

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
March 27, 2011 (Third Sunday of Lent)
“Who Do You Say I Am: Savior of the World”
John 4:19-26, 39-42**

The earthquake that hit Japan March 11 was the most severe one on record going back over 140 years. The quake was then followed by a tsunami – a word given to us by the Japanese. A massive wave of water swept about six miles inland, swallowing up houses, cars, people, everything in its path. One woman was working in a warehouse when the earthquake struck. She rushed home to get her elderly father, but as she parked in front of her house, she looked down the street and saw, as she put it, a “mountain of garbage” coming towards her. It was the tsunami wave.¹ You don’t just rebuild communities when the whole town is washed out to sea; you don’t reintegrate with friends and social networks when they’re all scattered or washed away.² Ask the Gulf Coast communities. Ask the countless people who have endured tragedies how long it takes to heal, if healing ever truly comes.

Christianity aims its message at wounded people. I am not saying it is unique in this role. Other world religions offer comfort and solace. But through the ages, when you pause to answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?,” you gain insights and a level of comfort unavailable from other religions. That has been apparent from the earliest days of Christianity, as we shall see in Jesus’ encounter with the woman from Samaria.

The heart of the Jewish people, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, was in Jerusalem, David’s capital city in the southern kingdom. But the southern kingdom had once been paired with a northern kingdom, which included Samaria and Galilee. In the centuries between King David and Jesus, conquering armies had ruled the entire region: Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans. Tsunami waves of oppressors had washed over the land, mixing up and intermingling with the people. Over time, the people of the north and the south fought and grew to hate one another. Separate temples. Separate holy mountains. Separate prayers offered essentially to the same God. How long does it take to heal? By the time of Jesus, hundreds of years had not eased the pain nor softened the hatred.

One day, Jesus left Judea in the south and headed north toward his home in Galilee, which meant he had to pass through Samaria. It was a hot day. He sat by a well but had no way to retrieve the water; so he waited. A woman came to the well, who, for a hundred reasons, both social and religious, wasn’t supposed to talk to him. So he initiated the conversation. And to her credit, she spoke – she questioned – she sought to learn from this non-Samaritan. She asked him about where to worship God and where to find salvation. She was awaiting a Messiah, and Jesus calmly told her, “I am he, the one you await.” And because of her faith, many, many more believed, and an ancient wound slowly began to heal.

In this passage from John 4, Jesus is given three names: Messiah, Christ, and Savior. Other people in other ages will give Jesus different titles, as we will see in the coming weeks of Lent and Easter. But for the early church, the three I mentioned were the key titles. Why was that so? What was so special about the names Messiah, Christ, Savior?

If a burglar breaks into your home, you feel violated. If an enemy takes over your country, rips up your flag, and patrols your streets with tanks and soldiers, you want revenge – someone to wipe away every last vestige of them. The Jewish people remembered the days when David sat on the throne and all their rival nations had been subdued. During those centuries of foreign domination, they awaited a Messiah, a warrior-king who would forcefully take back their land. The title means “the anointed one,” and when the region came under the influence of Alexander the Great and everyone spoke a form of Greek, the Hebrew word Messiah was translated into the Greek word Christ. Now, if the people of Jerusalem longed for a warrior-king Messiah like David, their cousins in Samaria longed for a prophet-priest Messiah who would be a new Moses, restoring purity to the land so the laws of God could once more be followed without blemish or outside disruption.

Jesus walked the length and breadth of his ancient homeland. He saw the southern streets where the warrior-king was awaited; he traveled through the northern cities where a prophet-priest Messiah was prayed for. He saw the ruins of Greek temples and the new constructions honoring Roman emperors and gods. He saw how his own people were divided into ascetics in the desert, legalistic Pharisees in the cities, and compromised Sadducees in the halls of power – a tsunami of historical forces had turned the whole kingdom of David into a muddled, mixed up, damaged land.

Jesus encountered a strong, faithful woman from Samaria, who named the tensions between Jews and Samaritans, the ancient arguments over where God should be worshiped, and in effect asked him how this can be resolved. Jesus replied that all who worship God must do so in spirit and in truth – a combination of faith and action, a conviction of the heart and soul coupled with right actions seen in how we live with one another. The unnamed woman goes on to say, “Someday Messiah will come and make clear how this will come true,” to which Jesus replied, “I am that One.”

