

Unsaved Saviors
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So, what's this "Saved Savior" trope in the Bible all about? Have you noticed it? Maybe not the term "Saved Savior," since I made it up yesterday. But have you noticed that a lot of the most important savior types in the Bible have to get saved themselves first?

It's so common that our Exodus reading today began with a one sentence reset so the pattern could start over: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Remember Joseph? The favorite boy of Jacob with the pretty coat and self-serving dream interpretations? His jealous brothers threw him into a pit to die, but he was saved when they decided to sell him to a band of Midianites instead, who sold him to an Egyptian named Potiphar, which is how one of Jacob's sons came to be living in a land with plenty of grain when the famine hit that would have done in their family, and the nation they were to become. Joseph, the Saved Savior.

But he's not the archetypal one. That would be Moses. Because once the regime changed in Egypt, the Israelites had no political clout. The new king decided that these foreigners were not hard working and productive members of society, but threats and menaces. But somehow the more they were oppressed, the more they procreated. Robert Alter translates the sentence just prior to our reading today, "And the sons of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and grew very vast, and the land was filled with them."

Isn't that terrific? Alter says the Hebrew verb for *swarm* is the one attached to the creeping things in the creation story. So, there are swarms of these Israelites in Egypt, and the more you try to exterminate them the more they reproduce. It's less an image of divine intervention than one of the irrepressible fruitfulness of creation, which is alive in these enslaved Hebrew people. But from the Egyptian perspective it was just a frustrating exercise in pest control. Pharaoh's extermination plan is how little Moses ends up in a basket in the Nile.

There's another fine little detail I can't let pass. That little wicker basket is called a *tevah*, an ark. It's the same word used to describe the big gopher wood boat that Noah was...that's right... saved in so the human race and all the creatures of the earth could be saved as well.

Oh, and while we're at it, later in the Christian Bible, an insecure king named Herod will hear of Jesus's birth and issue the very Pharaoh-like decree that all children under two must be killed. Fortunately, Joseph — Jesus's thought-to-be father, not the technicolor dream coat guy — Joseph was warned of this in a dream. So, he and Mary took their child...where? To Egypt. Jesus, the saving-est savior of them all, goes first to Egypt to be saved.

This is a rather swarming attempt to provide a sense of the way scripture echoes and recalls and reimagines itself, over and over again. For people who thought they could dismiss the whole Bible if they showed anything in it was less than literally true, these add up to a bunch of impossible coincidences. But what they suggest to me are sacred stories that share in a deep and consistent intuition about the way things are. So, maybe there's a deeper truth in the idea of a Saved Savior that's worth attending to, no matter what era or country or religion you live out your life within.

Yesterday, Ardelle and I were riding our bikes on the Green Line. I told her what story I was planning to preach on and mentioned my "saved savior" idea. Without missing a pedal stroke, she said, "So are you going to talk about 'Nice White Parents'?"

Now, some of you may have noticed that I like to explore Biblical stories with other stories. The first half of this sermon was a way of saying the Bible does this too. But I like quirky anecdotes that don't seem

directly relevant. Figuring out the possible connection is how I hold the attention of all eleven of you who haven't nodded off by minute four.

Ardelle's suggestion made me squirm, because it wasn't a curious diversion. "Nice White Parents" is an *Unsaved Savior* story. One I think many of us...one that *I*, at least...need to hear.

We listened to this podcast as we drove back to Memphis on Thursday. Its creator is a mother named Chana who was looking for a middle school in Brooklyn for her child. New York has one of the most segregated school systems in America. Which means intense competition for seats in the highest performing schools, and a lot of anxious shopping by parents of children who didn't get one.

While school shopping, Chana meets a good hearted, non-profit fundraiser by day dad named Rob, who did something remarkable. He asked the principal at a neighborhood school called the School for International Studies (or SIS) if she would consider adding a French immersion program. He then went to a group of friends and said, "Hey, if we stick together, SIS will add a French program." And they did. Word spread that SIS was suddenly hot, and enrollment tripled in a single year.

Now, something Chana had noticed when she toured neighborhood schools was that nearly 100% of the parents on the tours were white, but 90% or so of the students were black and brown. So when enrollment went from 30 to over 100 in a single year, the demographics of SIS changed drastically as well. It got way, way whiter.

Rob immediately got to work raising money for the French program. To give you a sense of the worlds that were colliding here, Rob had raised, I kid you not, \$800,000 for his kids' elementary school the year before. The SIS PTA had raised \$2,000.

