"What Saves Us,"
a sermon given by Rev. Frank Clarkson
on March 22, 2015

A week from today is Palm Sunday, the start of what Christians call Holy Week. It's an eventful week that begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. It includes the Passover meal called the Last Supper, followed by Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, while his friends fall asleep. Then his arrest and trial on trumped-up charges, and his execution at the hands of the Roman magistrate Pontius Pilate. His burial, and three days later, according to the earliest gospel, the tomb found empty.

In Roman times, crucifixion was not just a slow and painful death, it was a humiliating one. The authorities crucified people for the same reason that lynchings happened in our country, as a brutal way to intimidate others: stay in line, or else face the same consequences.

For the early Jesus community, his death presented a problem. If he was the messiah, the Christ, then how come he was killed by mere mortals? They had felt a power in Jesus' presence—healing and liberation—and this continued even after he died. How to make sense of this?

The early church included groups with very different understandings of who Jesus was. In that pre-scientific era, life and death were seen differently, there was more room for mystery than we allow today.

This big book, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, tells the sad story of how the early Christian church moved from a loose affiliation of life-affirming communities to an institution focused on domination and death. This didn't happen overnight. The authors, Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock, visited ancient churches and found, to their surprise, that there we no early representations of Jesus on the cross. For almost a thousand years, there weren't any images of the crucified Jesus in Christian churches—no crowns of thorns or nail-pierced limbs, rather, the pictures of Jesus were of the good shepherd in a pastoral landscape. They found beautiful images that harkened back to the garden of Eden, visions of peace and paradise, heaven here on earth.

Early on, Parker and Brock say, both the earth and the heavens above were seen as full of beauty and mystery, as paradise. "Salvation in paradise was an experience and a place, as well as work yet to be completed. The early church understood that paradise encompassed many dimensions

—material and spiritual, awaited and fulfilled."[1] People expected to get glimpses of paradise during their lives, and more of it in the life to come. Churches were places of beauty and peace, with stars painted on the ceiling and art depicting the peaceable kingdom here on earth, were created to remind people that we are meant to experience paradise, "on earth, as it is in heaven."

But in the latter years of the first millennium, as plague and warfare spread across Europe, that suffering found its way into the imagery and theology of the church. And the church helped spread it, acting like a conquering army, forcing compliance and destroying those who stood in its way. Think of the Crusades and Inquisitions.

Theologians began to articulate a new understanding of why Jesus died, called substitutionary atonement. It said Jesus' death was part of a plan, God's plan, to save us from our sinfulness. Jesus offered himself up as a sacrifice for us; Jesus needed to die, in order to save the world. The church moved from seeing the world as a garden to a battlefield.

Atonement theology became the dominant belief, and this is what most of us grew up with. But what kind of God would require such a sacrifice? Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock point out the consequences of substitutionary atonement, which makes God a child abuser, desiring the death of his own son (and it is he—what mother would allow this?). Sanctified violence causes more violence. Parker and Brock tell how clergy have told battered women, "Jesus suffered, so you should willingly bear the wounds your husband inflicts on you."[2]

By lifting up crucifixion as a means to an end, Christianity has supported a system of domination and submission: God dominating humans, men dominating women, and other men, Christians dominating those of other faiths, humans dominating our environment. Where is the mutuality and care that we find in the gospels, where Jesus sits with outcasts and sinners, where he ministers to those at the margins and teaches his disciples to feed the hungry and care for those in need?

But even with all its baggage, I find something compelling in the Jesus story. Though I walked away from it for a while, it was becoming a Unitarian Universalist that helped me to reclaim Christianity; helped me find a more inclusive and liberating version than I'd known before. I call myself a Christian not because I think it's the only way or the better way—no, it's the path that works for me, that helps me to lead a better life, that challenges me to love my neighbors and reminds me that how we treat those Jesus called "the least of these," is the real test of our faith.

