**The Cross and “At-one-ment”**

**Introduction to Salvation Series**

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*Scripture: Gen 22:1-19, Revelation 5:1-14*

A few weeks ago in Women’s Bible Study, we started a series on the cross with a question: what – if anything – does the cross mean to your faith? Various views were shared around the table: for some, the cross isn’t a particularly important symbol; for others, the crucifix and the sign of the cross are important symbols of being raised Catholic; for still others, it was a reminder of the cost of Jesus’ ministry of peace and justice, which was seen as a threat to the powerful rulers of his day; others saw it as “The Old Rugged Cross” – a symbol of comfort, forgiveness, and salvation.

Today we’re beginning a worship series on salvation, which is not a word that we’ve tended to use a lot in our worship. We don’t, for instance, practice “altar calls,” in which people are invited forward during worship to publicly repent and receive forgiveness and salvation. I would guess that our Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of salvation is a bit less dramatic than that, and more about the ordinary yet sacred work of following in the footsteps of Christ, of living in such a way that we love God and neighbour. I’d say Mennonite salvation is more service-style than revival-meeting-style. And yet, we wouldn’t deny that the cross is somehow tied to salvation. Our current season of Lent begins (for some) with the sign of the cross placed on foreheads on Ash Wednesday, and ends at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, which becomes the empty cross of Easter Sunday. We are surrounded by no less than 18 crosses (see if you can find them all!) as we worship in this sanctuary during this season of the church year. No wonder Lent is sometimes referred to as our “journey to the cross”!

So if the cross is so important, how exactly does it save us? Or, in the words of my faculty advisor at the Toronto School of Theology – what does the cross save us from? And what does it save us for? Now unfortunately, there is no one, clear answer to these questions, either in Scripture or in the Christian tradition. The Bible talks about the work of God in the cross using a whole range of terms: “reconciliation, redemption, liberation or salvation, forgiveness, justification,” as well as “atonement” sacrifice or “offering,” with Jesus as the “lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” to quote John the Baptist (John 1:29, 36). The “atonement sacrifice” is a reference to the Hebrew “Day of Atonement,” which included offering animal sacrifices to God to cleanse the people from sin (Lev. 16). Today, Jewish people observe it a bit differently, but it remains the most important holiday of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. So the idea is that some of the significance of the Jewish Day of Atonement comes to be associated with Jesus and his death on the cross, along with all these other ways of naming salvation or redemption. Sounds kind of like our Bible study discussion, doesn’t it? There are again many layers of meaning that the cross offers in the Bible.

Theologians don’t help us narrow it the number of interpretations of the cross, either. Unlike for some of the other major doctrines, there was never a council at which the early church leaders sat down and said, "This will be the Christian understanding of salvation." Instead, theologians speak of a number of different atonement theories, or explanations of how the cross saves. Now I don't want to get bogged down in looking at the whole range of these, but rather focus on the most well-known "atonement theory" - known as substitutionary or satisfaction or punitive atonement, which is based on the thought of twelfth-century theologian Anselm of Canterbury. Briefly put, it goes like this: in the beginning, God made humanity in the divine image. Then humanity sinned, and because God is so holy, God cannot look upon sin. God established that the punishment for sin is death. But humanity sinned so much that the debt became too much for humanity to repay. So God sent Jesus, God's Son, to take on our sin and die on the cross in our place – or as our substitute (that's where the "substitutionary" piece comes in). He died to satisfy divine wrath and justice and to pay for our sins on our behalf. So Jesus bore the punishment for our sins.[[1]](#footnote-1) Sound familiar?

Starting already in Anselm’s time, though, other Christian theologians began questioning his understanding of the cross, specifically its depiction of God as the one who requires the death of God's own son Jesus. What about forgiveness? They asked. Anselm claimed that he was holding together God’s justice with God’s mercy, but other theologians have found it hard to find evidence of God’s love in his thought. More recently, some theologians have protested that Anselm depicts "divine child abuse" in depicting God as requiring or causing the violent death of Jesus, God's own child. Mennonite theologian J Denny Weaver has made the case that this understanding of the cross does not leave us with a forgiving God at all, since this God “only forgives after receiving his pound of flesh.”

So, what does the Bible have to say about it? Well, perhaps unexpectedly, I’ve chosen to turn to the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, to a story in Genesis which speaks to some of the questions raised above concerning God’s character, or how we depict what God is doing or what God’s role is, in the event of the cross.   
 In Gen. 22, as we heard, we have the somewhat perplexing story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his only child, Isaac, for whom he and Sarah had waited for many years and through whom God’s promises to Abraham and Sarah are supposed to be fulfilled. God says, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” (Gen. 22:2). And Abraham obeys this horrific command from God, and takes his son up the mountain. The poor, unsuspecting child even asks at one point, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” and Abraham tells a half-truth: “God will provide a lamb, my son” (v. 7-8). And Abraham gets to the point of having the knife in his hand, ready to “kill his son” upon the altar, when an angel stops him, saying, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (v. 10-11). Abraham then sees a ram in the thicket and sacrifices that instead. And that’s when we all breathe a huge sigh of relief! The child is spared! According to the text, God was just “testing” Abraham, to see if he would sacrifice that which is most precious to him in the world – Isaac. And Abraham passed the test.

