

“Jesus is...Savior”

Final in the sermon series “Jesus is...” March 2, 2025

Philippians 2: 6-8. Luke 9:28-36

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Let me start with a disclaimer: Over the last 2,000 years, people who follow Christ have found a number of ways to conceptualize how Jesus is savior. We’ve looked at some of those ways in this sermon series—*friend, teacher, Lord, presence, way*. Each of these are deeply meaningful and personal for those of us who try our best to follow Christ. Now, there have been some ways to think about Jesus as Savior that have not been healthy or helpful, in my opinion. They have taken away our human responsibility, freewill, and placed it all on Jesus in some convoluted substitutionary atonement sacrifice—leaving our own transformation out the equation. It is the approach of, “I don’t need to change or do anything—Jesus has done it all.”

What I am going to offer today is *one* way to approach the question of how Jesus is Savior. You do not have to agree with me.

Savior. In the scriptures we find saviors as people who have led in times of distress and brought the people to a safe and good place. Famine, slavery, illness, violence—the savior instituted a transformation into a greater life.

Savior. One who saves. We might ask, “Save *from* what?” Brokenness, chaos, dis-ease, sin, death? How does that happen? (And is that salvation here above the soil or beyond it?)

A better question might be, “Saved *for* what?” What does salvation mean? Is it some post-mortem reward for good behavior, or correct belief, or is it (as the Scriptures often depict), a quality of life here above the soil (that continues), when we find wholeness and completeness in our own Christ-like selves?

Our Gospel lesson for today is the story of the Transfiguration. Three disciples have a glimpse into Jesus’ deeper spirit-connection to God. Their immediate impulse is to worship him (thus, the three shrines suggestion). The voice of God replies that worship is not the correct response to Jesus’ true identity, rather, it is to “Listen to him.” Jesus as teacher. If Jesus is teacher, what did he teach? What is the spiritual pathway Jesus taught?

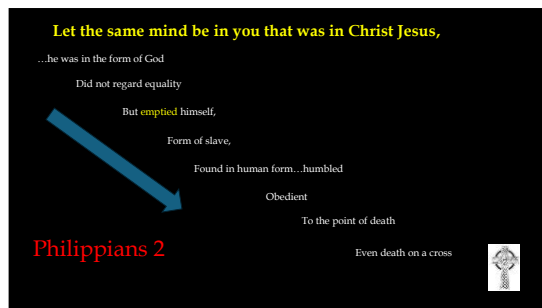
“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

—Mark 8:34-35

We’ll get to unpacking that in a bit, for now, let’s step back and consider how we progress spiritually—how we become holy. What’s the strategy? There are two basic approaches.

One way is by collecting spiritual energy, saving it up, hoarding it. We gain strength, we rise higher when we are being good or “pure,” avoiding evil. This is the path of ascent—going upwards, usually by our own efforts. (A word of warning here. If we aren’t humbly in touch with our shadow-selves, this goodness often crashes in televangelist fashion). This approach is usually seen as avoiding certain behaviors (usually having to do with the body and sexuality) and performing good deeds, or religious practices. This is the pathway of *ascent*—upwardly moving towards more holiness.

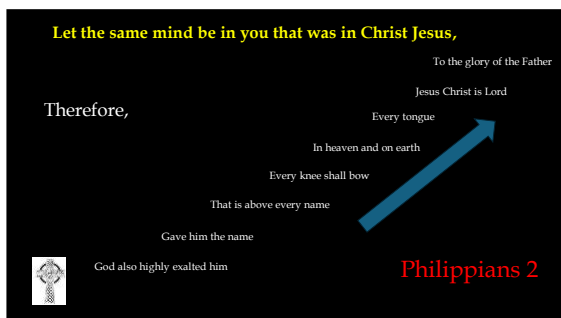
The other way is what Jesus taught and lived. Instead of going upwards toward holiness, it is a pathway of descent. The Philippians lesson for today is an early church hymn that offers a short-hand prescription for this approach:



The Jesus journey is one of descent. Like stairs, Jesus continually lowers himself and gives himself up and away. This is the path of self-emptying love. The key word in Greek is *kenosis*...emptying.

Jesus came out of the wilderness following his baptism with a radical new teaching, and it had little to do with beliefs and theology. Little to do with being good or pure. Jesus said, “no one is good, but

God alone.” He came with a completely new spiritual pathway of transformation... transformation that comes about not by boarding a cosmic chariot and ascending upwards to God through our own efforts, conserving our energies, but through giving it all away, surrendering, self-emptying. The spiritual path is not found in refraining from doing things, but in holding everything loosely, and being extravagant in love, generosity, forgiveness, and self.