The plot unfolds toward a big fundraising event. Imee, the PTA president, got her feathers ruffled when Rob started raising money without consulting her group. But she admitted her frustrations, and tried to be supportive. She asked for better communication. And, if there were to be a big fundraising event, she insisted that it be 1) held at the school, and 2) completely free for everyone. A community event. All perfectly agreeable to our dear Rob. And I say "dear" because I have no doubt that I would like Rob a lot if I met him at the farmer's market. I really would.

There was plenty more tension to fuel the plot, even before the actual fundraiser happened. Which — spoiler alert — did not end up being a community event held at the school after all. It was at the palatial French Embassy on Manhattan's Upper East Side, 45 minutes away. And it couldn't be free, because the embassy sent out 22,000 invitations, and that's a lot of wine and cheese to give away for a poor Brooklyn school they'd never heard of. Imee and her husband went anyway, God bless them. They worked a raffle table, cheerfully telling Manhattanite friends of the French Embassy about their child's school.

One was a talkative woman named Barbara, who was pleased to learn they were parents and then held forth on how learning another language opens the world for a person. Briefly coming up for air, she turns to our narrator Chana and says, "And what is your name?"

"Chana."

"Anna. I was just telling Anna, when I go to Paris, which I do every year —"

"Cool!" Imee interjects, hoping to sell her a raffle ticket for airfare, I think.

"It is cool. And it's cooler because I can speak the language... You have entree into their society. Not totally; one will never have total entree. But you can interact with your neighbors. You can interact in a restaurant. You can interact at the dry cleaner... And they so appreciate an American who can speak French..."

On Barbara rambles until our cringe muscles are about to give out. Barbara with the apartment in Paris that feels just like her place in Gramercy Park, explains to Imee, the bilingual Puerto Rican woman speaking English to her, that being bilingual makes a person more sophisticated. And congratulates her for wanting her child to learn French. Which she doesn't, of course.

"Imee," narrates Chana, "was exceedingly polite."

Barbara is the kind of real-life caricature podcast producers dream of. Which isn't a help if she lets the rest of us off the hook. What felt like the real punch of truth to the gut of Ardelle and me, nice white parents

that we are, was that these stories are supposed to end happily when the children see through the foibles of us grownups.

But three sixth grade boys, sweaty from soccer, talk to Chana one day. Telling her innocently how bad the school was before they arrived. How poor the kids' attention probably was and how little they learned, even though none of these boys was at SIS yet. But their class is doing better. Learning at a faster pace. The school improved with their arrival. With the beautiful candor of an 11-year-old, one says, "It's going to be one of the top choices. Already, in Brooklyn, when you're applying to middle schools, you get a book on statuses and stuff. And I think this school is actually really high up in the statuses..."

High up in the "book of statuses." He was referring to the directory of schools, but of course he spoke the truth. The presence of white kids (and white parents) brings a rise in one's place in all the books of statuses. And status attracts status, right? Isn't that the progress game?

I'm telling you all this, because I think this is a present day story about the damage done by unsaved saviors. Like me.

After Moses is saved in his little wicker ark in the bulrushes, he will grow up to be used by God to save the Hebrew people from slavery. And from that point on, every time Israel is told to re-center themselves on their true identity, they are told, "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out with a mighty hand." Not remember when you were heroes or victors. Not when you rode into town and raised everyone's statuses. Remember that you were in need of salvation, and it was provided. This is your deepest identity. Saved, not saviors. We still do so much well intentioned damage in this world when we live otherwise.

I don't think there's a more pressing moral issue for Christians in America today than the issue of race. And as a white man I'll admit to feeling a lot of despair that there's any faithful way forward at all. At least for me. It can honestly feel like there is no right, untainted, non-racist next thing to do.

It was easier when we thought racism was only about people who bomb churches or drive cars into protests. But we know that it's not. In fact, it may be most forcefully alive in the invisible motives and mindless actions of people like me. People who want to use their privilege and power to do good things. But still can't quite believe that I'm the one in this story who needs to be saved from my sins.

But what if this despair, that many white Christians are beginning to feel, is the work of the Holy Spirit? Because until we see ourselves first as enslaved and in need of a freedom we cannot get for ourselves, we simply can't enter the redeeming stories of scripture as anyone other than an oppressor. This is the explicit teaching and the deep structure of the Bible, from Moses to Esther to the prophets to Jesus to Paul. Until we see ourselves as helpless to save ourselves, we can't play our small part in God's saving work in the world.

But the paradoxical good news is that if we can see ourselves as a people whose wills and loves and actions are utterly broken, deeply in need of a salvation only God can grant... Well, this is precisely when we do enter the story of scripture. And maybe then room enough can be made in our broken hearts for a savior who is not us to enter them. Alter them. Save them and the world around us from our sins.