



The Day God Died – TouchPoint for April 10, 2019

Luke 23: 32-49 [NRSV] ...Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³ Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

The Death of Jesus

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man.” ⁴⁸ When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. ⁴⁹ But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

We are coming up on Holy week. The passion of Jesus. The crucifixion of Jesus. And one of the questions that comes up constantly is “Why did Jesus have to die?” And there are all kinds of theological answers. “Theories of atonement” we call them. Grand philosophical and theological reasons why Jesus had to die. But let me try to simplify it for you today.

Why did Jesus have to die? Because that is what happens when you beat, whip, and torture a person to within an inch of his life and then pound nails into his hands and feet and stick a spear in his side as you hang him on a cross. People who have this happen to them usually die. No, I take that back, they all die.

Why did Jesus have to die? Because we killed him. It isn’t any more complicated than that. When you beat, whip, and torture a person to within an inch of his life and then pound nails into his hands and feet and stick a spear in his side as you hang him on a cross—he dies.

Now, why we did that, is a whole other matter. But we would prefer not to look at that. And so we come up with all kinds of theories as to why Jesus had to die from God’s perspective. We come up with all kinds of theories of atonement that basically have only one underlying reason for their existence: to blame God for what we did.

My favorite one, or should I say my least favorite one, is called the substitutionary theory of atonement. In this one, it says that Jesus sacrifices himself on the cross to ‘pay the price’ for our sins. Though who is being paid is never clear and I’m not really sure I want a God who can be ‘bought off’— do you? And if God has to be paid off, bought off, is it really forgiveness?

If Jesus has to die before God can be gracious to us, then God is not a FORE-giving God, but an AFTER-giving God. God will only be gracious AFTER he extracts his pound of flesh and gets his vengeance and wrath satisfied by killing his Son. Does that sound like a loving and gracious God to you? Nevertheless, there are critics of people like me who criticize this theory. Here is what they have to say about people like me. This is from the internet and someone named R. C. Sproul:

*In more recent times, modern thinkers have objected to the satisfaction view of the atonement on the grounds that it casts a shadow over the free grace and love of God. If God is a God of love, why can He not just forgive people gratuitously from the pure motivation of His own love and grace, without being concerned about satisfying some kind of justice, whether it's a law of His own nature or a law imposed from without? Again, this view of the atonement fails to understand that **God will never negotiate His own righteousness, even out of His desire to save sinners ... And the Judge who does what is right never, ever violates the canons of His own righteousness.***

Apparently, God is more concerned with being self-righteous than forgiving us. This is nonsense. What kind of parent is more interested in his or her own self-righteousness than with their children's welfare? Don't have children if you're more concerned with yourself than them!

This is utter nonsense! This is the whole point of the incarnation and the cross. God is more interested in being "at-one" with us than being a transcendent, righteous God. God is more interested in being at-one with us in life and death, in joy and sorrow, in tragedy and hope, than being true to *our idea* of a righteous God.

God has, as God's essence, healing and unity, not separation of the righteous and unrighteous. Separation can never be the end result of atonement, at-one-ment. That would be an oxymoron, a contradiction. Atonement means exactly what it says ... at-one(ment). WORDS MATTER, PEOPLE!

This is the whole offence of the cross. That God is "**willing to negotiate**" and even "**violate His own canon of righteousness.**" For the sake of unity and healing and wholeness, for the sake of forgiveness. God is not a slave to His own righteousness. God is free.

This is what Paul means when he says, "*Christ did not count equality with God as something to be grasped.*" This is what Paul means when he says "*Christ became sin.*" Becoming sin would be a violation of righteousness, wouldn't it? The whole offense of the gospel is that God is willing to negotiate His own righteousness, out of His desire to save sinners, out of his desire to forgive.

That is the basic essence of forgiveness, and what makes it so offensive? It does away with rightness and justice. Forgiveness gives up the right to be "right" and exercise "justice." IT FORGIVES! It replaces justice and righteousness with something different—forgiveness. Quit trying to tame forgiveness or cancel it out by trying to fit it into a system of justice and righteousness. It doesn't fit there!

God doesn't give one whit about our notion of righteousness and purity and sacredness in defense of Him. Why do we always feel we have to defend God and God's purity? Is it because deep down we are deeply embarrassed by a God who will become flesh, and eat and sleep and involve Godself in all forms of earthly bodily functions and subjugations.

