

This morning's Scripture lesson comes from the Gospel of John at the end of a chapter in a section that I would call an island. It's an "island" because it doesn't fit neatly into the breakdown of John's Gospel into two sections: Chapters 1-12, the book of signs, and Chapters 13-21, the book of glory (Jesus' farewell discourse). Today's text is the break that falls in between chapters 12 and 13.

John 12 recounts the events of the last week of Jesus' life. The setting is Jerusalem, the occasion is Passover and right before today's passage, the Gentiles make a request to see Jesus. They were visiting the city for Passover. Jesus speaks to them and then leaves. This is where the break in the text occurs. When I think of the Gospel of John, one of the things I think of is signs. Signs, signs, everywhere signs, hence the name of the first 12 chapters. Jesus had done many miraculous signs before the people, but some didn't believe in him. This was to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah. Yet, there were many who did believe but wouldn't acknowledge their faith out of fear. This is where we enter today's text, which is a summary of Jesus' teaching in John. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Today we're looking at God with skin on: Jesus as Savior. What does it mean to be saved or that Jesus is Savior? This is one that I think some of us take for granted, while a few of us may think this is all Christianity involves while others of us avoid the topic altogether. Some of us don't want to sound too "evangelical." Hello. My name is Jennifer Fouse Sheorn, and I'm an evangelical follower of Jesus. I'm not ashamed of that title even though some "evangelicals" have hijacked this word and given it a bad wrap. Many of these atrocities by these so-called evangelicals have been or are being done today in the name of Christ. I get asked fairly often.

“Do you study the Bible at the church where you preach?” At first I wonder if this is asked of me because I’m a woman preacher. Maybe it’s because the person asking isn’t assuming that all Christian churches study the Bible?! I don’t know. I try and inquire and dig a little more but most of the time the conversation doesn’t go any further after I answer in the affirmative. ***Evangelicals take the Bible seriously.*** Check. ***Evangelicals believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.*** Check. Jesus has saved me, is saving me, and will save me. ***The term “evangelical” comes from a Greek word meaning “the good news” or the “gospel.”*** I agree wholeheartedly. I experience evangelism to be defined as “joyfully sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. ***The evangelical faith focuses on the “good news” of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ.*** Amen and amen. I am a sinner in need of a merciful God and so are you. If you read Scripture - you know that God doesn't rank sin. And yet we are called to confess, repent, and try to do better. Here's the tricky part: when we do better then we invariably sink into the sin of Pharisee-ism. Dang it. We can't win. So when anyone in the Church excludes those who don't fulfill their own human understanding of who God is, who God loves, who God calls, it makes me nervous. I thank the LORD for having mercy and grace beyond measure (Jan Edminston, blog 6.13.23). As followers of Jesus or even as people who are curious about who this Jesus is, we must read the Bible for our own spiritual growth and discernment but also because there are so many misconceptions and misinterpretations of Scripture. Yes, it’s ok that some of us have different opinions, yet I think to be a follower of Jesus Christ, we all must agree that Jesus is Lord and Savior. Yet, like the Gentiles in today’s story who request to see Jesus, some of us may believe but not confess it out of fear. Or perhaps some of us really struggle to believe at all that Jesus is Savior or to

really live as if it were true- that trust thing is hard, isn't it?! We're told early on in John's Gospel that God loved us so much that God sent Jesus to die and to be raised for us. Because Jesus lives, so do we. I was asked the other day if I believe that people who don't claim Jesus as Lord and Savior are doomed? Not my question to answer nor my role. That's Jesus' business. I believe in a loving God who is just and I'm very glad I don't get to judge who's in and who's out. Aren't you?

A friend tells the story of former parishioners who arrived late to worship every Sunday. Almost every Sunday, they stumbled into the sanctuary just after the Prayer of Confession with their two little girls. At that time, she also had young children and she got it: it's really hard to rally the troops on Sunday mornings. She was lightheartedly talking with the parents one Sunday and shared that she was in solidarity with them regarding how hard it is to get to worship on time on Sunday mornings. To her surprise, the Dad of the family said, "*Oh, we come to worship late intentionally. We come after the Prayer of Confession because we don't want our kids believing they have anything to confess.*" And after she picked her mouth up off the floor, the Mom said, "*And we don't like that **Jesus Loves Me** song. I don't want my girls to grow up singing that they are weak and He is strong.*" So, my friend's first question then was "*Why do you need a Savior?*" *If you have nothing to confess, nothing to repent of, if you are so strong, why do you need Jesus?* We are the Church because we need a Savior (Jan Edminston, blog 7/22/21). We need Jesus!

