

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Mark 15:1-15

Sermon Title: "Only One Redeemer" (The Supporting Cast of Lent: Barabbas)

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Barabbas is one of the most recognized characters in the Bible, yet he plays one of the smallest parts of any Gospel. We all know who he is, but he shows up in the last chapters, and even then his name is mentioned only three or four times.

According to Mark, Barabbas is linked to a group of insurrectionists who fight against the Roman government. During one of his missions he commits murder, most likely killing a Roman soldier. Barabbas is caught, and the Romans mean to hang him for his crimes, possibly on a cross for a very long time.

Other than knowing that Barabbas is a murderer from a certain terrorist group, the only other thing Mark tells us is that he is offered to the crowds along with Jesus as a gift. Pontius Pilate sets these two men side by side, and he asks which one of them the crowd would like to release. Everybody picks the criminal. The Savior of the world is sentenced to death.

As we see these men side by side, we might be surprised to see some similarities about them. There

are very few similarities, but they do exist. For one, Barabbas is a zealot, a revolutionary who despises the power Rome wields over God's chosen people, the Israelites. Zealots were just as maniacal as terrorists of our modern age: they tried everything they could to overthrow the Roman government in favor of complete Israeli autonomy. They fought against Roman soldiers, killed political leaders, and threatened the fabric of commerce in cities and towns. Barabbas lives for conflict against Roman soldiers and citizens, so that he might see his people free one day.

Jesus is thought to be another kind of revolutionary, another leader who would strive for Israel's independence. At least that's how many Jews perceived Jesus, when he taught in the synagogues, when he healed people of their diseases, when he rode on a donkey through the streets of Jerusalem. People couldn't wait for him to blow the trumpet, call the people to arms, and crush the Romans once and for all.

Do we know what Barabbas's name means? *Barabbas*, Son of the Fathers. In fact, his full name is Jesus Barabbas: "He saves, Son of the Fathers." One might wonder, with a name like his, that fame and prestige might have gone to his head. Muammar Kaddafi loves to call himself "The Brother Leader" and "The King of Kings." The third president of Uganda, Idi

Amin, used to call himself “Dada,” “His Excellency,” “President for Life.” With such a name as “He Saves” and “The Offspring of Our Fathers,” one might wonder that people might have viewed Barabbas as a pop star who could rally crowds together and get them to make some significant changes in their society.

Jesus, on the other hand, has many names. He Saves is one of them – that’s what Jesus means. Son of Man, Son of God, the Good Shepherd, The Anointed One, Teacher/Rabbi, Savior. Each name fully describes who Jesus is, and Jesus has no problem fulfilling each one. From the manger to the synagogue to the mountainside to the cross to the grave and to the resurrection, Jesus has many names not to boost his ego and to make people notice, but to complete God’s will on earth so that some day all God’s people might rise to heaven.

Both Barabbas and Jesus are arrested, labeled as rebels of the state. Both stand with Pilate in front of an angry crowd. The chief priests stir up the crowd even more. The people are asked whom they want to see let go. “Barabbas,” Son of the Fathers. What do they want to do with Jesus, the Son of the Father, God Almighty? “Crucify him!” is all they can say. Barabbas escapes his own execution, and by his escape he will free nobody. Jesus will free the people of God not from political tyranny but from spiritual

bondage. Not through violence but through violence done to his own body will Jesus free the people from sin, so they may live with God in all peace and joy.

Barabbas has an interesting name, but he isn't a savior. He isn't the chosen one of all the elders of the community to correct all the wrongs and uphold all the rights. All Barabbas is is an angry man, frustrated with a life he cannot change, fuming against a government that he cannot wish away. Anger builds upon anger, hatred upon hatred, and Barabbas doesn't become a positive force but a destructive one. A terrorist act here, a murder there, and he stands an inch away from losing his life. There is only one Redeemer, and it isn't Barabbas, He Saves, Son of the Fathers.

We have zealots in our world today, which we call "Islamic extremists." These fanatics believe they can destroy their enemies by killing them. They place bombs in buildings and streets in Iraq, Afghanistan, and any other place they can find. They spread destruction and fear, and no positive change. There was a podcast I was listen to about these young boys and men who strap explosives to themselves and blow them up in the name of Allah or some movement. Most of these killers do not kill because they strongly believe in something, because they think they are

redeemers of this world. They are promised money, if they commit certain acts. They are promised benefits for their families: material goods, food, shelter, protection. If you are a starving young person who is earn a meager salary, and somebody comes to you and say, "I can take care of everything," you might just follow that person. You just might do what they want you to do. There is only one Redeemer, and it isn't any terrorist or highly-motivated group.

Political leaders profess to have the answers to America's problems. They tell us with broad strokes how to boost the economy and save jobs. They know exactly how to reform health care and keep our homeland safe. Political pundits and news organizations claim that if we only stick to our principles, principles that were established by Washington, Jefferson, and signers of the Constitutions, that our country will be a great country. These principles may or may not work in a given year. These political congressmen and congresswoman might have good or bad ideas. But they are not the redeemers of our nation. We are not saved by legislation or campaign promises. Governments cannot take care of all our needs, especially the need to rescue us from sin.

