

Zechariah 13:7-8 and Matthew 26:47-56

“Jesus, the Savior of the world”

We find ourselves in a bit of a whiplash seasonally in the life of the church. We have experienced a lot of loss here during this past year. Even today we have a number of folks who are in hospice and are facing the valley of the shadow of death head on not only personally, but also those who have loved ones this past year and are in the midst of the grief that accompanies that experience. This season of loss leaves a mark on all of us.

The whiplash comes as we also find ourselves in the most fertile time in the life of the church that I can remember at least. As I mentioned in my enews last week we have had just about 30 baptisms since Covid and we have a number of new births and those who are expecting in the life of the church right now as well. This season of celebration and joy leaves a mark on all of us as well.

In our sermons we also are experiencing a bit of a whiplash, a back and forth as we are focusing on Lent in Advent. Advent a time of great anticipation and joy for the birth of our Savior and celebrating that the word has become flesh and probably one of the most celebratory and joyful times of the year. That is juxtaposed with the Scriptures that we are addressing which describe the passion of Jesus, probably the most difficult and painful time in the life of our Savior and which we have to read and understand as a roadmap to our life as well. Advent in Lent, death and new life, all of this is part of our life together as we journey along this trajectory of faith that leads us to salvation in Christ alone.

We have seen Jesus as the light of the world, Jesus as the bread of the world, Jesus as the shepherd of the world, and today, Jesus as the Savior of the world, which is appropriate in so many ways as we find ourselves on the Sunday before Christmas. But what we are going to find out today is that the Savior that we have in mind, the saviors that we lift up and emulate, have nothing in common with the Savior of our sins, Jesus.

I think of the type of savior that we are exposed to. How many of you like Marvel? Yeah, Naomi got me into those about a decade ago or so and I haven't missed a single thing that Marvel puts out. But the hero in Marvel is strong, and is able to destroy evil with might and force and violence and all those things that we would expect from a Savior. The Savior is strong and stands up to evil and beats evil with all the power that the world, and beyond this world, can muster.

Stranger things just dropped season 5, and again, the savior, the hero is not those who are weak, but rather those who are strong and those who are able to kill more people than the other guys. That's what we are programmed to expect from our Saviors, strength, not turning back, violence and destruction on behalf of good as it defeats evil.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:39, do not resist one who is evil. Our Savior tells us that the least of these, the last, the weak, will be first. Our Savior was born in a manger and didn't have the power of the Roman Empire behind him, ever. Our Savior deals with sin, our sin, through weakness. This is at the center of who Jesus is as Savior. Let's read.

READ

More than any other country in which I find myself, competition is at the core of who we are as Americans. Germany may come in a close second, at least to what I have been exposed. The level of intricacy and time and money that is spent in athletics is unparalleled anywhere in the world. I am a product of that. My father played professional basketball in Europe. We were raised trying to beat each other in every sport, in every moment, in every act that we performed. My mom was a big part of that. You all know that about me.

This past week a group of four of us went and played golf inside a simulator of a member of this church. I'm not going to mention names, but one of the first shots that was taken the ball ricocheted and hit one of us in the head and almost took out the other two. Now, in most scenarios if that were to happen it would have brought the night to a close. People would have gone home, grateful that nothing worse happened. But not us, we stayed there because there was golf to be played there was pride and competition that had to be carried out. I love competition, which I know you know about me.

But in our culture it isn't just in sports where we find ourselves competing. And in competition, who wins? The strongest, the one with the most power, the one who is ruthless at times, the one who refuses to allow the other to win. From sports to politics to culture the stronger one wins. We see this in the world as nations that define themselves as Christians see it within their right and within their policy to destroy, to go to war, to kill, and to use their might, why? Because they can and they have the power to do it. We live in a country where we believe might makes right. If we have the might, if we are able, then we can do it no matter the impact on other people.

In our Scripture today what happens when Jesus submits? Look at vs.56. What happens when Jesus says I don't act and I don't live and I don't operate in the same way that the world operates and allows those who are about to arrest him, arrest him? All of his disciples desert him. Our first Scripture for today, the Zechariah one, is one that was quoted last week when Jesus predicted to his disciples in vs.31 that because of me, because of my actions, and really it is because of his inaction, you will all desert me.

