

Savior

by Rev. Bruce Silver

This week we wrap up our discussion of the Christian fish symbol, Ichthus. Chris has walked you through this historical acronym that the church has used to proclaim Jesus. He shared what “Jesus, Christ, God, & Son” means from a historical biblical context. So today, I get to wrap this up with the conclusion of the Greek letters, sigma, which stands for savior. Before I get into the message there is one thing that I feel I must address before we bring this series to a conclusion. The fish symbol is in many ways a creedal affirmation of who Jesus is. This morning in the Smith River at Jedediah Smith State Park Chris is baptizing Chloe Jacobson. She will affirm her belief in and trust of Jesus. Chris could very well ask her for her assent to the letters of the fish and she would say yes. The problem I have is that we have taken a creedal affirmation and turned it into a marketing ploy that some people believe is an evangelistic tool. I can’t recall any stories of people seeing a fish symbol on the back of a person’s car and being convicted that they are a sinner and need Jesus. This is not what it was meant for. I have heard stories of people being bad examples of what a Christian should be and proclaiming their faith at the same time by the fish symbol on the back of the car. If you have one of these symbols on your car, please make sure that it is your way of sharing a personal sacrament with the world. A sacrament is just an outward symbol of an inward, invisible grace. OK, I’ll get down off of my soapbox now.

So the Greek word *soter* is the one that we translate as savior. But what does it mean, and better yet what does it have to do with us? The word only comes up in the New Testament about two dozen times. Sometimes it is used in reference to God as the one who saves us. Most of the other time it is in reference to Jesus who brings about the salvation for all who would have it. Surprisingly the word “savior” is not found very often in the books of the New Testament that we believe were written closer to Jesus’ life and death. It is only after the church has had some time to reflect back on the person of Jesus that it adopts the term and title of “savior” for Jesus.

How many of us are like that in our own faith development? We see Jesus and the thought of his divinity seems like something we can grasp. His teachings might challenge us and we may even believe that he is God’s son but on the topic of him being a savior we tend to hesitate. Let me illustrate this for you. D.M. Stearns was preaching in Philadelphia. At the close of the service a stranger came up to him and said, “I don't like the way you spoke about the cross. I think that instead of emphasizing the death of Christ, it would be far better to preach Jesus, the teacher and example.” Stearns replied, “If I presented Christ in that way, would you be willing to follow Him?” “I certainly would,” said the stranger without hesitation. “All right then,” said the preacher, “let's take the first step. He did no

sin. Can you claim that for yourself?” The man looked confused and somewhat surprised. “Why, no,” he said. “I acknowledge that I do sin.” Stearns replied, “Then your greatest need is to have a Savior, not an example!”

Having affirmed our need for saving we can now turn our attention to this morning’s passage. I know that it is not even close to Christmas yet but there is a lot in Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus that can help us with our understanding of Jesus as savior. In fact, in good preaching fashion I can find at least three things that we can get from this morning’s passage. The first is, at the mention of Jesus as savior we are to overcome our fear. The second thing is that the fact that he is savior is something that should bring about great rejoicing. The third thing we learn from today’s passage is our response to having Jesus as savior should be one where we spread the word about it.

Let’s start with overcoming our fear. A couple of weeks ago I got to take a vacation. I know that some of you here think of our trip to Mexico as a vacation and the many trips we have made on the Rogue River as mini vacations but I assure you that taking 120 people to Mexico or 42 Jr. Highers on the Rogue is no vacation. Part of my vacation was spent on the North Umpqua River fishing. Every morning I would get up early and search for that all elusive steelhead fish. I have a better understanding why they call it the fish of a thousand casts. My last evening there I had the privilege of fishing with a guide (who turned out to be the grandson of a church member). Scott was a great guide. He knew all the spots that the fish tended to lie in. There was one spot that we walked out to that you had to step on a series of submerged rocks. Had I not known about these rocks and which ones to step on there was no way I would have known about the fishing spot that I was fishing from. He even offered an arm to help steady me as we walked across these rather slippery rocks. In many ways we acted as my savior showing me my need for his help. I was rather intimidated walking through the fast moving current with all of my gear on, yet I had this person who served as a savior. Just in case you are interested, I was able to raise one steelhead for times to my dry fly but it just wouldn’t take it. I guess that’s a pretty good excuse to have to go back and try again.