Jesus as Savior, as revelation of God's life-giving purposes, is necessary because the world is contrary to God's purpose but does not seem to know it. That's why

God put skin on and moved into the neighborhood in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus constantly confronts humans with God's purposes for human life. We, as humans, are enslaved by sin, hence the reason we pray a Prayer of Confession every Sunday and hopefully daily. Such sin means alienation from God for all human beings. One scholar argues that "fundamentally, sin means not to believe in, or entrust oneself to, Jesus as the one commissioned by God to reveal God's purposes. The gospel reveals sin to be not only individual but systemic, not only personal but also political, social, economic, and religious. In Christ Jesus, sin does not, however, have the final word. In Christ, there is freedom from its slavery. Jesus takes away the sin of the world in revealing and enacting God's life-giving power of love. Sin and death remain the way of the world unless one believes in Jesus as the one commissioned by God to reveal the Creator's purposes for human life" (Warren Carter, *John*). Nearly 100 times, John's Gospel designates believing as the means by which humans respond positively to and accept Jesus' revelation. "Jesus willingly took the violence, the contempt, and the hatred of this world and absorbed them all into his own body. He refused to waver in his message of universal love, grace, and liberation, knowing full well that the message would cost him his life. He declared solidarity for all time with those who are abandoned, colonized, oppressed, accused, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, and murdered" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). Just look at Zacchaeus as an example. Zacchaeus was not just a tax collector but THE Chief Tax Collector. This meant that he was not only a robber but also very rich. Therefore, most people did not like him. Yet when Jesus paraded through Jericho that day, Jesus picks Zacchaeus to dine with. Not only that but Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' home to break bread together; Jesus went to no other home that day except that

of this rich man. After the meal, Zacchaeus lied and said what he was going to do and not going to do anymore. Jesus calls him on it and then Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Willimon defines salvation as "whenever Jesus intrudes into your space, whenever Jesus makes your sinful table the site of his salvation feast. Salvation is what Jesus did for Zacchaeus. The gospel is a story about Jesus' choices and decisions for the lost, not our choices and decisions for Jesus."

Jesus took an instrument of torture, the cross, and turned into a vehicle of hospitality and communion for all people, everywhere. "If we, like the Gentiles, want to see Jesus, the place to look is to the cross. Yes, Jesus was and is many things: teacher, healer, companion, and Lord, and it is essential that we experience him in all these ways. But the center, the heart of who he is, is revealed at the cross" (Thomas).

Some of us feel as if we've known Jesus all of our lives and would say that we were saved over 2000 years ago when Jesus died on the cross. Some of us came to know Jesus later in life, perhaps in a crisis or with a mountaintop experience. And there are some of us who may feel that we don't know Jesus at all, which may be why we're here. Regardless of where we find ourselves, all of us are in need of Jesus. This is our commonality and starting place. I saw a quotation this week that speaks so much to how we impose rules on other people about who Jesus saves and who he doesn't and what one must do in order to be saved. How do we know? Philip Yancey in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, said, "In one of his last acts before death on a cross, Jesus forgave a thief dangling beside

him, knowing full well the thief had converted out of plain fear. That thief would never study the Bible, never attend synagogue or church, and never make amends to those he had wronged. He simply said, 'Jesus remember me,' and Jesus promised, 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' It was another shocking reminder that grace does not depend on what we have done FOR God but rather what God has done for us." I'm going to say this another way. Salvation is NOT something that we do; it is what Jesus does through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We want to earn God's favor. We want to work for our salvation. We want others to do the same. That's not how gifts from God work. Grace is a gift that we don't earn nor do we deserve- nor does anyone else. I could go on and on about us and the different approaches we take to understanding salvation. But that's not the point of today's sermon. For once- it is NOT all about us!!! Jesus is Savior. We are not! God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is judge, not us! And even then- notice what Jesus says in today's text. "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world" (v. 47). This is a repeat of John 3:17. Yet, Jesus goes on to say in the next verse that there is a judge. God is the judge, and I believe God is a God of love and mercy. Are you, like Zacchaeus and the Gentiles in today's text requesting to see Jesus in order to believe? If you do believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, how does your life reflect God's love and the grace of Christ? I like how one scholar said it, "We do not love God so that, tit for tat, he will then save us. That's not how faith works. To love God is to be saved. To love anybody is a significant step along the way. We do not love God and live for him so that we'll go to Heaven. Whichever side of the grave you happen to be talking about, to love God and to live for him is

Heaven. It is a gift, not an achievement. Salvation is a process, not just an event” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*). Much like with Zacchaeus, with all our limitations and false motives, we can’t come to God. We don’t have to. In Jesus the Christ, God comes to us” (Will Willimon, *Why Jesus?*). Just as the big, lit up cross sign at the Rescue Mission reads, “Jesus saves,” Jesus has saved, is saving, and will save. God’s grace is a gift. Let us not try to set limits on what the love of Jesus can and can’t do. We’re only invited to participate in “a kingdom where the main requirement for membership is to be honest-to-God lost, and the main claim of citizenship is not to have discovered but to have been found” (Willimon)! “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found was blind but now I see.” Amen.