

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

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*Questions at Calvary Sermon Series – Atonement, Mark 14:1-15:47*

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.<sup>1</sup> *Amen.*

Feel how far we have travelled in Mark's Gospel: from the supernatural oracle at its outset,<sup>2</sup> the heavens splitting open,<sup>3</sup> and a holy spirit lighting upon Jesus<sup>4</sup> ... to his and his disciples' conquering of demons,<sup>5</sup> disease,<sup>6</sup> and even the antagonistic natural world<sup>7</sup> ... to the high hopes just moments ago and the parade of palms upon their devoted band's entrance into Jerusalem<sup>8</sup> ... and, then, *this* ... this devastation.<sup>9</sup>

Like Christopher Reeve in *Superman II* having yielded his invulnerability and getting his lip bloodied in that diner,<sup>10</sup> as Jesus turns toward the Holy City following his transfiguration, the extraordinary powers he has wielded so impressively suddenly melt away, lose their efficacy. When he faces the social, religious, and political hierarchies – those systems and structures that bind him and his followers – his divinity yields to the limits of his mortality.<sup>11</sup>

The night in Gethsemane reinforces Jesus' humanity, when he prays to God – for whom “all things are possible” – and asks God to remove the cup of death Jesus now sees with terrible clarity before him.<sup>12</sup> Jesus' moment of vulnerability reflects his friends' struggle to stay awake, yet, while the disciples' heavy eyelids ultimately overcome their best intentions,<sup>13</sup> Jesus submits to the peril before him.<sup>14</sup> By this integrity – Jesus marrying his belief and his action – the more Jesus musters faithfulness, the more strength he has for fidelity.<sup>15</sup>

Last week our sermon series began with “theodicy,” answering the fundamental question of Palm Sunday: *If there is a God, and if that God is loving, and if that God is all-powerful, then how could that loving, omnipotent God allow this horror to happen?* We named how the early Church – from its position of relative powerlessness – subordinated God's Love, to God's power, choosing to understand their suffering as parcel to “God's will,” a divine plan that would ultimately lend meaning to their misery as a necessary step toward a future redemption.

In turn, we named how our very different American circumstance of global power and privilege inspires different answers. We *flipped* the ancient understanding; we subordinated God's power, to God's love. Refusing the idea of God as the cause of any harm, we affirmed instead that if God could save one from suffering, then God would save all, for all of us are loved fully and loved equally; yet, because God has not saved all from suffering, then we must accept *God cannot save any* – not even Jesus on the cross. This theodicy reconciliation affirms our freedom (that gift requiring God's self-limiting the Divine power to control); acknowledges our

complicity in the world's suffering;<sup>16</sup> and expects our faithful labor for that world's healing and renewal.<sup>17</sup> God will not make those loving choices for us; we must make them ourselves.

Today we consider the implication of these approaches to theodicy for the "atonement" – how the Church has understood Jesus' crucifixion.

Building on the canonical epistles, the Church has traditionally understood Jesus' death as a sacrifice in the style of their Temple devotions.<sup>18</sup> The Cross fulfills what the Temple offerings only anticipated.<sup>19</sup> For us Episcopalians, our Rite I, Eucharistic Prayer voices this idea crisply: Jesus "made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world."<sup>20</sup> Whereas the Jewish faithful offered continuing Temple sacrifices for their ongoing, individual ablution, Jesus' act accomplishes this purification finally and for all.

Yet, this framework begs clarifications: Who offers the sacrifice? To whom has the sacrifice been offered? What salvation does the sacrifice accomplish? Does "all" really mean *all*?

Early Christian thinkers propose that Jesus was "ransomed" for us sinners. This tradition imagines that humankind's sin-sickness testifies to the devil's victory; Satan holds us inescapably captive – yet, with a vulnerability: Satan's insatiable appetites. See, while our sinfulness *earns* our detention – and we cannot free *ourselves* from our situation – Jesus remains sinless and shares none of humanity's guilt. Even so, the devil cannot resist and claims the Nazarene as his own. This overreach avails God a Deathstar-trench<sup>21</sup> to salvage the creation.