What happened next? The woman became an apostle, bravely telling her community, the people who for years hadn’t given her the time of day, that she had met the long-awaited Messiah. The townsfolk came rushing out to see Jesus. They talked with him, invited him to stay with them, and before long they named Jesus the Savior of the world. What caused this transformation of faith, this mass conversion? Yes, Jesus told the woman her whole life story, but he wasn’t a magician who won converts through fortune-telling parlor tricks. He spoke like a priest, talking about worshiping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; but he didn’t talk about simply returning to the old ways of worship. Nor had he come to town at the head of a band of mercenary fighters, a warrior-figure calling people to arms.

When Jesus said to the woman, “I am the One,” just then his disciples returned from getting food. The woman left at that point and rushed into town, so when the others came out to see Jesus and invited him to stay, we can surmise that Jesus’ disciples also stayed in Samaria for two days. That meant the entire group stayed amongst so-called enemy people; they ate their food, used their utensils, slept in their homes, and received their hospitality. We’re not told about any miracles or wonders that wowed the people into believing Jesus is the Christ. There was only a time of shared words and simple fellowship; but that was enough to lead the people to see Jesus as the Savior of the world, the one who could bring healing to the nations.

Healing. Isn’t that always the first step on the pathway of faith? Healing is the primary message of faith. God so loving the world that God’s Son was sent into the world to heal the chasm between heaven and earth, between parent and child, sibling and sibling, between bodies and souls. Think of the pictures you’ve seen of natural disasters. The ones that are most troubling are of people alone, weeping, traumatized, crumpled over and isolated. The ones that move us yet offer hope are the ones that show people comforting one another amid the wreckage, hugging, consoling, different ages and circumstances coming together in times of tragedy – whether photos from Japan’s tsunami or Hempfield’s tornado. Hope begins with healing.

Healing. Isn’t that at the heart of Christian salvation? Too often we wrongly think of salvation in terms of being on the right side of God’s line between the saved and the damned, those “In” and those “Out.” In an old New York Times Metropolitan Diary piece, a conversation is described in which a woman is waiting for her husband in front of Macy’s department store. The man came running up to her and said, “I’m sorry I’m late, dear. The cabdriver refused to give me my change until I received Jesus Christ as my Savior.”³ For Jesus to be the Savior of the world, it doesn’t mean he’s captain of the winning team, but rather that he saves, heals, brings together the teams and nations into one family of God. Samaritan and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, native born and immigrant, rich and poor, gay, straight, however we’ve chosen to divide ourselves. A Savior does not save by re-establishing old patterns that involve division and brokenness and distrust; a Savior saves by doing a new thing, healing and reconnecting that which the world in its folly and times of destruction have rent asunder.

Healing. Isn’t that part of our deepest desire as people of faith? To speak truths and expose secrets so that long-standing wounds can finally mend. To reach across barriers and stop feeling isolated so that we might not be so alone and so fearful. To profess as Paul did in Romans 5: “If while we were enemies we were healed, reconciled to God, through the death of God’s Son, much more surely will we be saved by his life” (Rom 5:10). And to echo the language of the Samaritan villagers: “Lord Christ, we believe now, for we have heard this good news for ourselves and know it is true. You are the Savior of the world.”

So it begins. Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am?” to a world wounded by war, divisions and distrust – a world scarred by earthquakes, tsunamis and disasters both natural and radioactively manmade. Before we can fully answer, Jesus says “I am he, the One you’ve waited for.” Then he stays and eats and talks and sleeps in our midst. And his friends do the same. And when we follow this pattern, healing begins – first for us, then through us to others. And we too are able to answer his question by saying, “Yes, you are the Savior of the world.”

AMEN

¹ “It’s strange that I am alive,” The Last Word, *The Week*, March 25, 2011, pp. 52-53.

² “From survivors: Lessons for now,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2011, pp. WK1, 4.

³ Metropolitan Diary, *New York Times*, July 26, 1998.