to 80 million copies printed every year³ is the intriguing, gripping, stimulating, improbable and ungraspable figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

For almost 21 centuries, the Church has confessed that Jesus, the Jewish storyteller, miracle-worker, and wandering religious teacher who, as an adult, never traveled more than 100 miles away from his village, never spoke Latin or Greek – the world languages of his time, never wrote anything his followers could preserve, never spent any prolonged time with people outside his own sociocultural background and was never interested in other religions except in his own vision of a reformed and re-energized Second Temple Judaism, this man, is the Messiah or the Christ, the Anointed One, God's Wisdom in human flesh, the Son of God, Lord, and Savior. Jesus may have

lived and died in some unrenowned corner of the Roman Empire, but after the resurrection he became the Christ to all humanity. There is hardly any place on Earth today where someone, in some place, at some moment will not open a Bible to understand the world in which Jesus lived, to study the Jewish Scriptures that nurtured his faith, to read the Gospels that contain his teachings, and to reflect on the writings of Jesus' earliest followers in the New Testament.

For two millennia, people have been inspired, challenged, comforted, empowered and changed by Jesus Christ. Since its early beginnings, the Church has proclaimed that this Galilean is God's best answer to the human yearning for a meaningful life. Almost two thousand years after the resurrection, Christians still believe that somehow when we look at the Jesus of the Bible, we learn what it means to be fully human ourselves. We discover what humanity looks like when we open our hearts to God's dream and hope for our lives. We experience the depth of God's unconditional love for us and for the whole creation. We are set free from sin to re-imagine the world around us. As the United Methodist minister Rev. William Willimon wrote in his book *"Why Jesus?"*, in Christ we encounter ***"a God whom we couldn't have thought up on our own [that] turned to us, reached to us, is revealed to be someone quite other than the God we would have if God were merely a figment of our imagination – God is a Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly. This God scared us to death but also thrilled us to life."***⁴

Thrilled to life, this is the perfect description of the mood of Jesus' disciples on their walk to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. The Gospel of Luke says nothing about palm fronds, tree branches or hosannas, but the evangelist speaks of the unrestrained and irrepressible joy of the first followers of Jesus as he led them into Jerusalem, riding atop a donkey saddled with some of the disciples' own cloaks. Every single one of the disciples knew exactly what Jesus was doing on that day. He was acting out the words the prophet Zechariah had put into writing some 500 years before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. ***"Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey...he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth."***⁵ The closer they got to the city where Pontius Pilate, representing Roman imperial power, rule and theology, had paraded at the head of a column of imperial calvary and soldiers to show who was in power, the words of the prophecy reverberated louder and louder in the chambers of their hearts. The new kingdom of peace and freedom was within their grasp. They believed the rule of God that would end the Roman occupation was coming through Jesus. No snorting and stamping Roman stallion, no Roman spear or shield meant to frighten and intimidate, no Herod Antipas or ruling religious authorities that collaborated with the Romans would stop them. So certain were the disciples of their salvation that they began to shout out loud uninhibited and defiantly the hope they had so long suppressed, ***"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"*** In a world where subjects of the Roman Empire were expected to say

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“Hail Caesar!” before Roman authorities and one of the popular slogans of the Empire was **“there is no other name under the heaven by which men can be saved than that of Caesar,”**⁶ Jesus’ ecstatic followers were not only challenging their Roman overlords, they were also allowing themselves to be thrilled to life, full life, meaningful life, to a life worth living in the presence of Jesus, the Messiah.

A savior, a life-giving savior – this is what the crowds-thrilled-to-life saw in Jesus on that first Palm Sunday. And, for a fleeting moment, the disciples got it right. They realized that Jesus was more than a teacher or a prophet, more than a preacher, more than a homeless peasant or a healer, much more than a religious rabble-rouser or a spiritual guru. For a short while, those people who had been on the road with Jesus since Galilee understood that the 30-something-year-old-man-from-Nazareth was God’s great rescue operation. They came into the awareness that Jesus is a mediator of the divine presence, love, and grace among us. In that celebratory moment impregnated with the deep longing for salvation, the disciples caught their first glimpse of Jesus as the Liberator, the Messiah, the Way who brings God to humankind rather than getting people to heaven. Right there and then, the people who would establish the first communities of disciples in first-century Palestine figured out that Jesus offers the life we long for. A life without violence and hate. A life without fear and oppression. A life without the rumbling of tanks or weapons of mass destruction. A life without war. A life without armies and big military spending. A life without empires and ideologies of domination. A life without the threat of global warming. A life without walls and fences to keep refugees and asylum seekers out. A life without Christian nationalism or terrorism inspired by distorted interpretations of religious texts. A life without racial hostility or hyper-partisanship where senators from one party do not walk out after the historic vote that confirmed the first Black woman to the Supreme Court. A life without discrimination against transgender youth. A life without poverty and hunger, homelessness and injustice. A life of peace, hope, faith, and love of God and neighbor as God dreams for all human beings. It was only for that brief moment before they entered Jerusalem where everything changed, but while they were coming down from the Mount of Olives, the disciples were able to give an answer to the question Jesus asked them near Caesarea-Philippi, **“But who do you say that I am?”** As they journeyed to the city alongside Jesus, their actions and hopes and joy shouted the answer out loud, **“You are the Savior from God who thrills, awakens, rouses humanity to life.”**

The story of Palm Sunday has lost much of its power to liturgy, music, hymns, parades, sermons and the waving of palms in churches that are not really sure about what to make of this wild theological claim that Jesus of Nazareth is our Savior. American mainline congregations are so affluent, so comfortable, and so well-adjusted to the dominant socioeconomic and political operating system of the empire that runs our society that we don’t know if we need saving. Most of us live our lives outside the church as if Palm Sunday had never happened and the word “salvation” appears to belong in the pulpit of Evangelical churches where a stronger emphasis is placed on the spiritual lostness of the human soul which, according to their theology, only Jesus can save from the eternal fire of hell. The truth however is that we need a Savior.