See, Jesus' willingness to endure crucifixion sets a trap, with Jesus' humanity the bait, and his divinity the hook. When the devil bites – exceeds his authority – the hook sets. God has Satan dangling on the line and reclaims humankind for good.<sup>22</sup>

Among other troubles, this ransom model depends upon the cosmology of Jesus' day; remember: for Mark's community, humankind lives at the front of a battle pitting God and the angels against Satan and the demons, with rules of that engagement (problematically) requiring God's deference to Satan's authority. In time, the emergence of new cosmological ideas adapted this theory. Instead of a battle between God and the devil requiring Divine trickery, the idea of the *Christus victor* imagines Jesus as triumphing over evil and the world's wiles.<sup>23</sup> In this theory of the atonement, Jesus dies to *conquer* death, a liberation Christ shares with humankind as an expression of God's goodness, rather than as the result of any negotiation or battle.

Other atonement theories propose Jesus satisfies – covers – our sin.<sup>24</sup> From Adam's and Eve's inaugural disobedience, we have dishonored God, and, given the difference in our respective stations – God imagined as a feudal lord, and we as mere vassal subjects – we cannot bridge this deficit on our own. Rather than our eternal condemnation, Jesus as "lord," and Jesus as perfectly and unfailingly faithful, offers himself on our behalf to restore our right relationship with God.

Just as changes in Christian and secular cosmology prompted further development of the ransom theory, the rule of law's succession of the feudal system inspired new understandings of Jesus' death as a substitute for the punishment we deserve. Rather than dishonoring our manor lord with our disobedience, these ideas propose humankind has committed legal offenses for which we are accountable to God as our judge.<sup>25</sup> Though sinless, Jesus enters this cosmic courtroom drama, accepts God's guilty verdict on our behalf, and endures the punishment that should have been assigned to us, the depravity of Jesus' torture expressing the ugly depths of our sinfulness.

These sets of atonement theories – ransom and substitution – both continue the subordination of God's Love to God's power. Returning to our Eucharistic prayers, hear from the form we will offer in just a few moments: Jesus "stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself *in obedience to your will*, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world."<sup>26</sup> Though Jesus demonstrates great fidelity, in these theories of atonement, God orchestrates the Passion events and "wills" Jesus' suffering, whether as a trick, or a test, or a payment, or an absolution. God remains firmly in control.

A third atonement model – moral influence – preserves the priority of God's Love before God's power. As Jesus dies – crying out to a God who does not answer him<sup>27</sup> – ***we see ourselves: not as the victim God has sent to the cross, but as complicit with the crucifiers who nailed him there.*** Jesus has freely chosen peaceableness and mercy and grace, and we have freely chosen violence and judgement and division. Jesus "dies for our sins" – not simply because "he gets what we deserve," but *because of* our prideful, selfish, vulgar sins.

Jesus' selflessness sings God's Love, for "greater love hath no one than this, to lay down one's life for their friends."<sup>28</sup> The power of this sacrifice intends to "influence" reciprocity between Jesus' action and the actions of the community he served. That is, in this subjective model Jesus' crucifixion not only means something *to* us, but expects something *from* us. Specifically, Jesus' death on the cross calls us to die to sin, to offer ourselves for the good of the Gospel. Likewise, the manifestation of Jesus' Love intends to inspire *our* love – our love for one another and our love for God.

As the Christian Church begins again the negotiation of Holy Week's hierarchies, we should take care. Just as Jesus proved vulnerable to those systems and structures that bound him and his followers – his sinlessness no shield – our faithfulness will not keep us from all peril. While God does not "will" any of us to the cross, be certain that the powers and principalities<sup>29</sup> still carry their hammers and nails and hard wood.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, *we lean into the mysteries of our faith*, into the crucified One who knows our fear and hurt. *We lean into one another*, into the care of our beloved in this community. And *we lean into our hope*, daring an Easter belief in the impossible.

We join this pilgrim march as companions in the household of God,

*Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> From Psalm 31.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:1-3.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 1:10a.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 1:10b.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 1:21-28, among many examples.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:40-45, among many examples.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:35-41, as a powerful instance.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 11:1-10.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 15:37-38.

