

Sermon – “A Bloodthirsty God?”
Sunday, August 19, 2018
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 53:3-12, John 3:14-21
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A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53, verses 3 through 12:

- ³ *He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised,
and we held him of no account.*
- ⁴ *Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.*
- ⁵ *But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*
- ⁶ *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*
- ⁷ *He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*
- ⁸ *By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.*
- ⁹ *They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.*
- ¹⁰ *Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring,
and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.*
- ¹¹ *Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.*
- ¹² *Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.*

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During the ancient Israelites' 40 years in the wilderness, long before Christ, there was an episode recorded in the book of Numbers in which serpents came among the people as punishment for their sins, and God told Moses to fashion a figure of a serpent, put it up on a pole, and the people bitten by snakes would not die if they looked upon it. Today's second reading references that event as a sort of foreshadowing of Christ being lifted up on a cross and also saving people from death. Hear now God's Word to you from the Gospel of John, verses 14 through 21:

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

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When we as Christians say that "God is love,"¹ and yet proclaim a Gospel of crucifixion, it should be no surprise that people object. "For God so loved the world," we read in the Gospel of John, that God "gave his only Son," and, as the Nicene Creed states, "for our sake he was crucified." We've heard it so often that we may readily gloss over the words, but it really is an odd-sounding and troubling claim. Crucified—put to death—for our sake? What does that even mean? How is it for our sake, and how is it showing God's love, to have a man nailed to a wooden cross until he dies?

Indeed, if you were a newcomer being given a classroom introduction to the beliefs of Christianity for the first time, you might be excused for raising your hand and asking a rather simple question: Why does God punish Jesus for our sins? Isn't that kind of unfair? How does it accomplish anything useful? And what kind of God gets satisfaction out of someone dying a painful death?

If you aren't a newcomer, you might be familiar with some of the jargon, but you still might be pardoned for having no ready answer to this question. If you have read theology, you might have come across phrases such as "Christus Victor," or "Ransom Theory," "Moral Influence Atonement Theory," "Vicarious Substitutionary Atonement Theory," and the arguments between proponents of each. But you still might be uneasy when you read the many passages in scripture that speak in phrases sounding like those in Isaiah 53.

¹ 1 John 4:8b

“He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”² “[T]he LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”³ “[L]ike a lamb that is led to the slaughter...They made his grave with the wicked...although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain...when you make his life an offering for sin.”⁴ All of this is a language of violence. What it does not sound like is anything we can immediately recognize as love.

The challenge we face is that this seeming disparity is built into the Gospel story itself. The very event we claim as God's great work of love– the cross– is an instrument of death. Most of us who have grown up in the faith are accustomed to the cross primarily as a symbol of the church. But imagine if the emblem of our faith were some more modern equivalent of a cross. Would we be surprised when people balked at our proclaiming a God of love while decorating our homes and churches with guillotines, or nooses?

To put the problem bluntly: How can we see a God as loving, good, and merciful who seemingly demands blood payment for our offenses and will not be appeased until an execution takes place, and who doesn't even seem to care whether it is the guilty ones put to death or a perfectly innocent person offered in their place? Christ's atonement for our sins is presented by Christianity as good news, and yet it is precisely that which seems utterly repellent to many. Is there beauty, or only ugliness, to be found here? That is the question we take up today.

You may recognize that this is no matter of mere, idle theological speculation. This is a real obstacle for a great many people, both outside and inside the church. It is something that makes our Gospel downright revolting to some, and at the very least rather uncomfortable and difficult to many others. How is it possible, then, that Christians have preached the crucifixion as good news, as an act of God's love, for nearly two thousand years?

The atoning death of Jesus seems to present several intertwined problems. It appears to be an offense against fatherly love, an act of cruelty, a corruption of justice, a dismissal of mercy and forgiveness, and an idea with bothersome implications for everyday life. I have heard these concerns voiced with increasing frequency, and yet rarely discussed directly from the pulpit, so I think it is worthwhile for us to spend some time facing them head-on.

We might start by asking: Who sends his own son to death, for offenses he didn't even commit, and is reasonably considered a loving father? On multiple occasions I have heard people object to Christianity on this count and go so far as to ask: Doesn't this make God, in effect, a divine child abuser?

This is an intense and harsh question, but it deserves a response. This particular question we may begin to answer simply by noting that sending someone on a mission which may end in death is not inherently a hateful act. A military officer who does not love those under his or her command is a poor officer. And yet one who hangs back, unwilling to give any orders that would allow one of them to die, is also a poor officer.

² Isaiah 53:5

³ Isaiah 53:6b

⁴ From Isaiah 53:7, 9, and 10

Or consider parents, teaching their children to be faithful to what is right even at great cost. Most of us would be proud to see our children become the sort of persons who would give their lives for others, even as we would desperately hope they never actually have to. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."⁵ It is not unloving, and certainly not abusive, to teach your children selflessness, to put them on a lifelong mission of loving others, even knowing what it may cost, knowing that it may cost them everything.

More importantly (and this is something which, strangely, is nearly forgotten in most contemporary discussion of the atonement), if we're going to consider how to properly understand Christ's death, we have to remember who Christ is. Christians don't believe that Jesus was just some unlucky but very good fellow chosen by God to die. We actually claim that Jesus is part of the Trinitarian God. We proclaim one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus isn't only the Son of God. He also *is* God. The talk of God as an unloving or abusive father for sending his son to die on the cross only makes sense as an objection when we forget that the Son and the Father are one.

This does start to address our concerns about cruelty, as well. Many people hear talk of God accepting the sacrificial death of an innocent Christ in our place and wonder how this is any different than the horrible pagan gods who are appeased by virgin sacrifices, or child sacrifices, who have a furious bloodlust that must somehow be sated. Why on earth would suffering be the currency in which we are required to repay whatever debts we owe God? We can see here that a partial— though not complete— answer starts with recognizing that the suffering that takes place in Christ's death is actually *God's* suffering, and nobody else's.

But no matter who Jesus was, he was given over to death, and this is said to have paid the debt for our sins, which is still confusing for two reasons. One is that it doesn't seem to make logical sense as a notion of justice. Imagine if I were to wrong you, and you wanted me punished under the law. I couldn't hand over some innocent person to the police instead, saying, "Here, imprison this person in my place." Justice demands not just that a crime be punished. It has to be the guilty person who is punished.

The second confusing matter is why punishment is being doled out at all. Aren't we as Christians always talking about God's forgiveness? Where did the forgiveness go? How can we say this is true forgiveness, if the debt must still be settled, if satisfaction must still be made, if somebody still has to be executed? We say Jesus has paid our price, but why is there still a price? Why can't God "just forgive us"?

To answer these questions, we need to spend some time considering the nature of wrongdoing itself, and what forgiveness is. Consider what happens when one person sins against another. For instance, imagine someone stealing from you. The thief has deprived you of something which is rightfully yours. Justice demands that this person restore to you what was taken— in effect, the thief owes you a debt.

And in fact we find that this is a natural way of thinking about all sins, even intangible ones. Whenever one person harms another, the wrongdoer owes the victim restitution. For some types of offenses, such as thievery, it is relatively straightforward to measure that debt in

⁵ John 15:13

dollars, and to know when it is repaid. For other sorts of harms (for instance, causing irreversible injury) it may not even be possible to restore what was taken from a person. But that does not mean it isn't still in fact owed— fairness requires that someone who has wronged a person return that person to whatever state he or she enjoyed before the crime was committed.

Incidentally, that is part of why no human system of justice can ever completely make things right. Humans are not capable of paying every debt that they incur. Sometimes the debt is more than they have to give. Sometimes what is owed is altogether beyond the power of a human being to give at all. This is why in the end, ultimately, the world cries out to God for restoration, cries out for a God who makes all things new.⁶

But there is also another element involved in indebtedness besides the debt itself. There is also the position of the one to whom that debt is owed. It is generally the right of anyone owed something to hold the other person to that obligation. But there is another option. One might, for whatever reason, choose to cancel the debt, to simply declare it paid in full; that is, to forgive it. This is what we request from God every time we recite the Lord's prayer as it is found in Matthew: "Forgive us our debts."⁷ This is what we hope for when we wrong our friends and family, that they will choose to let go of what we owe them, no longer hold our sins against us, so we can be restored to full relationship with them.

This is also what we see reflected all through our legal structure. In most circumstances, a wronged person has the right to pursue either of two options. He or she can demand that the state exact a penalty in proportion to the offense, by pressing charges in a criminal case or bringing suit in a civil one. Or a person can forgive, can choose not to press charges or sue for damages, and the state will not pursue the matter. The government is bound to a duty to uphold justice, and this means holding people to debts that are in force. Yet it also understands that the one to whom the debt is owed has the option to show mercy and forgive it.