The Jesus pathway for us is descent—what God does with it is transformative—an ascent. As Reverend Leah talked about last week, Jesus was not diminished in his giving, his forgiving, his emptying, his resisting evil. Our task is to empty—God then fills it.

This approach is basically, “Don’t cling, don’t clutch, don’t hold on too tightly, don’t brace yourself, don’t hold back your heart.” That’s how Jesus lived and was criticized for it. Criticized for eating and drinking and dancing by John the Baptist’s disciples and further criticized for hanging around the wrong types of people and breaking the rules of purity by others.

Jesus put the teaching this way: “Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever seeks to lose it will find it” (Luke 9:24). In the Gospel of John we find a metaphor for the same teaching: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain. But if it dies it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow.” Take up your cross. We usually think of crosses as burdens or responsibilities we take on as Christians, but Jesus is saying; take up the instrument (the cross) of your own emptying...of the dismantling of your small self—who you *think* you are. Deny yourself, doesn’t mean to refrain from things, but to re-think who you think you are. Perhaps as we enter Lent this year we can think about denial differently. Usually we deny ourselves something—my father, who was a

Methodist Minister always gave up watermelon for Lent. What if we gave up our vision of our small selves?

Jesus was extravagantly open and generous. He emptied himself, and in the process found himself full, abundantly full: able to feed thousands, able to heal, forgive, love...even his enemies.

One image I found helpful in seeing this self-emptying love and spiritual practice (of kenosis) is the candle. What is a candle made of? Tallow and wick. One way to define a candle is to describe its substance. But another way is to talk about a candle's essence.

The essence of a candle is not discovered until it is lit on fire, and we see what it is *for*. In this emptying we find out. The wondrous dancing light with its warmth and tenderness... the fragrance filling the room... the heat and light released in this action reveals its purpose— it's true self. The candle surrenders its being at one level, in order to manifest it at another level.

Likewise, our lives can be defined as the elements we have put together. Our small selves, our identities... the list of things we like and dislike... tasks and hobbies we give energy too... the things we've amassed in our homes and bank accounts. Yet, it is all just wick and tallow... until... we empty ourselves... hold it loosely, with generous extravagance. Then we find out what life is all about! Then we are truly alive and truly ourselves in God's image! To hold things loosely is not easy for us in this or any economy. Yet that is what we are called to as Christians, to follow Jesus on the path... show up on the field of life with willing hands that are open to others, forgiving, freeing... acting with generosity, justice, and mercy.

So, the path of Jesus is not an easy one. It is counter-cultural, counter-intuitive, counter-common sense, and counter our own instincts of self-preservation...which all tell us that life is found in gathering, accumulating, holding onto, clinging, achieving. To this, Jesus offers the paradoxical alternative way of kenosis— emptying, making room. The Christian Spiritual pathway is one of surrender, letting go, falling through, living into a larger identity and life. A life that Jesus called 'eternal.'

Jesus is our Savior because he blazed the trail for our own wholeness and completeness. The letter to the Hebrews puts it this way.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, *the pioneer and perfecter of faith*, who instead of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Jesus is the "Pioneer and perfecter of [our] faith."

This isn't just a pathway for Jesus and the rest of us can ride his coattails into heaven. This is the map for our own descent, self-giving, and life-finding! Jesus, the pioneer, leads us into this wild territory of transformation.

An ancient Celtic Theologian wrote:

“...Thus it is not what you believe that matters; it is how you respond with your heart and your actions. It is not believing in Christ that matters; it is becoming like him.”ⁱ

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Jesus is my savior, as he leads me to hold loosely, let go of my small self, to love fiercely, and burn occasionally (on my better days) with a life beyond imagining.

We are wick and tallow. The invitation from Jesus is to let our essence burn in love for God, for this universe, and all its creatures. So be it. Amen.

Benediction: *[So, for those of you who aren't used to a bunch of grey haired old men up front, don't worry, Leah, and Suzie and Amanda will be back next week]*

Hold loosely. Hold loosely each other—so that you may not trespass. Hold loosely the things of this world—that you may grasp God's holding of you. Hold loosely yourself—who you think you are—that God may show you a greater way of being. Hold loosely even your ideas of God—to be filled with ever grander visions and understandings.

Love fiercely, with abandon—having faith, trusting that God will fill everything you empty and give way.

Let your essence burn in love for God, for this universe, and all its creatures. Amen.

ⁱⁱ Robert Van de Weyer (ed.), *The Letters of Pelagius*, p. 48.