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**“Just. Jesus.” Sermon**  
**Community of Christ Temple Service**  
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How many have been asked the question, “Are you saved?” This is a loaded question.

It’s loaded because it begs several other questions, like “What do you mean by ‘saved?’” and “Saved from what?” Most often, the question is clarified to me, “Are you saved from going to hell?” As I dig deeper into the story behind this question, the Good News and invitation to Jesus behind is fear-driven and theologically muddled. When I find out *who* is actually damning us to hell and *why* we are heading there, the God of this story looks less and less like the one revealed in Jesus. Yet, for many Christians, this invitation to be saved from hell is what inviting people to Christ really means.

Some of you might ask tonight, “Why even go here, Matt?” Community of Christ beliefs and interpretation of scripture don’t really go this way. Why talk about salvation?

I begin with salvation because the commission to *invite people to Christ* is deeply related to our understanding of salvation. That means it’s intimately related to understanding of Jesus as our revelation of God’s justice *in* and *for* the world. The body of Christ is also a worldwide movement. We live in a world of global Christianity. And, for many Christians, inviting people to Christ means exactly this: inviting others to believe the story of God’s wrath, heaven and hell, and individual salvation – which is tied to a religion of right and wrong behavior and right and wrong belief.

Stassi and I have a different story tonight – a story that I believe is simply more beautiful, liberating, Holy Spirit-filled, God-sized and earth-focused. It is also more theologically and scripturally sound. The story I want to share begins with clarifying our question: Is the Good News of Jesus really working out our individual salvation from hell, or is it first the incredible challenge to believe that God’s reign of justice and peace has already come and been unleashed into the world – and we can join it?

Which is it?

### **Justice & Righteousness**

It is easy to miss God’s revelation in Jesus because it is easy to forget the real problem the Gospel solves.

The ancient writers and readers of the bible weren’t modern-day Christians. They weren’t primarily concerned with what Christians today often obsess about: life-after-death, heaven, hell, and our own individual salvation. They were not asking themselves, “How do I get to heaven when I die?”

The ancients faced more immediate, pressing, and this-worldly matters. Like us, they were concerned about war and peace, the rise and fall of Kingdoms, about food and family, death and prosperity, right relationships and finding favor with God. These themes run throughout the Psalms and Proverbs, both the five books of Torah and the Prophets, as well as the teachings of Jesus. These are not distant other-worldly concerns about heaven and hell in the afterlife. The ancients were concerned about life in this world, here and now. We can get a sense of that in the prayer Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread  
Forgive us as we forgive others.  
Let us not be tempted.  
Help us when ensnared in evil.  
(paraphrased)

Bread, forgiveness, decisions, and getting out of trouble. These are this-worldly concerns. They are problems we, too, can relate to.

For the ancients, God's reign in this world mattered because there was a relationship, and sense of correspondence between heaven and earth. The two realms were parallel to one another. Heaven was God's realm, a realm in which God reigned supreme. God's power was manifest and fulfilled in heaven.

*This* world was a realm of competing gods. It was a world of adversity, life and death, and mysterious forces that were explained by contradictory spiritual powers and rival gods.

No wonder, the God of the Old Testament seems so jealous!

In addition to competing with Gentile gods, the ancient Hebrew name for "Satan" – the ruler of this world – literally means accuser, resister, tempter and adversary. The ancients made sense of this world by naming its spiritual forces. Midst the dust of earth, good fortune in this life indicated God's favor on you in heaven. Likewise, disaster and misfortune in this life indicated God's disfavor or anger against you. This was true of persons and families and clans, as well as nations and empires and

peoples. Navigating this world meant navigating divine forces, appeasing the gods of wisdom and fortune by obeying them, worshipping them, and offering sacrifice.

Israel's longing for a Messiah in the first century only makes sense when we consider this ancient worldview. In particular, the Messiah finds meaning for us today by understanding this relationship between heaven and earth, God's reign in heaven and God's reign in the world. The Messiah is a bridge that extends God's rule from the heavens into this realm. This is crystal clear in Matthew 28:18 when the resurrected Jesus says to his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

Israel's hope for a Messiah is grounded in its memory of the Exodus. This is Israel's story of God's liberation from slavery, Israel's struggle in the wilderness and entry to the Promised Land. Hope for the Messiah is modeled on Israel's understanding of God, the Deliverer, and God's prophet, Moses.

There was more than one image of the Messiah circulating at the time of Jesus. There were also many visions for what the Messiah would fulfill among the writings of the Prophets. But, what is clear is that the Messiah would be God's chosen anointed. The Messiah would come to bridge the realms of heaven and earth, to restore God's reign in this world. The Messiah would restore God's covenant to Israel and set Israel right.