Now, some commentators have wondered why God tested Abraham in this way in the first place, and some have concluded that this story is about how Abraham and Sarah are called to be different from their neighbours, who practiced child sacrifices to their gods and deities. Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, are rather supposed to practice animal sacrifice as part of their worship. So we’re shown a progression from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice – and later, rams will be replaced by prayers and hymns within our worship.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One can’t help but make the connection, though, to another Father and Son whose story didn’t end quite so happily. In Anselm’s substitutionary understanding of the cross, God the Father repeats Abraham’s actions, but the knife ends up coming down, so to speak, as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dies a tortured death on the cross. The progress from child sacrifice to animal sacrifice is seemingly “reversed,” as God goes through with the terrible plan. In the words of Dorothee Soelle: “Only on Golgotha does Moriah find fulfillment; only there does God strike the final blow.” So God supposedly carries out what God stopped Abraham from doing.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But is that really what our faith teaches us? That God is violent and vengeful, requiring blood to pay for sin and satisfy divine justice? That God puts God’s own son to death, or, at best, watches it happen without intervening, sending no angel this time to shout, “Wait! Stop!” Soelle asks, “Who wants such a God?”

Brian Zhand, a pastor and author in the U.S., has a great little video on YouTube called “The Gospel in Chairs.”[[4]](#footnote-4) I invite you to look it up sometime (I know, like me, you’re all itching to watch theological videos in your free time). In it, he explains that Anselm’s view isn’t the only way to understand the cross. In fact, there’s a “more ancient, more biblical, restorative understanding” of the atonement or how the cross saves us. And the key to his explanation is that the Anselmian view puts too much distance between God and Jesus Christ, which ends up treating them like two separate characters in the narrative of salvation. Instead of the idea that Jesus came to satisfy God the Father’s wrath, Zhand emphasizes that Jesus came to reveal what God is like. Zhand says, “God is like Jesus. God has always been like Jesus. We haven’t always known that God is like Jesus. But now we do.” And this really makes a difference to how we understand the cross. Rather than God causing or requiring the cross because of God’s wrath, the narrative becomes: In the beginning, God created humanity in the divine image, but humanity sinned and became subject to “futility and death.” We alienated ourselves from God, and so God, in God’s love, takes on humanity in order to draw near to us and reconcile with us. Jesus’ ministry reveals that God is not squeamish about sin and sinners! God doesn’t turn God’s back on sinners. Jesus – God-with-us – touched and ate and drank with and had compassion for all kinds of sinners and outcasts during his lifetime – tax collectors, adulterers, prostitutes, the mentally ill. God never turns away sinners because God is “too holy” to look on them. God in Christ never does that. So the God who condemns and metes out bloody punishment doesn’t resemble Jesus at all.

Then, at the end of his life, we human beings crucify Jesus. And even then, God doesn’t condemn us for this grievous sin. God forgives us, and enters into death, taking on our entire human experience, even death. So there is no place where God is not, for God walks lovingly with us even in death, which means that death no longer has power over us.[[5]](#footnote-5) So God is like Jesus – God is not a great executioner in the sky, but instead is the one who is crucified, taking the form of the Lamb who was slain. God does not sacrifice God’s Son, but Godself on the cross, for the sake of reconciliation with us. This understanding of the cross leads us to a different understanding of atonement – one with hyphens added so that it spells “at-one-ment,” being about God’s closeness to us in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, God’s effort to heal our sin-stained relationship with God, and reconcile us with God, to be “one” with us, whom God created in God’s image.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a former comedian-turned-Lutheran pastor who founded an offbeat church called “The House for All Sinners and Saints,” articulates it well:

“I was stunned that Good Friday by this familiar but foreign story of Jesus’ last hours, and I realized that in Jesus, God had come to dwell with us and share our human story. Even the parts of our human story that are the most painful. God was not sitting in heaven looking down at Jesus’ life and death and cruelly allowing his son to suffer. God was not looking down on the cross. God was hanging *from* the cross. God had entered our pain and loss and death so deeply and took all of it into God’s own self so that we might know who God really is. Maybe the Good Friday story is about how God would rather die than be in our sin-accounting business anymore.

… There is simply no knowable answer to the question of why there is suffering. But there is meaning. And for me that meaning ended up being related to Jesus – Emmanuel – which means ‘God with us.’ We want to go to God for answers, but sometimes what we get is God’s presence.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Now as helpful as I hope this has been, it doesn’t mean that we’ve solved the enigma of the cross, or reduced its evocative multiplicity to a single meaning. Believe it or not ,the vivid imagery of Revelation 5 can help us to avoid that particular pitfall. In this passage, Jesus is identified as “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” but also as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David,” who “has conquered” (Rev. 5:5-6). And this Lamb/Lion is declared worthy to open a sacred scroll. Now this is all metaphorical and symbolic language, of course, but one layer of its significance is that God has upended our expectations. We expect God’s power to be like that of the Lion – powerful, terrifying, violent, even bloody. But when God approaches, God turns out to be a wounded lamb. God is one of the most vulnerable creatures we can think of. And yet this Lamb is not weak. Vulnerability is not equated with weakness, here. Instead, the Lion/Lamb of God is declared “worthy” and a “conqueror.” To me, this reveals that there is a profound strength in love that violence can only dream of!

In this way, God saves us – God undoes the power of sin and death in the way we’d least expect – not through wrath, but through incarnation. God becomes fully human and walks among us and with us, even to the point of dying on the cross. This is the God who knows what we are going through, who has experienced the entirety of the human condition, and whose love will never leave us. As Bolz-Weber says, “We want to go to God for answers, but sometimes what we get is God’s presence.” As we continue on our path toward the cross this Lenten season, let us be thankful to God for God’s constant, loving, saving presence. Amen.

1. Adapted from Pastor Brian Zhand's "The Gospel in Chairs" sermon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wnj52gaauBs>, and Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Human)*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1975), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Soelle, 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Adapted from Pastor Brian Zhand's "The Gospel in Chairs" sermon, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wnj52gaauBs [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Adapted from Brian Zhand. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)