<sup>10</sup> [I know, I know, an illustration that feels a little glib for the day](#), but it is what comes to me. Before this, Jesus has a “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for” way about him, and it’s striking that the power seems to expire.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 14:1-2 grants us readers a peek into the conspiracy.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 14:36.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 14:32-42.

<sup>14</sup> In *Mark As Story*, David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie note that as Calvary approaches, we increasingly see Jesus as the “peasant woodworker from the village of Nazareth in Galilee,” that precocious boy with an unknown father. They describe Jesus as “neither God nor a divine being, but a human, a son of humanity, who has been given great authority by God. Jesus is the commissioned agent of God, sent as an ambassador to inaugurate God’s rule. He is God’s son because God has given him the authority of a son and because he is in turn obedient to God. He is also God’s son because he is the human heir who will sit on God’s right hand when God’s rule comes in power. [Yet, *this* Jesus has no position of power, no status in the life of the nation.]”

<sup>15</sup> *Mark As Story* hits this note, as well. I mean to make a “The hardest step of the journey is the first” sort of point, but more than that, too; faithfulness feeds faithfulness because we never endeavor faith alone – the Body of Christ (our Beloved Community of church) and the Holy Spirit accompany and encourage us [let the record reflect my resistance to referencing Ephesians 3:20-21 for the 104<sup>th</sup> time this Program Year].

<sup>16</sup> Don’t blame God; the world’s condition is not God’s choice, but ours.

<sup>17</sup> Don’t wait for God to fix it; repair of the world’s condition is not God’s responsibility, but ours.

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 2:14-18 stands out.

<sup>19</sup> As a guide for these atonement theologies, I turned to my well-worn seminary textbook, Alister E. McGrath's *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. McGrath proposes this framework imagined the Cross accomplished what the Temple sacrifices "were only able to intimate, rather than achieve."

<sup>20</sup> From "Eucharistic Prayer I," of "The Holy Eucharist, Rite I," in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 334. I love me some Rite I – not because I agree with its words, but because those words are so dang fond and familiar. I think first of all the 7:00 AM, daily Lenten Eucharists I have prayed, where it was "meet, right, and our bounden duty" to gather morning after morning. Good stuff.

<sup>21</sup> "[Great shot, kid! That was one in a million.](#)" Oddly edited by the people at Skywalker Ranch.

<sup>22</sup> Images from Rufinus of Aquileia, as quoted by McGrath, p. 416.

<sup>23</sup> As McGrath notes, Gustaf Aulén resuscitated this theory in 1931.

<sup>24</sup> Anselm its leading ambassador.

<sup>25</sup> Luther is not my bag, though this idea so drenches even our contemporary thought and culture that it sneaks into my head, unbidden (likely with Sam Waterson in one role or another).

<sup>26</sup> From "Eucharistic Prayer A," of "The Holy Eucharist, Rite II," in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 362. Man, this is a super-dang dense sermon. As I kidded with someone after worship, let it be a buffet: take the deviled eggs and leave the asparagus. Among other benefits for "those who can endure to the end," I value engaging these atonement ideas and then approaching our prayers with greater attention and curiosity.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 15:34. Maybe the toughest moment, hardest words, and most difficult silence in the book. The leering at the foot of the cross ("Listen, he is calling for Elijah ... let's see whether Elijah will come to take him down.") feels as real as the pain from Jesus expresses.

<sup>28</sup> John 15:13.

<sup>29</sup> From the King James translation of Ephesians 6:12: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." For our age (and cosmology), I do not read this as pointing toward the battle imagined in the ransom theory of the atonement. Instead, I read this as referencing the power of our *collective* sin that reigns with our complicity, yet beyond our direct control (eg, war, polluted water, inequitable healthcare, etc.).

<sup>30</sup> I wanted to conclude with an image McGrath references from nineteenth-century, Connecticut-native, congregationalist-minister, Horace Bushnell: "Christ's death affects God and expresses God: 'Whatever we may say or hold or believe concerning the vicarious sacrifice of Christ, we are to affirm in the same manner of God. The whole Deity is in it, in it from eternity ... **There is a cross in God before the wood is seen on the hill ... It is as if there were a cross unseen, standing on its undiscovered hill, far back in the ages.**" I couldn't quite pull it off.