What does Jesus do to lead people to desert him? Let's look at Matthew. He receives a kiss from Judas, who is called affectionately here the betrayer, knowing full well that this will lead to his eventual torture and death. His response to this kiss is calling Judas friend. Do you see how opposite it is from what we would do. Do not resist evil, Jesus says, when you know that Scripture must be fulfilled so that he is able to put in motion his salvific act of death and resurrection.

When one of his disciples tries to defend him by cutting off the ear of one of the crowd, maybe, just maybe, we can rally the others and get them to pull out their swords and maybe, just maybe we can begin this whole revolution thing and turn things upside down. But Jesus says no, put it away, he commands his disciples to weakness. And less we somehow forget who we are. We are his disciples. Jesus commands his disciples to weakness, he commands us to weakness which flies in the face of everything I have ever done in sports and in everything else in my life. Who is this Savior? How dare he try to change my life? Put away your sword for those who live by the sword die by the sword.

The final straw is that Jesus accepts his position as an innocent condemned man so that God can work at saving all of humanity. Our world view is that only the strong survive. This was the disciples world view as well. As soon as they saw that Jesus was going to do nothing about it, they flee. They don't want to associate with someone whose calling card was weakness and strength through servanthood and obedience. That is not very appealing.

The church has historically been on the wrong side of history and has aligned itself with the most powerful. It has also sought out power on its own and used that position to abuse and keep the most marginalized and weak down and in their place. That has been a part of our history as the church that we have to live up to and confess. In Zechariah's day the shepherd, those called to serve as prophets to the one true God only looked to make themselves more fat and maintain more power than they already had.

In Jesus' day we see time after time Jesus butting up against the religious leaders of the day, those who were in power in the church, in the temple. Eventually they are able to use their power and their status vis a vis Rome and demand that Jesus be put to death. They had the power to do that, so they won in that way.

The Reformation comes about as a result of a corrupt church that was using its abundant power to dictate the lives of people not only on the earth and what opportunities they had, but they also pretended that they had the power to dictate their salvation which was only seen through the eyes of the church in power.

Today, nations identifying as Christian, or people within nations who identify as Christian, find themselves at war and using whatever power they have to progress that war. In our nation there are voices that speak up and say our primary responsibility as a church is to ensure that anything illegal be stamped out with force and power and killing and anything else that has to do with the ability to do things because you can. Russia and Ukraine, both who identify as Christian, are at war with each other. United States and Venezuela, both who identify as Christian, are basically at war with each other. The list goes on, as if we have created our Savior in our own image.

Jesus' arrest in this Scripture..., did you hear what I just said. Jesus was arrested here by the authorities, our Savior, the one whom we worship today and every day, was arrested today in our Scripture. Do we just pass over this detail as if it makes no difference. People in power viewed criminals such as Jesus the same way that we view criminals today. When we run across someone who has been arrested we don't think Jesus, especially within our culture and society based upon competition, that person has lost, that person has basically been kicked out of whatever game we think we are playing.

But that doesn't reflect who we are as followers of Jesus. Listen to what Paul says in I Corinthians 1:26-31, and especially vs. 27: God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. Everything is upside down, and I don't mean the upside down world. God does not act how we act. Jesus did not value what we value. Might does not make right, in fact, the opposite is true more often than not. Might leads to abuse and a walking away from Jesus and walking toward that which we think we are capable of doing on our own.

But this approach of servanthood as the way of life does not sell. His disciples abandoned him because it was at this point that they realized that he was serious about not doing anything and that he was going to allow himself to be arrested. They knew what he said in vs.53 and they expected him to do exactly that, to call up 60,000 angelic troops to not only save him from arrest, but to save them from this brutal Roman Empire which the Messiah would come and eliminate. He wasn't going to do that, it became clear here at the end.

I have always said that our goal is to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus and that once they come to know Jesus to make them mature in their faith. In my ministry this has always translated into growth in attendance. That has been the one metric that I use to understand whether I am doing my job or not, and honestly, whether you are doing your job or not as disciples inviting others to join. But I also recognize the irony and the conflict in preaching a message that doesn't sell, Jesus calls us to suffering and servanthood, and expecting there to be growth.

No one wants to join a team that focuses on weakness and allowing others to be first and us last. Unless you are a Cowboys fan, this sounds awful. But if I'm going to teach about my Savior, I have to be true to Scripture. Jesus never looked to use his power to combat evil. He used his weakness, and weakness doesn't sell. It doesn't put butts in pews, but it has put souls in heaven. Amen.