We need Jesus to be our Savior. We need to journey with Jesus so his life, death and resurrection may deepen our relationship with the God to which the Bible points. We need Jesus as a Savior to perfect our faith and deliver us from the operating system of this world that too often blinds us to God's dreams for our lives. We need Jesus to save us from living without ever being fully alive to what matters. In her recently published book *"Freeing Jesus,"* Diane Butler Bass noted 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."**⁷ We need Jesus to save us from living without hope, without faith, without the courage to stand up for life in this world that is fond of building crosses to frighten, intimidate, hurt and silence those who want to imagine humanity healed, transformed and made more whole by God's life-giving salvation.

Last month, the Russian Orthodox priest Ioann Burdin made international headlines for speaking out against his own country's invasion of Ukraine. He called the invasion a real war, departing from the Kremlin's official language that defines the military assault as a "special operation." Local authorities asked the priest to report to the police station in town only 3 hours after Fr. Burdin preached a sermon in support of peace and added a couple of prayers for the Ukrainian people and for the speedy end to the war to the Sunday liturgy. He was accused of discrediting the Russian armed forces and betraying his Motherland. Police Officers reminded him that under a new administrative code passed by the Kremlin, which makes it illegal to spread "false information" about the Russian military, he could be sentenced to 15 years of jail time. Fr. Burdin was fined the equivalent of one month's average local wage and released.

He told reporters that the Bible and his call to be a priest do not allow him to remain silent or endorse the dominant ideology of the State. He said that the duty of every Christian is to oppose the aggressive war in Ukraine and not go on living as if nothing was happening. In a letter to his congregation, Fr. Burden reminded his parishioners that **"blood is not only a curse to the killers" but "also to those who kept silent" or "didn't protest."** He insisted that Christians must not forget **"that there always remains the foundation on which humanity stands, the foundation of human civilization, on which the Gospel stands — the impossibility of shedding human blood in any situation and in any case."**⁸

Despite the very real possibility of arrest and jail time, Fr. Burdin took to social media recently to decry President Putin's speech at a rally in support of the war. During his address, Putin paraphrased Jesus' words to the disciples to praise the Russian troops, **"There is no greater love than giving up one's soul for one's friends."** I couldn't help but think of how many American presidents and mainline pastors have used that very same Bible verse on Memorial Day weekend. For Fr. Burdin, using Jesus' words to justify the madness of war, any war, is tantamount to blasphemy. He said that he will continue to speak out against the war and speak up for life because this

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is what his faith in Christ demands. “***My call is not to save the world, but to testify,***” Fr. Burdin concluded.⁹

On the first Palm Sunday, the disciples got it right. Jesus is the Messiah who comes in the name of God. He is the Lord who will not bless or participate in the operating system of the empire. He will not be the king of violence and war. Jesus will go into Jerusalem and rather than adjusting to the reality of our cross-building world, he will die on the cross to open our eyes and make us see what kind of life humanity has been living. The world that builds crosses will try to silence Jesus, but on Easter, the one who was crucified will rise again because, through Jesus, God insists on offering us salvation, the gift of true, healed and whole life.

Sometimes, the Church gets it right too. There are a few times when priests and pastors and the people in the pews read the Bible and get it right. Jesus is our Savior. We do not have to save the world on our own. In Christ, God is with us, thrilling us to life. Gently prodding us to let our voices and our actions bear witness to the salvation that makes even comfortable Christians like you and me shout out loud that in this world of authoritarian despots like Putin, imperialistic presidents like Biden, where empires still conquer, dominate, oppress, exploit, kill, invest heavily in destructive weapons, program and control the world’s operating system, use religious language to justify and bless war, we believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord, the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior who offers us the abundant and eternal life we deeply long for. And our call as people who are journeying with Jesus is to live toward that life. To have the courage to testify about our salvation in the face of the imperial powers of the world. As Frederick Buechner said so wisely, to let our salvation stammer itself forth through the holy stories of our faith, actions, words, and lives.¹⁰

May it be so. Amen.

¹ By John Lewis in Why Getting Into Trouble is Necessary to Make Change, Time Magazine, 04 January 2018 [<https://time.com/5087349/why-getting-into-trouble-is-necessary-to-make-change/>].

² Harper Lee in To Kill a Mockingbird, p. 50 [Kindle Edition].

³ Best-Selling Book, Guinness World Records, [<https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-book-of-non-fiction>].

⁴ William H. Willimon in Why Jesus?, pp. 6-7.

⁵ Zechariah 9:9-10.

⁶ Rob Bell in Repainting the Christian Faith, p. 162.

⁷ Diane Butler Bass in Freeing Jesus, p. 76 [Kindle Edition].

⁸ By Victoria Arnold in Russian Orthodox Priest Fined For Condemning War In Ukraine, Religion Unplugged, 17 March 2022 [<https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/3/16/russian-orthodox-priest-fined-for-condemning-war-in-ukraine>].

⁹ By Jack Jenkins in For Russian priest protesting Ukraine invasion, a mixture of defiance and concern, Religion News Service, 05 April 2022 [https://religionnews.com/2022/04/05/for-russian-priest-protesting-ukraine-invasion-a-mixture-of-defiance-and-concern/?fbclid=IwAR3dB1CN-4orD1RKAvoAp1eBCEYpy_w62VAC3yA5KthCG-qxssfDYTL-150].

¹⁰ Frederick Buechner in Secrets in the Dark, p. 89.