I understand why some in our tradition are wary of Christianity; because of the harm it has done; the ways it has abused its power, has mistreated and failed people. But for some of us, Jesus remains a compelling model for a life well-lived. We remember his words about loving you neighbor, and not casting the first stone. We recall those who have been inspired by his life: including leaders as diverse as Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. I'm grounded and sustained by the seasons of the church year: Advent's invitation to wait in expectation while the world is crazily shopping, Christmas' call to remember that we too

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[1] Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008, p. 88.

[2] See Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us.*

embody what is holy and life-giving, Lent's reminder to be in touch with our broken places, and Easter's affirmation that love is stronger than death—these seasons and holy days feed my soul and connect me to others and the Spirit in ways that I am ever grateful for.

I hope this is a place where you can engage with the big questions and articulate a theology that helps you lead a happy and helpful life. I hope this is a community that provides ample amounts of both solace and challenge for the living of these days.

Yes, we live in a broken world. A world with so much suffering, too much of it caused by human hands. We kill our visionaries and prophets: Jesus, Michael Servetus, the Unitarian reformer burned with this books in Geneva in 1553; Oscar Romero, who stood with the poor in El Salvador; Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many others.

But it's also a beautiful world we live in, this blue-green planet with mountains and oceans, hills and valleys, amazing creatures and plants, and such a wonderful diversity of humankind. Imagine yourself out in space, looking back at earth. From a distance, it looks like paradise, doesn't it? What if we could see that, and remember that, while we're here?

Until about five hundred years ago, religion wasn't seen as separate from everyday life. The cycles of the year, and religious practices and rituals, were woven into daily life in ways quite different from how we live today. There was no divide between spiritual, religious and secular—it was all part of what was. The fragmentation of our lives would be inconceivable to those living a few hundred years ago.

Isn't it clear that we need ways to be grounded in what nourishes and sustains us, if we are going to help heal and bless our world? That is what good religion is about: helping us to be in touch with our shadow and our light, helping us to practice what it means to be human[3] and lead good lives while we're here.

Jesus of Nazareth was one who lived courageously on this earth; who went to his death, rather than betray his friends or his God. Who calls us to be in right relationship with one another and to serve those in need, to be less fearful of death because we are all one in the Spirit.

I understand that Holy Week can be complicated for religious liberals. But it can be life-giving and liberating. We have two more Vespers services, Wednesdays at 6 pm, and in Holy Week we'll meditate on Jesus' words as we remember his life and ministry.

You know, when we remember Martin Luther King, Jr., we don't focus on his murder at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis. No, we are inspired by his life—by his words and his deeds. Christianity began to lose its way when it made Jesus' death more important than his life. The invitation of Holy Week and the Jesus story is strengthen us and set us free; so we find it healing, not scary; liberating, not oppressive.

Against this backdrop, hear again Mary Oliver's words:

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[3] The UU theologian James Luther Adams: "Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human."

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.[4]

May your faith be one that invites you into that place, every day, where you are present to this wonder and mystery, of trees and rivers and souls, including your own.

In his testimonial three weeks ago, Robert Mohns said "I think we all look for meaning in life. Some people hope for reincarnation or afterlife. I don't. Some see a guiding hand in the universe. I don't. I see one world that is what we make of it. No more and no less. Meaning is here. Meaning is now."

On one level, Robert and I are are theologically kind of far apart. But on another we are so close. Because we would agree that what saves us is never violence or sacrifice; what saves us is this thing called presence, that is found in the connections we make here and now. We may call it different names and understand it in different ways; we may draw inspiration from different sources; but we are one in this understanding that what saves us is found here, in this present moment.

I believe there is a force for good in the world; that we sense it most often in others and in the spaces in between us. It was particularly evident in Jesus and the Buddha, in Rumi and in Martin and many others, and it is in each of us. This is our task: to awaken to that spirit, so that our lives, and our world, are transformed by its love. That is what saves us, now and forever,

Amen.

[4] Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese."