



LESSONS IN LIVING

What We Can Learn from the Creation Myth in Genesis?

“Part 8: Atonement”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 9:9-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

As Jesus walked on, he saw Matthew, a tax collector, at his post. Jesus approached and said, “Follow me,” and Matthew got up and followed. Now it happened that, while Jesus was at table in Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and notorious “sinners” came to join Jesus and the disciples at dinner. The Pharisees saw this and complained to the disciples, saying, “What reason can the Teacher have for eating with tax collectors and sinners?” Overhearing the remark, Jesus said, “People who are in good health don’t need a doctor; sick people do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Sermon

We're beginning our Easter series. I really appreciated being able to look at the mythology of Genesis and to realize a lot of the stories pre-existed before Israel was even here by thousands of years. By studying the religions of the world, we have a better sense of the patterns of our own religion. If you think of religion like a seed with a husk, the seed often dies and the husk goes on for a thousand years.

[*a child cries in the audience*] For me, it's great to hear children crying. That's a great sign of community, I think.

Christians are more able to hear the mythologies of Judaism than to realize that Christianity also has a foundation of mythology. That's particularly hard at Easter. If you don't want to go where I'm going today, that's fine. If you want to hold on to tradition, if that works for you, if the traditional views of atonement work for you, then by all means, hold on to them. If you just think atonement is something whose time has come and gone, that's fine, too.

What I want to argue is that when we look at the Easter story from the perspective of world's religions, we realize the patterns it's talking about are much bigger. If you look at the various atonement theories, they're not consistent with each other. Paul was talking differently to every culture he went to. For example, his perception of Romans was they're legalistic. The atonement was the satisfaction of justice. Jesus accomplished this when humankind could not.

There were people that believed in substitution of punishment. He had the truth that it's okay. You're not guilty, you're not hated. But he had to put this truth into different worldviews. I think if you look at the theories of atonement, and we're going to try to do that today, you realize the patterns a whole lot more.

I learned this the summer I spent as a chaplain for a year and a half as a chaplain. When you're with people that are dying, there isn't a learning curve to try to teach a scientific worldview. You're just trying to help people transition and let go. That's what Paul is doing.

This was a time in the world where there was despair all over the world because the Roman Empire, the Greek Empire, the Persian Empire had crushed the local cultures. This meant the rituals of the ancient world had been crushed. If you believed in animal sacrifice to satisfy your guilt, that was now broken.

Paul needed to come up with a bridge Where people living in terror and fear and guilt could let go of that and go into something better. Now, I don't know about you. My church was very kind, but we still taught the same salvation story. No matter how kindly you try to put it, the concept of salvation is based on fear.

No hell, no salvation, right?

For the kindly protestant churches there is no fire, but Jesus is the fire chief. Jesus will save you from something that doesn't exist, but don't think about it. *[laughter]* The traditional view most of us inherited is even worse. This view says God loves you very much, but if you turn down God's love, he will torture you for all eternity. The good news is God re-channels that fury and tantrum onto Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I can see that making me love Jesus, but I can't see it making me love God. If God wants to hurt me and hurts Jesus instead, I still have a guy with an anger problem. It's like if you went to a car mechanic and they blamed you for the broken car, even though they had repaired it.

Remember God made everything. To blame us when the system broke down doesn't seem like reality-based to me. The God I want to worship is much bigger than that, much kinder than that, and would certainly understand the human heart better than I would.

We're going to use some pictures that were donated by Kent Miller. Could we look at the first one?



We have the whole story of Easter, and we're going to look at each of these pictures during this Easter season, but we're looking at them mythologically. Myth doesn't mean it's not true. It means it's a coded set of symbols that take you deep in your own psyche.

This is like the quote from the Sufi Kabir that we heard at the beginning. It's like part of you is conscious. That's the part we're comfortable with. But you're an animal. And so much of your consciousness, your perception, much of who you are is beneath the level of your mental awareness.

We have to make friends with our animal bodies. If you know your conscious mind, but you don't know your unconscious mind, then you're really sitting there vulnerable to someone like Donald Trump to come along and push those buttons that you don't even know you have. In this time of disaster, people who refuse to hate, refuse to go into despair become healers and the hope of the world.

I believe that's what the atonement symbols are trying to point us to. Not just about Jesus, but about options that we have in these very frightening and terrible times. The question in the back of your mind, I hope during this time, is, how could I change and become a healer in the world as it is now? How can I say no to hate and despair and bring whatever light I can into the world at this transitional time?

A lot of the cultures of the world animal sacrifice. These were herder animal cultures. They weren't killing the animal just to satisfy God. They were going to eat the animal anyway. A ritual developed to consecrate that, to recognize the sacrifice of the animal, and to give yourself to the larger life. To realize if you're taking life, you need to give yourself to the larger life.



This is a very familiar story. But what isn't familiar is that this was a mythological way of getting people to give up on animal sacrifice and human sacrifice. Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son. But what the angel is saying is that's not what would make God happy. Your faith, your obedience, that satisfies all of it. Can you imagine how important that would be to a culture that thought it had to kill animals to keep God happy? That's not where animal sacrifice came from. It came from hunter-gatherer cultures trying to tune themselves to nature.



One of my favorite symbols of the idea of sacrifice is from the early church, where it had a picture of a pelican mother piercing her own breast to feed her young. The way I was taught the atonement theory is pathological. It's neurotic. That people just choose pain in absentia, or that God was so overcome with anger and wrath at me, and Jesus stepped in to take that pain.

Instead, when we look at this, we understand what Jesus is saying when he says, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. He's trying to teach his disciples the purpose of all of this was not the pain, but a love that's strong enough to go through the pain.

After church, we're going to look at some art. Art is a powerful way of transforming pain into beauty. When you get to know artists, very often they had very hard lives. You probably don't need the idea of a Jesus who steps in and takes your punishment. That works really good in Rome, where people thought God is so just that if people make mistakes, God's going to punish them no matter what.

The point was to get people out of their fear; to get them to let go and say, Jesus has satisfied all the things that are being counted against you.

This is the first notion: to let go of the pain and ugliness that seem overwhelming right now. There is a brutal stupidity that has grasped our nation. I'm not going to mention any names because I don't want to get political. *[audience laughs]* I think you know me well enough to know that, but I can do it passive-aggressively. *[audience laughs]*

The world needs some people who will turn our current pain into beauty, empathy, and mercy.

There is a second atonement theory. In the ancient world, for example, in Greece, and in certain nations, they believed humankind was under the dictating leadership of planetary beings. Sometimes they're called principalities and powers. The idea was that Mercury was Mercury, Venus was Venus, Mars was Mars. It made sense. If the planets are beings, then it makes sense to think they control us. But that's still based on the false belief that the universe was designed around us, and that we can understand the universe by looking at our life and what happens to us.



Does anybody know what planet that is? It's Venus.

Instead, we have to harmonize our life with evolution, with the cosmic process, and find our joy, our happiness there.

I was going to look this up after the first service, and I forgot. The temperature on Venus oppressive. It would boil us. The pressure would crush us. In space, the United States took the easy way. We landed on the moon and Mars. The Soviet Union tried to land on Venus repeatedly. But the atmosphere is so deadly, it would crush the vessels.

[Jim points at the slide showing the planet Venus] Now, let me ask you, does that look like where love comes from? I think there's so many religious practices that make sense as art, but they're really bad science. If we take them up, they become poisonous.

I don't want to talk about Robert Kennedy Jr. But... *[audience laughs]* isn't it interesting that he kept children from getting vaccines to prevent children from being exposed to mercury, and now measles is back in our country? Then last week he justified a new law that allows coal companies to dump mercury into our water and air. Religion that doesn't touch the real world is not a victimless crime.

The more we love nature as it is, the more we love humankind as we are, the more we feel our connections to the web of life, the more loving we can be.

The more we have to make things up for our system to work, the less of a healing agent we're going to be in the world.

We must be reasonable, testing our beliefs with science, and realize art is just as valuable, if not more valuable than science. But we must understand neither art or science can do what the other does.

Have you ever looked up in the clouds, and you saw patterns? I remember as a child trying to think, well, God's speaking to me through that. I'd see something in the clouds. That's one type of pattern. But there's also patterns in nature that ground me in who I am and ground me in who you are. The ancients called these patterns the word of God. I don't think scripture is the word of God unless it's aligned to these patterns that bring us into being.

I love Stevie Wonders' definition of superstition. He said, If you believe in things you don't understand, you suffer, and probably you cause great suffering in the world.

If we don't know, it's okay to say we don't know.

But it's also important to realize there are patterns holding us together. We can say, we don't need an atonement theory giving us the secrets of the universe whispered in our ear. But if by truth, we mean those facts we need to know, to respond to each other, to know who we are, and to know how to be in harmony with nature, then I think love can also teach us that.

Love can tell us what ideas are necessary to be a gift to humankind.

Third thing. There is another atonement theory which seems like the weirdest of the theories. It's called Christus Victor. In the ancient world, they believed in demons and angels. They believed in animal spirits. They didn't know. They didn't have science, so they were doing the best they could do. But once you believe in evil and good as abstractions, you start seeing people as good or bad.

You start seeing nations as good or bad.

Have you heard about the evil empire of Iran? We bombed 150 school children. Do you think the story is going to end there? If you were a brother or sister of one of the children murdered by the United States and Israel, do you think the story would end there? Or would you leave with a dedication to make that empire feel the pain that your people feel?

There's no effort really to negotiate this time. There was no consultation with Congress. But even if it had passed Congress, that's a colonizing empire and those days have got to come to an end.

In 1953, Iran was a peaceful democracy with a prime minister that nationalized their oil. The United States backed a political coup to reinstate a monarch, which gave them more influence over Iran.

What if we just counted which nation has dropped the most bombs since World War II? Would it be Iran or would it be the United States and Israel? What if you ask who's crossed their border to kill people in other places? Would it be Iran or the United States and Israel?

As an American, you've probably been taught you're better than other people. That Christianity is the only way. Paul taught that human righteousness can be even deadlier than human sin. Because we're all animals, and we get afraid, and we look at the world out of our fear and think we're seeing evil. Somehow, we have to heal that wound within ourselves to be healers in the larger world.

Jesus talked about forgiveness a whole lot more than morals. The fact is, we are not good at judging each other. Time and time again, Jesus said, do not judge, do not judge, do not judge. Do not judge others, and God will not judge you.

What the MAGA Christians and the right-wing churches have always said is, if you don't judge other people, God's going to judge you.

Now, either Jesus is lying or Donald Trump is lying, and you have to decide. *[Laughter]*
If you decide Donald Trump, you get a red hat, which is good. But if you choose love, you get a living human heart. I think that's even better than a red hat.

There's so much fear in the world. And it's understandable that he would look out in despair and say, where is this evil coming from? Even seeing the MAGA movement as evil prolongs our misery and our suffering. We are animals who've left their environment, and we are scared, crazy.

Hatred will not cast out hatred. That's not my saying, by the way. it's Buddha. Martin Luther King Jr. didn't come up with it. It's the Buddhist Dhammapada. If violence would cast out racism, the Civil War would have dealt with the problem.

We have to learn to be healing agents of love, even in this desperately fearful time. Even if I look out and I see someone as evil, I have to realize that is an illusion. No human being deserves that. Now, somebody can be dangerous, and we may have to stop them, but we don't have to hate them.

So this Easter, as we walk through the story, I'm hoping we can look at it mythologically, not what happened to Jesus because the stories contradict. But what does it mean to be a human being with the suffering that surrounds us, with the evil, with the confusion?

Right now, AI has untethered us from the real world. You can now see a picture you don't know if it's real or not. But love can answer that question. Love can tell you what's real. Love can turn your suffering into art and into beauty. It can turn your superstitions into works of art.

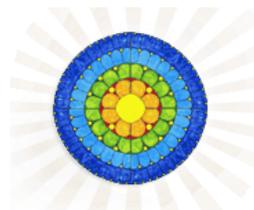
And it can turn even your fears into a compassionate embrace of your human family. The question we need to ask ourselves this Easter is, how do each of us need to change to be healing agents in this wounded world?

I invite you now to your own reflection on these words, and you'll have a minute to think about how you would have preached it. If it's better than mine, don't tell me!

Benediction Rev. Erica Knisely

May we join with each other in an honest search for the truth. With courage, may we come to know who we are. Let us remember to be merciful and most of all, to love. In the strength of a love that saw no end in Christ, may we go in peace, to love and to heal. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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