We want our fellow Christians to be perfect in every way. We want them to be above blame al the

time, constantly spiritual in heart and mind. Tim Tebow is a name we all know. He is known for playing outstanding football in college – whether Georgia fans want to admit it or not – and he is also well-known for his Christian witness. Tebow knows what he believes, and people admire him for it. I was listening to my sports radio on Monday, and the radio personality made glowing comments about his time with Tebow. “Tebow is honest, he is genuine. He is a guy you want to hang out with and talk about anything, because he is such a friendly, engaging person.” What would happen if, tomorrow, the news reported that Tim Tebow sinned in some way? It is reported that he was caught in some scandal - how would we feel about it? We might be angry. We might be devastated. We might feel hopeless about any Christian celebrity, because they all seem to slip up and conform to the patterns of this world. Yet, Tim Tebow is not our redeemer. If something ever happened – and we pray it never would – we must realize that Tebow is just as imperfect as we are. Any Christian friend might fall from grace in our eyes, and if they do we soon realize that they need a Redeemer just as we do.

God knows you and I are not the Redeemer. He never created human beings to be saviors. God created us to worship him and to serve his will.

Because we have a hard time doing this because of our sin, God the Father gave us his Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus our Redeemer does so much for us that we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus gives courage to face the tough choices in life. We don't have to make the tough choices alone. Jesus stands before us and behind us. He gives us the brain power to make decisions, and he gives us the courage to face every decision we have to make, and every change we have to endure.

Jesus our Redeemer and Savior gives us the desires of our hearts. We may think those desires include an expensive car, a large house, a high-paying job. Yet Jesus knows what our true desires are. Jesus fulfills our needs. He becomes the Desire of our hearts, and we orientate ourselves so we live for him. He gives us the means to live each day with purpose and joy. He gives us the way out of sin and death, and provides the way to eternal glory with God the Father.

So we go back to Barabbas, Son of the fathers, and Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father, standing on either side of Pontius Pilate. A crowd gathered in front of them is shouting for Barabbas's release and for Jesus' execution.

One might think that the crowd just saved Barabbas from a terrible death. By their concerted

effort, they made it possible for a man to see another day. But they did nothing of the kind. It is Jesus who saves Barabbas. He doesn't run away or hide from persecution. Jesus knows it is his time to die on a cross, so he might save Barabbas, and the people in the crowd, and Pilate, and Pilate's wife, and all other Roman and Jewish officials. Jesus will carry on, toward the cross, toward the tomb, and toward the resurrection. He will cancel out sin and usher forth eternal life. All who know they need a Redeemer can approach Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins and for the free gift of everlasting years with God the Father.

The Bible doesn't say anything else about Barabbas. However, there is an obscure book I picked up in the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary once. It was written by an obscure author named Par Lagerkvist, and it toyed with the idea of what Barabbas's life might have been like after Jesus' death and resurrection. Lagerkvist wrote that Barabbas wanders the city of Jerusalem, trying to understand what Jesus did for him. He saw Jesus from a distance, and speaks with Jesus' believers and followers as they carry out ministry. He sits with Peter in the temple and asks him about Jesus, and he meets with Lazarus who was resurrected by Jesus after four days in a grave. Barabbas simply cannot understand



how the Son of Man would die for anyone, especially for him.

Barabbas thinks Jesus is a Redeemer, but he still wrestles with how this Redeemer could die so willingly. He wears a stone on a necklace around his neck with something etched on it signifies he might belong to somebody else. Jesus Christ. He tries to be a follower of Christ, turning completely from his old murderous ways.

One night a great fire erupts in the city, and the Christians are being blamed for it. Christianity is not very popular among the Romans at that time, and Roman soldiers are rounding them up for jail and even death. Barabbas is arrested and presented to the jailer for questioning. He sees Barabbas is wearing the stone and necklace, and he inquires what the message is on the stone. Barabbas confesses that he belongs to Christ, the true Messiah. That is enough to send him to the cross, the form of capital punishment he had escaped when Jesus first saved him.

As Barabbas hangs on the cross, he still doesn't understand what Jesus did for him. But in his dying, he realizes he needs to go to Jesus. He needs to fully accept what Jesus did so many years ago. Par Lagerkvist ends his obscure story with these words: "When he felt death approaching, that which he had always been so afraid of, he said out into the

darkness, as though he were speaking to it: – To thee I deliver up my soul. And then he gave up the ghost.”<sup>1</sup>

In life and in death we belong to one Person, Jesus Christ, the only Redeemer we need.

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<sup>1</sup> Par Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, translated by Alan Blair (New York, NY: Random House, 1951), 180.

## Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: God's mercy is poured out like a mighty river. God's grace flows like a never-ending stream. Whatever we have done and whatever we have failed to do are washed away. We are made clean. We are raised up. We are forgiven and set free in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God, amen.

