

From the Pastor's Desk

From a God of Violence to the Prince of Peace

False Assumptions about the World

For millennia human beings viewed the earth as the center of the universe. They watched the sun rise in the east and set in the west. Through observation it was evident that the sun, moon and stars were moving around the earth. When Galileo Galilei published his observations of a sun-centered rather than earth-centered universe, he was summoned to Rome, accused of heresy and forbidden to teach. He was put under house arrest from 1634 to when he died in 1642. Galileo's world-view, although correct, violated the traditional world-view and he was silenced. The church's concern was not for truth; rather, it was attempting to protect the scriptures which state that the sun revolves around the earth. And, because the Bible was perceived as God's inerrant word, they saw themselves as protecting God himself.

This illustration shows how difficult it is for humans to change their assumptions. It is easy to point fingers at the church and accuse its leaders of ignorance and of stifling science, yet today we may hold assumptions future generations may consider primitive. We are products of our environment, yet tend to proclaim the lens through which we view the world as infallible. Changing our lens is very difficult. It was only twenty five years ago that the Catholic Church officially lifted its condemnation of Galileo.

A God of Violence?

Most of us would hold that God is a God of love and not violence; yet we embrace without question that God sent his only Son to die for the sins of the world. This statement presumes a violent God requiring the blood of his Son to satisfy his wrath—not a pretty picture of God. Is the nature of God violent? People who receive an inadequate answer to this question often drift away from Christianity because they refuse to embrace a God of violence.

Jewish Blood Sacrifice

We are spiritually more Jewish than we realize. The requirement of blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins comes from the Old Testament. It was not enough for Jewish people 2500 years ago to ask God for forgiveness. They had to show they were serious, which was symbolized in the sacrifice of one of their animals. They couldn't sacrifice a crippled animal or one near death. It had to be unblemished and a true sacrifice for the owner. They noticed the more blood they took from an animal the less life it possessed, so blood came to symbolize the life force of the animal. The ritual of sacrifice required the blood to be poured out on the altar. This blood sacrifice was understood to please God and his forgiveness was granted. So, we have inherited the concept of God requiring blood in order to forgive from Judaism.

The scripture, "God sent his only Son to die for the sins of the world" and others like it were originally written by Jewish Christians and addressed to Jewish Christians to point out how significant Jesus was to their lives and convince them to embrace him in faith. They realized that because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross they no longer needed to sacrifice animals in the temple for the forgiveness of their sins. Thankfully, for Jewish Christians and everyone else, the death and resurrection of Christ brought an end to this understanding of a violent God in need of blood sacrifice.

Atonement Images

There are several images of the atonement, i.e., the understanding of why Christ was crucified. The emphasis on blood sacrifice is especially seen in the "Substitutionary Image" but there are other very valid understandings that do not presume a God of violence. A brief description of each follows.

Substitutionary Atonement

This image states that humanity deserved God's wrath because of sin but he sent his Son to substitute for us and receive God's punishment by shedding his blood on the cross. Jesus was the unblemished lamb of God who shed his blood for the sins of the world. As I mentioned, this image is the oldest and comes from Christianity's Jewish roots and presumes that God required blood sacrifice in order to forgive. Here we see a very violent God who needed to release his wrath and did so on his Son. This is not the God most of us have come to experience or the loving God we see revealed on the pages of the New Testament in the life of Jesus. The God revealed in the Old Testament and the God revealed in the New Testament seem to be radically different.

Predestination

Substitutionary atonement and the understanding of a violent God is built upon predestination which states that God is all knowing, therefore, not only did God predestined his Son to be crucified, but also predestined all other evil in the world. Predestination imposes upon God a nature of violence which is in conflict with the New Testament understanding of God where we read:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 1 John 4: 7-8

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him. Matthew 7: 9-11

Luther tried to reconcile the conflicting images of a God of violence and love by dismissing predestination and said we need to be content to live with mystery. We also have to live with substitutionary atonement because it's in many of our hymns and some of our liturgy.

Violent God - Violent People

Another problem substitutionary atonement creates is the issue of the divinization of violence. When God is perceived as inherently violent and requiring violent acts, violence then becomes an acceptable human behavior. Perhaps it will be necessary to exonerate God from violence before humans will be able to find a way to lasting peace. (For more information about this see *The Non-Violent Atonement* by Denny Weaver.)

Thankfully, we have other ways of understanding the purpose of Christ's death and resurrection.

Anti-Temple Sacrifice

In this image, we see that Jesus' death and resurrection freed people from having to pay for forgiveness through the temple sacrifice system. Remember Jesus' cleansing of the temple when he was upset at poor people being ripped off by the money changers and the temple being turned into a den of thieves? This was one of the reasons why Jewish authorities wanted him killed—he confronted their oppression of the poor and their lucrative money changing business. Yet, in having him killed, they unknowingly brought the end of the temple sacrifice system for Jewish Christians who then found forgiveness through Christ. In this image of atonement, Jesus set people free from their bondage to the temple sacrifice system and he continues to set people free today from any other system that holds them in bondage.

Christus Victor

(Christ as Conqueror)

This image states that humanity was destined for the grave, but Jesus' death and resurrection triumphed over death itself, enabling us to be made alive with Christ. Christ's death and resurrection showed the world that our lives continue beyond the grave. The emphasis here is not on his death but his resurrection.

Moral Influence

In this image, Jesus' self-giving life teaches us how to live. It teaches us that love involves sacrifice. We are to imitate Jesus' example of selfless love and compassion for others in the face of strong opposition and even death.

New Creation

In this image, the resurrection of Christ begins a new creation. As we follow Christ's example of sacrificial love, we contribute toward the new creation which God began through the sacrificial love of Christ and by raising him from the dead. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* II Corinthians 5:17 *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.* Galatians 2:20 *When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.* (From the funeral rite) God's new creation begins in us with baptism and continues throughout our lives as we follow Christ.

Power in Weakness

When Jesus submitted to crucifixion he showed us that strength comes through weakness. This image states the paradox that God's power is perfected in us when we are weak. *My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.* II Corinthians 12:9

The last five images do not imply that God is violent, willed his Son's death or vented his wrath on his Son. With these images, rather than sending his Son to die, God sent his Son to love. As Christ lived his life of love and compassion, he encountered evil but would not stop. Evil killed him and God wept. One can hold that God is a God of violence and predestined his Son to die on the cross, but it's not necessary. Like Luther, we can be content with mystery and leave the question of predestination and why evil occurs in the unknown mind of God.

The Richness of Multiple Understandings of the Atonement

When I have the privilege to stand at the altar and say, "Take and drink, this is the cup of my blood to be given for you and for all for the forgiveness of sins", it includes forgiveness but also freedom from oppression (anti-temple sacrifice), victory over death (Christus Victor), an example of self-giving and becoming instrument of God's new creation (Moral Influence & New Creation), and shows that in our weakness we are strong (Power in Weakness). This is why I appreciate the ELCA. It has a tent large enough to accommodate other images of God and a deeper and richer appreciation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christmas and the Prince of Peace

When we look at the baby in the crib we see God's love made incarnate. Jesus, the Prince of Peace changed our views and assumptions by revealing a nonviolent God. He walked into evil and refused to use violence. His life continues today through his followers. But, like the church during the time of Galileo, changing our assumptions and expanding our views are not easy.

Which God do we recognize? A God of violence, a God of peace, or both? As we celebrate Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace.

A child has been born for us. We have been given a son who will be our ruler. His names will be Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6

On Sunday, December 14th, during Adult Education, the topic for reflection will be *God of Violence or the Prince of Peace* and we will further discuss understandings of the atonement. Come and share your views.

~ Pastor Bob