

“We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Romans 8:37

The fourth in a series of seven sermons for the season of Lent

Since sacrifice is gross, old-fashioned, offensive, and foreign to our culture, and since we simply don't grasp it, and since there are all these images, a hodgepodge, a kaleidoscope of ways of speaking of the cross, what do we do?

Following Paul and Luther, we confess: The cross alone is our theology. The cross alone is our salvation.

How do we sort this out? The Swedish theologian and bishop Gustaf Aulén set the course from about 1931 – 1971 with his book, *Christus Victor* (until Moltmann's *The Crucified God* became prominent). Aulén said that basic to the understanding of the cross is that Christ is the Victor. He is the conqueror, and this motif is dominant. We must not be side-tracked by sacrifice and substitutionary atonement (Anselm), as they were in the Middle Ages.

It is sometimes thought that the Bible tells of a battle between the Lord's angels, led by Michael, and Lucifer's or Satan's angels, and Lucifer/Satan lost. In fact this is not in the Bible. (In Job 1 there is a testing of Job, but this is not a battle with Lucifer/Satan.)

Out of the whole Old Testament there is one verse suggesting a battle, Isaiah 14:12: “Have you fallen from heaven, O Day Star, Son of dawn!” But this verse is referring to Babylon, not to a battle in heaven.

There is only one verse in the whole Old Testament that has a heavenly battle as its reference, Daniel 12:1: “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble such as never been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered.”

The ancient Jews knew the contemporary Babylonian and Sumerian epic poems of battles. They were very concerned about idolatry and fertility cults. They knew about the battle between chaos and cosmos in Genesis 1; it is found in the first couple of verses, hidden in the original language.

They knew about Marduk, the one who was victorious in the Babylonian myths, and they didn't want to have anything to do with Marduk. That wasn't their way of understanding the Lord.

What about the New Testament? The New Testament has a very different context. Like today, it was a time of great change. They had what is called the apocalyptic view. The last

book of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Bible is called "The Apocalypse." There is one direct reference to a heavenly battle: Rev. 12:7-9:

"Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."

That's the only place in the New Testament where such a battle is mentioned. It is a motif on the fringe. There is also a brief reference in Revelation 6:2: "And I saw . . . a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer." And in Revelation 7:14: "And he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation.'"

In terms of the Book of Revelation, that's it. As you can see, this battle theme is very much on the fringe of the New Testament.

Aulén, in his study of the cross as victory, refers to the Gospel of Mark. To be sure, in Mark there is not a battle between God's angels in the heavens and Satan's minions. But if you think about the Gospel of Mark, it's really about the battle between the Son of Man, Jesus, and the demons. There are exorcisms, casting out demons. The Gospel of Mark has the theme of conquest, of the victory of the stronger One.

In Luke 10:18 Jesus says: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."

Then in the Gospel of John 12:31: "Now is the judgment of the world, now shall the ruler of the world be cast out." And in John 16:33: "In this world you have tribulation." The battle theme is not a big theme in the New Testament.

Some people have the idea that the Bible says that between the time Jesus died and rose, he went into hell and defeated Satan. Isn't that in the Bible somewhere? No. But 1 Peter 3:18-4:6 has been used as a basis for this idea. Note particularly verse 3:19: "... he went and preached to the spirits in prison."

But the idea of a heavenly battle or a battle against demonic forces was a later invention. It arose in the Fourth Century and is called the Harrowing of Hell. (In 1 Peter 3:19 Jesus simply descended to the place of death.)

It is a favorite theme in literature. For example, Dante's descent of Christ into Limbo and his Harrowing of Hell were popular themes in religious paintings until the end of the Renaissance.

But such a battle really isn't in Scripture, even in Paul, although he does speak of Christ as victorious over sin, death, and the devil. For example, in 1 Cor 15:54-57:

"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is thy victory: O death where is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

There's also Rom 8:37: "We are more than conquerors." (How can we be more than conquerors?!) And 2 Cor 2:14: "He leads us forth in triumph."

What we in the West don't realize is that for the first 1,000 years of church history, the Eastern Orthodox Church did not stress the dying Jesus hanging on the cross. We in the West are familiar with that great Isenheim altarpiece by Grünewald of the dying Christ hanging on the cross, a prominent theme in the Western Church.

Among the Eastern Orthodox, however, it is common to see paintings of Christ ruling from the cross. He's healthy. He has a crown on his head, and he's victorious.

When the early Eastern Orthodox fathers were struggling with what the cross mean, they came up with a fishing metaphor: What happened is that Christ's flesh was like bait on a fish hook. The Evil One was fooled. He took a bite and was caught.

They thought of this image as they reflected on 1 Cor 2:8: "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." If Satan had known, he would not have taken a bite, but he was deceived and thus was caught, defeated.

There is also the "cosmic Christ," imagery which found in Colossians 1:18:

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first born of the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent."

There has been a whole body of thought that has said what this is really all about is a cosmic drama in which the Lord, who is also Lord of nature and of history, is involved and evolving toward point Omega, that is, the fulness of Christ where everything is resolved. This is based on Colossians 2:15: "He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him." In antiquity when you were victorious in battle, you paraded your victims and your spoils through the streets to show what you had done.

The “cosmic Christ” motif has problems, too. Evil is then just the shadow side of the good. All the tragedy and all the injustices of this world are simply glossed over as part of process leading to point Omega.

The victory motif, like all the motifs, fails, too. On the one hand, how could one think of it except as a kind of charade? How could there truly be a battle between the Lord of all and his angels against Satan and his angels? One would have to say that the Lord is toying with them. He knows what is going to happen, and he makes it happen. It seems to happen up there somewhere, over our heads, as if we we’re mere spectators and not at fault, as if we are just bystanders.

In fact, it happened down here on earth and we are involved, too. He’s an offense then and he’s an offense to us would-be gods. We’re like them. We denied him, betrayed him, killed him to protect ourselves. It’s self-defense. It’s either him or us. We want to be in charge, the ones in control. We don’t want him; we want to be God.

On the other hand, the victory motif helps us proclaim the cross and resurrection as a battle against demonic forces threatening to dominate and destroy us. It is only the resurrection that snatches victory from defeat, bringing about something really new, and enabling us to see the cross as a real death. The victory motif helps us see that “in a theology of the cross, the cross and resurrection *is* the way.”¹

In his Commentary on Galatians Luther writes of “the joyous duel” that happens on the cross. Referring to Paul in Romans 7:23 about the law of the Spirit opposed to the law in his body, Luther writes:

“Therefore Paul would like to draw us away completely from looking at the law, sin, and death, and other evil things, and to transfer us to Christ, in order that there we might see this very joyous duel: the law battling against the law, in order to become liberty to me; sin battling against sin, in order to become righteousness to me; death battling against death, in order that I might have life. For Christ is my devil against the devil, that I might be a son of God; he destroys hell, that I might have the kingdom of heaven.”²

Jesus knew we would betray him, and yet he sacrificed himself for us. He knows what we are, and he takes up the cross on our behalf. He comes to have mercy on us, to do us, in sinners that we are, in order to raise us with him.

¹ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 38.

² LW 26:164; LW 22:355-56.

Luther said “death and sin can no longer accuse, harm, and injure” us because Christ has conquered them. This is accomplished not by our strength, but by him on our behalf. Therefore “we like lambs, remain resting in the arms of Christ, the faithful Shepherd.”³

³ LW 22:356.