

Paradox is often the footprint of the Divine. Following God's scent into unfamiliar landscapes is often where God waits for us with expanded and more direct encounters with the Holy One.

We stand at one of those paradoxical portals this morning. On Palm Sunday we join our hope with the people walking across the Kidron Valley with Jesus. We spread palm leaves to line the path for a Messiah on his way to the throne in Jerusalem.

Then we appear to contradict ourselves. This is also Passion Sunday, when we join our distress with people just outside the walls of Jerusalem where some of the same people who joyfully cheered, "Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord" are now shouting "Crucify him."

Jesus dies on the cross on Calvary and we are left at the tomb with Mary the Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus. We stand wondering what to make of the death of Jesus.

We've been wrestling with this death for 2,000 years. The core theory that has dominated our thinking for centuries goes something like this: God created and saw that creation, including humanity, was very good. And then humanity sinned somehow so offensively that God would have been right to destroy us all. There was no human way to atone for the sin. God could have ignored the sin in infinite mercy except that God was bound by infinite justice.

The ransom had to be paid by those who sinned – humans. But only an infinite payment would suffice – a payment that only God could make. And so, God the Son decided to manifest in human form to pay the ransom as both fully human and fully Divine, and the paradox could finally be put to rest.

St. Irenaeus suggested one of the earliest versions of this theory in the second century. He proposed that Jesus died to pay ransom to

Satan to free people's souls, but because Jesus was God in disguise, Satan was fooled and Christ was victorious.

Nine centuries later, St. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, rightly pointed out that this version gave Satan too much power. Anselm tried to resolve the paradox by claiming that God did not pay ransom to Satan, but to God's self. Protestant Reformers took this theory and set sail. This is still the theory most prominent in evangelical circles, but it is a leaky boat.

The only way to make this atonement theory work is to set aside God's forgiveness and put God in the role of a remarkably cruel and abusive parent. If God's forgiveness *can* and *must* be bought, then it isn't infinite and it isn't forgiveness.

There are at least three scriptural holes. First, the theory tries reconciling God to humans, rather than humans to God. Second, Jesus dies *instead of* sinners, while Paul taught that in baptism, we die *with* Christ and are raised *with* Christ. And third, while the Greek words clearly say that Jesus died "on account" of humanity, none of them imply "instead of."

Some parts of the church kept exploring the relationship between Christ's death and our salvation. And people have continued to evolve the theory trying to answer some of these shortcomings.

But instead of going into Peter Abelard's 12<sup>th</sup> century updates or Jacobus Arminius' 17<sup>th</sup> century suggestions, or even the insights provided by feminist and womanist theologians in the last decade, let's just say that there are still problems.

Fortunately, there is hope.

There is hope if we relax the pursuit for an intelligible theory that solves the paradox. Something different happens if we follow God's scent into a wilderness and let the paradox solve us. In the unfamiliar landscape of Palm and Passion Sunday, we can trust that God is here with us offering expanded and increasingly direct encounters with the Holy One.

The unfamiliar landscape that we enter with an undefended mind is ancient. We go back to the First Temple liturgy of atonement – a ritual that was 900 years old before Jesus was born. Remember: the past is a foreign land; they do things differently there.

Atonement, for the ancient Jews, was not a theory, but a liturgy. A theory is a set of ideas that we can grasp, and once properly grasped we have it. A liturgy is something that happens to us, within us and around us. And if we allow it, the liturgy has us.

The First Temple liturgy of atonement began with the high priest purifying himself and putting on a pure white robe, the robe of an angel. He was no longer a human being, but an angel, one of whose names was “the Son of God.”

He could enter the Temple’s Holy of Holies, where only he was allowed, by tying small boxes called phylacteries either onto his forehead or his arms. In the box was the Name of God, YHWH, “the name that cannot be pronounced.” Bearing the Name, he took one of two goats inside the Holy of Holies.

The Holy of Holies symbolized the place where God is and was *before* bringing time and creation into being. There the priest sacrificed the first goat representing YHWH, spattering the blood to purify the Mercy Seat and the interior of the Holy of Holies.

Then the high priest then moved to the Temple veil, which was made of beautiful textiles representing God’s created world. The priest put on a robe made of the same material to represent God entering the physical world to restore creation. Coming through the veil, still wearing the box containing the Name, the priest began sprinkling the rest of the temple with the blood of the goat that represented “the Lord.”

And as he came through the veil the people said: “Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord.”

After cleansing the temple that represented the entire world, the priest ritually placed all the accumulated sins on the head of the second goat, the scapegoat, that represented Azazel, the angel of death. The

people then drove the scapegoat off the edge of a cliff, killing it to take away the people's sins.

The ancient Jewish liturgy of atonement was about God emerging from the place beyond time and creation to set the people free from their impurities, their sins and transgression. For our ancestors in the faith, the high priest *became* God and sprinkled God's blood to liberate the flow of creation. Instead of God demanding satisfaction through the atonement liturgy, God gave freedom and grace to the people.

And so, early Jewish Christians like Paul and Mark saw Jesus as the high priest who had come to restore the eternal covenant that God made with Moses, refreshed with Noah and amended with Jeremiah.

Because something essential had changed in the Second Temple period when Jesus lived. There was no Mercy Seat or anything else inside the Holy of Holies. Average Jews saw the corrupt Sadducee priests simply going through the motions. Many saw Jesus as the new high priest who was going to restore the priestly mysteries.

No wonder Jewish followers of Jesus shouted "Blessed is the one coming in the name of the Lord" as they walked toward Jerusalem.

The Roman Empire and those who worked for them had other plans. Jesus did not take his place on the throne. Instead, he went to the cross. People who were certain that Jesus would be a royal conqueror became bitterly disappointed. "Crucify him!" they shouted.

To their dismay, Jesus *became* the sacrifice.

What people could not grasp was that Jesus spilled sacrificial blood to reveal who God is; God absolutely without vengeance, God absolutely without substitutionary tricks; God with absolutely no need for sacrificial blood. God, instead, pouring out God's self absolutely. Just as God does in every Eucharist.

God still comes to us in the Eucharist and unites us with the presence of Jesus, the forgiving victim, at the heavenly banquet. Jesus Christ, our great high priest, emerges from the Holy of Holies to offer us

his Body and Blood. And when we walk through the veil, we participate with Christ in becoming the new temple.

The paradox of Palm and Passion Sunday doesn't resolve theologically. We ourselves are resolved by the paradox liturgically. Instead of trying to grasp a *theory*, we present *ourselves* to be grasped by God's inconceivable love. That's what Paul means when he tells us to "Be of that mind in yourselves that was also in the Anointed One Jesus."

Without being of that mind, retribution is easier to imagine than mercy. Without being of the mind that was in the Anointed One, the punishing power of death can distract us while we let the aroma of life eternal slip away. Without being of that mind, naming a scapegoat is our first instinct instead of trusting that Christ has torn the separating veil in half to liberate us from our own violence.

We can relax our search for theories about the death of Jesus. Being, instead, of that mind that was also in Jesus, we live more deeply the liturgical reality of the Anointed One who gives himself to us so that we can become him.

Blessed, indeed, is the one coming in the name of the Lord.

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