

Life Through His Death

1 John 2:2; 1 John 4:10

The third in a series of seven sermons on the cross for the season of Lent

The cross alone is our theology. The cross alone is our salvation. If we were to sit down and have a conversation about the question: What is the cross about?, one of us would soon say: He died on the cross to pay for my sins.

Yet today this answer is under great attack. There was another great attack on the meaning of Christ's death about 900 years ago under Anselm and Abelard, and again in the middle of the Nineteenth Century. Then about 1900 there was a controversy among Christians over Fundamentals. There were said to be twenty-five Fundamentals, and one of the top five Fundamentals was penal substitution, the idea that Christ paid our debt by the blood of the cross. What's important is that this debate has also come back in our lifetime. About twenty-five years ago there arose a massive new attack on whatever we mean by Christ dying on the cross to take care of our sins, to pay for them.

Three true stories about sacrifice that help understand this question:

First, recall that Solomon's Temple was destroyed in 587 BC, eventually rebuilt by Herod the Great and destroyed again in 70 AD. Yet even today the Jewish people, particularly Orthodox Jews, retain the fervent hope that one day they can restore the Temple in Jerusalem. This hope is sacred and is included in their formal Sabbath prayers.

Some years ago in the national U.S. Lutheran-Jewish Dialogue, in a casual conversation over lunch, the question of restoring the Temple came up and one of the Lutheran scholars asked his Jewish colleagues: If they were to restore the Temple, would they also restore the sacrifices? That is what Temple worship involved. The Jewish scholars did not respond.

The second story is about a problem that some Florida homeowners have. They report finding on their lawns or in their trash cans little dead birds and chickens that had been burnt. What's this about? Some Latin American immigrants had been practicing their native Afro-Cuban religion, Santería, which involves sacrificing animals to Santería. (In 1993 the US Supreme Court ruled that animal cruelty laws targeted specifically at Santería were unconstitutional.)

Third, while Jews today no longer offer sacrificial lambs on Passover to mark their liberation from Egypt, there is a tiny Samaritan community on the West Bank of the Jordan River that to this day keeps this tradition alive. If you go there during Passover, you can watch this happen. The high priests, dressed in ornate white robes and red fez hats, slaughter about thirty sheep and roast them in accordance with the sacrifice described in the Book of

Exodus. (The sacrifice and command to smear blood on their doorposts allowed for the plague of the first-born to pass over the houses of the Israelites.)

To us this slaughter does not seem religious at all. Why sacrifice?

Leviticus 16 describes what the Jewish people are to do on Yom Kippur, one of the highest, most sacred, of their Holy Days, the Day of Atonement. It describes exactly what the high priest is to do with these cattle which he sacrifices. Two goats will be chosen by lot. One goat will be sacrificed like all the other animals, and the other will be the scapegoat. This is where we get the term "scapegoat." The high priest places his hands on the head of the goat and in so doing transfers all the sins of the people onto the head of the goat. That goat is then released into the wilderness to carry away the sins of the people (Leviticus 16:21-22).

This is the core of what forgiveness is about in the Old Testament. We look at this whole matter as the Old Testament describes it and remember that again and again it says: The blood is the life (Deut 12:23, Lev 7:26-27, 17:10-14). And the life is sacrificed, given up, for the forgiveness of sin.

The Old Testament is clear that this is not tit for tat. That is to say: You cannot buy yourself out of sin. You cannot commit a murder and then say that cost me a bullock. It is very definitely understood in the Old Testament that this is God's mercy, that he allows in this way for you come before him. But it is not as if you could buy your way.

But, of course, the practice of sacrifice was easily abused. Not only did abuses happen in terms of trying to buy your way out, so to speak, but it became empty ritual. The Old Testament again and again rejects sacrifice: "Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire; but thou hast given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offer thou hast not required" (Psalm 40:6). See also Isaiah 1:11-17; 1 Samuel 15:22, Amos 5:21-22; and Psalm 51:16-17.

This message is repeated and takes on new meaning in the New Testament. For example, Matthew 9:13 quotes Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

Mark 10:45 states: "For the Son of man... came ... to give his life as a ransom for many." That isn't directly a reference to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, but it's an indirect reference.

Much more significant is the Book of Hebrews (the most difficult book in the New Testament): "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin" (9:22). Calvin used this verse as if it were a doctrine. That settles it. Going on to 9:26: "Jesus put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." There it is. That makes it even more specific.

What do we do about that? Let us look again at this attack against the sacrificial meaning of the cross which has intensified in recent years.

Why did God use the cross? Why did he die on the cross? To whom was the payment paid? To the Father? Was he sitting there on his throne demanding this? He could have done it by decree. He could have just said: "That's over." Or as in Exodus "I'll destroy all these and start over" (Exodus 32:10). Why did he do it this way? Why this ransom and to whom? Is there some law above God? What's this requirement?

The second part of this modern attack is: How gross! How monstrous! It's an antiquated way of thinking. We don't want to accommodate this mindset. It is just part of the past. One of the books attacking this is *Sacred Violence*. How is it that these two words go together? Another is *Sacred Fury*. (Also *Violence and the Sacred*)

All of this raises questions for us. First, about the use of the Bible. Second, what is the real problem? And finally, what is salvation? What kind of a God is this?

Mark 12 tells the story of the owner of the vineyard who repeatedly sends his servants to claim what is his own, but the tenants kill them one by one. Finally the owner sends his son and heir, and the tenants kill him, too, thinking to take all for themselves (Mark 12:1-12).

Like those tenants, we want to take over and take all. We're entitled, aren't we? We want to get God off our backs and be in control ourselves. We're owed, aren't we? So we killed him.

On the cross he bore our sins, not as a sacrifice to pay off our debt or to appease God's honor. God can't be bought off. The cross is not about buying God off.

Rather, on the cross God was in Christ solving the problem of sin and death outside of us, in spite of us. He died to defeat sin and death for us to redeem us. We wouldn't have it; we killed him, just as surely as if we were there that day.

But he was raised from the dead, vindicated by God. He lives. He comes to save us, that is, to put us to death in him so that we might be raised with him.

F. W. Dillistone concludes his famous book, *The Christian Understanding of the Atonement*, by saying that there are only two things we, crooked tenants that we are, can do to grasp what the sacrifice of the cross is about: Go to Bach and listen to his Passion of St. Matthew, or listen to Negro spirituals. In other words, the cross is beyond us. It is finally something we cannot grasp; it is a matter of awe and thankfulness.

Our way is to ask: What is God doing? And we thank him.