But there is something inherent in the meaning of forgiveness, something very important, that somehow often goes unnoticed. Look carefully at what goes on when a person forgives. Imagine that someone has destroyed some property belonging to another person. The victim has lost something valuable, and now has two choices. He or she could demand justice and force the other to pay for his or her crime. Or our victim could forgive that person for it. Now who, it is worth asking, has paid for the crime in the second case, in the case of forgiveness? Has the victim gotten back what he or she lost? No, it is still gone. The victim has wound up simply taking the loss. When a person forgives, when someone cancels a debt, that person is choosing to write off the cost. It does *not* mean that there *is* no cost. The cost is now borne by the one doing the forgiving.

In other words, it is in the nature of offense, of sin, of wronging someone, that there is always a cost. There is something that has been taken, or torn down, or destroyed. Something has been lost— that's what makes it a wrong. Forgiveness, then, is the choice to bear the cost oneself, to eat the cost instead of demanding the other person pay it. So someone *always* pays for sin. It may be the sinner or the sinned-against, but there is never no price paid at all.

⁶ See Revelation 21:1-5

⁷ Matthew 6:12a

This is a very important point, by the way, because it explains why forgiveness is not easy, and why we should not expect it to be: it *costs* something. And it also brings us back to the question of God's forgiveness. A while ago, we were considering the matter of Jesus paying the price for our sins, and we asked the question of why there has to be a price paid at all; why God can't "just forgive us."

The answer, as I hope we can now see, is that there is always a price for sin. That is simply part of what sin is by its nature. What sin *is* is a creation of some loss, some cost. Our sins, our violence, our complicity in the evils of the world have a cost. Who will bear it?

We have talked about sin as something that tears down, requiring restitution, restoration, repayment. We have also talked, if you recall, about how the Father and the Son are one. And so maybe it is at this point in the conversation that we are prepared to examine the crucifixion of Christ and begin to see it in another light.

When we sing hymns about being saved by the blood of Jesus and read scripture about his substitution for us in paying the penalty for sin, maybe it has sometimes made us uncomfortable. We might have imagined God, offended by sin, demanding repayment, and requiring the death of an innocent person (Jesus) to make that payment. And we probably have wondered about how that sounds weird and contrary to justice. What law could possibly be fair that would allow another person to be put in place of the criminal in receiving the death sentence, while letting the guilty one go free?

But this is not just any person substituting for us by accepting a death sentence on our part. The person dying here in our place is the second person of the Trinity— is part of the triune God. It is not God substituting an innocent person off the street for us. It is *God* substituting *God's* self for us. In other words, it is not God demanding repayment at all. It is *God himself* bearing the cost, hanging on that cross and paying the price.

And we may have worried about how God's accomplishment of salvation through crucifixion somehow shows a God who revels in violence and bloodletting. But remember who executed whom on that cross. We will recall that Jesus is killed not by God at all, but by human beings who execute him under Roman and Jewish law. The murder of Jesus Christ, Son of God, is our brutal rejection of God, not God's brutal act in the world. It is *our* violence, and it is in bearing the consequences of our violence with forgiveness that God ultimately shows a rejection of, and a defeat of, violence.

In other words, we get things completely backwards when we interpret what happened on that cross as an example of a cruel God abusing power— it is God suffering the death; it is we who are abusing our power at Calvary.

Jesus Christ became human. "He was despised and rejected."⁸ Our encounter with the living God in human form was the culmination of the human rejection of God. We met him, and we killed him. And in this very event, in our darkest crime that sums up all human crimes in all of history, shines God's greatest mercy, for God's choice in the face of all of our sin is: to eat the cost. To accept it, to bear it, to take upon himself the death we deal, and give us resurrection in return.

⁸ Isaiah 53:3a

This is why the cross is good news. It is not a bloodthirsty God seeking to inflict suffering in return for our wrongs. On the cross hung a loving God accepting upon himself the suffering of our wrongs. We “were bought at a price,”⁹ as the Apostle Paul said. But the price is paid by none of us. The price is paid by God, “[f]or God so loved the world.” Thanks be to God.

⁹ 1 Cor 6:20a and 1 Cor 7:23a