

Leader's Guide

Facilitation tips are provided throughout in green. These do not appear on the participant handout.

Study: Freeing Jesus

Week 4: July 16 – 22

Chapter: Savior

Study Big Idea: Freeing Jesus is an invitation to meet Jesus again for the first time by encountering many Jesuses. Regardless of your religious (or non-religious background) you'll be inspired to get Jesus out of the unhelpful confines you (or the religious traditions you've experienced) constructed for him. Allow yourself to rediscover Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence.

Chapter Big Idea: Jesus saves. The image of Jesus as Savior is among the most talked about concepts in American Christianity. Within American Protestantism, Evangelicals and those in Mainline traditions have widely differing understandings of what this means and how it should impact the daily lives of Jesus' followers.

This is the most theologically in-depth and robust lesson so far. It's okay if your group is unable to discuss all of the questions. Diana Butler Bass' storytelling – contrasting her Methodist the Bible Church upbringing – sets the stage for folks to listen and learn from the varied experiences within your group.

Icebreaker: Tell us about a time you found yourself in a situation you didn't know how to get out of, but escaped or overcame it when you were rescued (or saved) from it by someone else.

Have an answer or two of your own prepared in advance. Expect replies as simple as being saved at work by a colleague when faced with an unfamiliar assignment or as life-changing or even life-giving as having one's life saved by someone else.

Opening Prayer: Jesus come among us and be real for us as we gather today. Save us from our aimlessness and sin. Save us from our limited understandings – even those we have of you as Savior. Amen.

Did you know? The third line of the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith reads, "God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

Scripture Reading: The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master (Luke 2:10-11, The Message).

Freeing Jesus Reading: Years later, I would come across these words from Jesus scholar Marcus Borg: "Some people do not feel much guilt . . . guilt is not the central issue in their lives. Yet they may have strong feelings of bondage. Or strong feelings of alienation and estrangement." For such people, the conventional rendering of Jesus as Savior, the one who takes away whatever is sinful and unclean in their lives, makes no sense.

Borg insists, however, that there are other things from which one needs to be saved: victimization, meaninglessness, suffering. Jesus offers the "good news of 'coming home,'" from exile in the wilderness. He continues, "For some, the need is liberation; for others, the need is homecoming; and for still others, the need is acceptance." No matter our experience or our deepest needs, Jesus saves (p. 76).

Marcus Borg (1942 – 2015) is one of a handful of people who have deeply informed my personal theology. As of his passing in 2015, he was the [only person](#) to have a book appear on my annual list of the year's top ten books on four occasions (a fifth was added posthumously in [2017](#)). (Fun fact: Both Marcus Borg and Diana Butler Bass accepted my invitation to lecture and preach at Naples United Church of Christ during the years I served that congregation.)

Discussion Questions:

1. According to Diana Butler Bass, "'Savior' may well be the most ubiquitous term Christians use to describe Jesus. This is especially true in Western Christianity, and Protestant churches in particular. Where the emphasis on Jesus as the One who saves us from sin and death is a primary focus of both preaching and piety . . . Yet, oddly enough, "Savior" appears only twice in the gospels to describe Jesus" (p.69). Why do you think such an infrequently used descriptor of Jesus as "Savior" has become the primary means of identifying who Jesus is for so many people today?

Focus on the "why." The questions that follow will get into the "what" the title means. Recognizing its place in the current state of American Christianity will provide context for the other conversations.

2. How have faith communities you experienced prior to Cathedral of Hope talked about Jesus as "Savior?" What has your experience of this language been at Cathedral of Hope?
3. When you think about salvation do you tend to focus more on this life or on life after death?

4. In this lesson's book reading, Diana Butler Bass quotes the well-known progressive Jesus scholar Marcus Borg to provide some alternative ideas about salvation. Later, on that same page (p. 76), she goes on to explain that "The word 'salvation' comes from the Latin *salvus*, which originally referred to being made whole, uninjured, safe, or in good health. *Salvus* was not about being taken out of this life; it was about this life being healed." Are these ideas new or familiar to you? What, if anything, about them do you find to be helpful?

Not everyone will have the same understanding and some may still be trying to figure out exactly what they believe at this stage in life. Focus on things that are new and on things that individuals see as helpful to shaping their own understanding.

5. Share something from this week's reading that captured your attention – a passage that provided you with new insight, an idea that you're struggling with, something that is unclear or just doesn't make sense, or a concept you'd like to hear more about from the perspective of another group member. What about this passage interests you?

Reflection: Jesus is available to all as Savior – one who desires our transformation and wholeness. Many Protestant traditions emphasize (or even overemphasize) one aspect of salvation; salvation, however, is much bigger than this (as is our Savior). Salvation is not simply about the afterlife; it is also about living well in the here and now.

Closing Prayer: Jesus we're learning about you in community. We now know you better as Teacher and Savior. We recognize that our studies cannot stop here. Help us to grow in our relationship with You and with one another. This we pray in the name of Jesus, who alone is the head of the church. Amen.