Because Israel believed in one God over all creation and all history, the Messiah's "righting" of the world meant not only restoring Israel's place among the nations but also restoring all God created. The Messiah's impact would be total. The Messiah would reveal God's justice in the world and for the

world. The Messiah would restore God's righteousness in it, and would right the wrong relationships within it.

Let's stop a minute. Can you hear how political and holistic all this sounds? Can you hear how social, environmental, economic, and total this vision is for the Messiah?

I hope it's becoming clear that to proclaim Jesus the Messiah of a religion of individual salvation, of getting into heaven and avoiding hell in the afterlife *literally* makes little to no sense from a historical and biblical perspective. This invitation to Jesus skewed. It's off base, even misleading. At best, it's incomplete.

Like the prophetic message woven through the Prophets and sections 163 and 164 and 165 of the Doctrine & Covenants, the Good News of the Messiah coming to earth concerns "all the dimensions of salvation." It concerns the reign of God, here and now. It concerns justice and joy, reconciliation and renewal, restoration and compassion in this life between God, neighbor, and self.

Any idea of "eternal life" or "salvation" has to include, the now.

The messiah will bring justice to nations, restore God's will to creation, and reveal God's judgment and reign throughout the earth. This is how we must understand Jesus, and the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. When we read Jesus Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, we must consider it in terms of God's reign in Christ within us and among us, in this life. "Blessed are the peacemakers."

When we read Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom in Luke 4 – "I have come to bring Good News to the poor, restore sight to the blind, to free the oppressed...and proclaim the year of God's favor!" – that is

who Jesus is right here and right now. To grasp the deep theology in John, we must think of God's reign in Jesus, here with us. He is the word of God, which was God, and with God in the beginning became flesh and lives among us, here and now.

*That* is the Good News of Jesus and the meaning of Christian witness! It is that God's reign has come into the world. That is what it means to proclaim Jesus *Christ* in our lives. Jesus is our revelation of God's justice and righteousness in the world. He is God's love *for* this world. He is God's righteousness *in* the world. This is what it means to proclaim him.

Open your *Oxford Companion to the Bible* to the entry for "justice" and you won't find anything there. What you'll find is a redirect: "See Righteousness."

We've become accustomed to separating righteousness and justice as terms. But, theologically and scripturally these terms are inseparable. Righteousness is not just a religious term meaning to keep God's commandments. Likewise, justice is not limited to matters of secular law and state, to courts and ethics. In Christian theology and scripture, justice and righteousness are very often interchangeable terms. From a biblical perspective, there is no justice or righteousness outside of God – in the whole world. God is the author of both.

Many of you are familiar with the Jesus' famous teaching in Matthew 6:33 – "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you." The Greek word for righteousness in this verse can also be translated as justice. In fact, in Spanish, this term is translated as *justicia*, justice. Can you begin to hear the invitation to Christ in this translation? "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's justice, then everything else will come to you."

The Hebrew term transliterated as *mishpat* (mish-pawt') is one of several terms meaning both righteousness and justice in Hebrew scripture. *Mishpat* refers to justice and righteousness in the sense of an act of judgment or keeping law. Throughout Hebrew scripture, Yahweh is a Law-Giver. Christian faith proclaims Jesus as God's Word incarnate – not, therefore, as written law, but God's Word in a human, living form. For Christians, Jesus is the revelation and fulfillment of Yahweh's *mishpat*. Jesus is God's righteousness in and for the world. He is God's final judgment and act of justice for us.

The problem of our Christian faith, then, is not God's judgment and wrath upon us. Certainly, there is a hell to be saved from: it's a hell of our own making. It includes the horrors of poverty, environmental crisis, nuclear holocaust, and systemic oppression. But, what Paul states so clearly in his letters, is that the challenge of Christian faith is not the wrath of God but freedom. There is *freedom* in Jesus Christ. It is freedom from being scared of God, and the freedom to join in the reign of God through turning our hearts and trusting God's will for creation. In Jesus, God's judgment of grace and love is revealed *in* and *for* the world. Love wins. There is no longer division. The reign of God has come into history. God's judgment is not vengeance but costly life-giving and life-saving grace. In Jesus, we are free to believe that death is conquered. It is not eternal. We are free to believe God's creation is reconciled.

The reign of God on earth, as it is in heaven, has been unleashed into the world in Jesus. And, you're invited to come and be a part of the body of Christ. Do you believe it? Invite others.