When confronted with our need for a savior it is often a very scary proposition. Imagine the shepherds watching their flocks when a lone angel shows up and announces the birth of Jesus. I would have been rather frightened by the angelic visit. Remember what the angel says? “Do not be afraid.” When we come to grips with our own inadequacy, our own inability to save ourselves we are indeed frightened. When I had to admit that I didn’t know where to step and needed help just crossing the river I gave up control and placed my hope in another. Since the fall from the garden, humanity has been doing its best to gain control. Isn’t that what the sin of Adam and Eve was all about? It’s about control and the need for a savior is one in admitting that we are no longer in control but need to have Jesus provide that salvation for us.

Once we get over the fear of having to rely on someone else for our salvation we should be rejoicing in the fact that we do have a savior. I know that there are people here that are filled with eager expectation as the NFL preseason draws to a close and the regular season approaches. Football is back and it's time to rejoice. You see the people on television that dress up for the games, and I don't mean just wearing football jerseys to the game. These are people that put on pig noses or dress up like dogs. They paint themselves silver and black or dress up like they are going on a mission of pillaging the next town as soon as the game is over. If people can get so worked up about a football team, why is it that the church sits idly by and does very little to proclaim the good news of Jesus as savior? We should be cheering and jumping up and down. We should be wearing our team colors and proudly displaying them. When we have the chance to worship the creator of everything we should be excited. It should not be a drudgery or an obligation that we do in order to feel better about ourselves and then get on with the rest of the day. What happens when the first angel delivers the message of Jesus' birth? A great company of angels appears and sings glory to God in the highest. When was the last time that your response to Jesus as savior elicited song, or even a cheer or applause. I'm not talking about applauding a performance but applauding the creator. How many times have you been move to make a verbal assent to the greatness of God? If anyone deserves this kind of praise it is God indeed. Remember, Jesus is our savior and brings us back into a right relationship with God the Father.

So let's assume that we have overcome our fear and given over control to Jesus as the only one that can show us where to step. We admit that without him we are lost and only he can save us. In response to the salvation that we receive we break into a chorus of gratitude. We can't contain ourselves because of the great work that Jesus has done on our behalf and we have met him face to face. Our last response it to be like the shepherds and spread the good news of what we know. This might be the hardest thing for us to do. We live in a society where tolerance is preached. We are to accepting of all people no matter how wacky their beliefs are. I know that I often have the reputation of not worrying what other people think. I often speak what I think is right and allow the chips to fall where they will. This does not do a great job of winning friends and influencing people. Yet, aren't we called to spread the good news of salvation. What makes us so hesitant to tell others that they can receive eternal life by trusting in God? Why is Jesus such an offensive word? The problem is probably not so much that Jesus is an offensive word but that the title of Christian is an offensive word. Maybe when Pat Robertson says that we should assassinate another person Christianity gets a bad name. Maybe when people bomb abortion clinics in the name of God Christianity gets a bad name. Maybe when Christians call people names and tell them they are going to hell because of their lifestyle, Christianity gets a bad name. Maybe it's time we change some of that. Maybe it's time that being a Christian is something

that is thought of in a positive light. If you saw someone who was drowning and you had the ability to throw them a lifesaving ring wouldn't you do it? People are drowning in their own sin and their lack of being able to give up their own control. It is our responsibility to help show them the way. To show them which rocks to step on so they might find their way to salvation.

If we have learned anything from the fish symbol I hope that we have learned of our need to rely upon Jesus. This is not a passive faith. It is an active faith filled with a sense of adventure. If you do not want risk do not follow Jesus. If you do not want conflict do not follow Jesus. If you do not want to relinquish control do not follow Jesus. If on the other hand, you want to know true excitement follow Jesus. If you want to know true joy follow Jesus. If you want to know a peace that surpasses all understanding follow Jesus. Remember, Jesus tells his disciples to follow him and instead of catching fish we will be catching people and isn't that what it's all about? AMEN.