Why do we always feel we have to defend God and God's purity? Is it because we are embarrassed by a God who is willing to let go of righteousness and purity to be at-one with us sinners. "*This man eats and drinks with sinners and gluttons.*" So proclaim all the holier-than-thou religious folks aghast and clutching their pearls. Why is it we always seem to be more interested in saving God than in God saving us?

Look, we are sinful (read that 'broken') people. If the divine Mystery is going to be at-one with us, then that is what the Divine Mystery is going to have to become. Broken and sinful. All these theories of atonement are so confusing to me. On the one hand, we always fight for something called 'free will' but when it comes to the crucifixion, we blame God for what we did. God is responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. God forced Jesus to die. It was all God's plan. We had no choice.

But, when I read the crucifixion story, I see that it is Pilate and Herod, Roman authorities who do it. It is Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, religious leaders, who do it. It is a democratic vote of the common folk who scream, "Give us Barabbas" and "Crucify Him." It is his disciples who deny and betray and fall asleep and run away from him. And I don't see any puppet strings pulling on any of them.

“But ignore all of that. It really is all God’s doing. It isn’t our fault.” Atonement theories are simply an intellectual exercise in blaming God for what we did. If this is all and only God’s doing, then there is no reason for Jesus to say on the cross, “Father, forgive them”—after all, it’s not our fault he’s on the cross—but God’s fault.

We simply cannot stand a God who will forgive freely, forgive unconditionally, forgive us without effort and merit on our part for what WE DO! We simply cannot stand a God who will do that AND THAT’S WHY WE KILLED HIM. On the cross, we have a God who is willing to forego His sense of justice and righteousness and purity to be at-one with us, to forgive us. If anything is sacrificed on the cross—this is what is sacrificed. God is willing to give up everything that we think makes God, God, in order to be at-one with us.

“For I am convinced that neither life nor death, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things past, nor things to come” nor even God’s righteousness and sense of what it means to be God, “can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.” In this way, then, it may be true to say, “God sacrifices Godself on the cross.” Not to appease God’s sense of justice and honor; not to pay a price; no, God simply sacrifices everything that makes God, God in order to be at-one with us.

God does not manifest a commitment to His own righteousness and justice. God manifests a commitment to forgiveness, that’s the offence of the cross. When Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, he is making the declaration that God has forsaken God’s very God-ness. God has ceased being God as we and God understand God to be. God has become sin. God has become broken, and literally and theologically “to Hell with God’s righteousness.”

God will not come down off the cross to save himself. God will not fall back to being that kind of God. God isn’t interested in saving Himself, but us. God has committed Godself to the human condition, fully and completely. In life and in death, in sorrow and tragedy, in pain and suffering, in sin and brokenness—AND THERE IS NO GOING BACK! There is no other way for God to be at-one with us other than to be totally at-one with us.

To revert to a God of power and glory; to revert to a God of payoff and sacrifice; to revert to a God of righteous otherness, would be to deny and destroy, the very at-one-ment that God seeks with a broken and sinful humanity. For God to be at-one with us God must become fully human and sacrifice the very essence of what makes God, God. Sometimes, it seems, we are more invested in God being God, than God is. And so the incarnation, and especially the cross, becomes a stumbling block and foolishness to the world.

And so it is not wrong to say that the ‘at-one-ment’ cost God His very life. God gave up everything to be at-one with you and me. God died to being God, so we humans could be at-one with the Mystery. This is the **good news of the cross!** There is nowhere you have to go, or have to get to, to be with the Divine Mystery. No place you have to go or get to, other than your own humanity, in all of its glory and wonderment, as well as its own brokenness and sinfulness, to be with the Mystery.

This is no ‘theory’ of atonement. This is ‘actual’ at-one-ment. Lived out and acted out in flesh and blood on this good earth. Lived out and **DIED OUT** as actual event.

And this at-one-ment continues in this meal. In everyday bread and wine. In the everyday act of eating and drinking. In the everyday event of sustenance and feeding. We are constantly being fed by the divine Mystery. It is the source of our existence in everything we do; it is always with us, it is always at-one with us.

The Divine Mystery has fully committed itself to you and me. At all times and in all places. In life and death, in joy and sorrow, in pain and suffering and celebration and victory. This is the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being. And that’s not just a theory I came up with. It’s something you can take to the grave with you and beyond, because the Mystery has shown itself to be AT-ONE with us there as well.

Amen.