

What Kind of God?

communion meditation

March 1, 2009

Mark 1:9-15
carolyn dipboye

It's called "the penal substitution theory" or "*the doctrine of atonement*," as if there is only one. It holds that there was something terribly wrong in the world. Humankind was so tainted by the actions of our original parents in the garden and subsequent bad decisions or sins of humanity that our relationship with God was irreparably damaged; and try as hard as we might, we could not make it right. Remedy could only come from God's side. Yet God was a righteous God, repulsed, even angered by human sinfulness. The situation could not be righted without God's righteousness, God's wrath being appeased. Someone had to pay the price, and so God sent Jesus as our substitute to die for our sins.

It can be couched in words about God's pain and God's great love for us; and the foundational significance of the deeply moving concept that Jesus' presence in this world and death are *pro me*, for me, holds great meaning. When, however, it is focused on God's wrath and demand for blood, it becomes either frightening or repulsive. Recalling perhaps experiences in childhood where we quaked before that sort of God, we reject it. Some of us choose to leave the church forever; and some of us stay in the church, choosing to accent the positive—even to the point sometimes of turning the Christian faith into an anemic version of being kind to granny and the cat.

How do we hold onto two great truths at once? How do we speak to the fundamental truth that something is desperately wrong with our world while holding onto a God of love? How do we avoid, on the one side, a God whose wrath ends up underwriting all kinds of human violence and, on the other side, a God whose bland acceptance and easy forgiveness underwrites Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "easy grace," which frees us from any sense of strain whatsoever? Can we speak of the death of Jesus in a way that focuses, not on God's coercion, but on God's gracious gift of God's self? Can we speak of God as one who stands not over against Jesus, but as one we see in and through Jesus more profoundly and more clearly than we have ever seen before?

The season of Lent puts the cross of Christ at center stage; and in doing so, it shines the spotlight on both his gracious presence in our midst and the terrible violence with which he was greeted. Confronted with that terrible reality, we can speak of the cross in terms of a legal transaction—God exacting a price from sinful humanity. We can turn accusingly on the failures of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people. Or, we can turn again to the scriptures—the whole scripture—and discover that the anguished sense of humanity's estrangement from God and simultaneous desire for God hangs over every word.

The call to repentance stands at the heart of Hebrew scriptures. "A horn blast reverberates through the dark reaches of the universe. The angelic hosts, drawn up in array before the throne of God, shudder at the sound." It is, Herman Wouk reports, Rosh Hashana, the day of judgment. Prescribed in the book of Leviticus, it is the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance. Its scrolls contain all that one has entered in the past year and God's impending judgment. Entering a time of serious reflection upon one's infractions against others and against God, faithful Jews begin making the rounds to make things right with others before attempting to make things right with God. The process ends in drama on the eve of *Yom Kippur*. Again the sound of the ram's horn rends the air as the sound of warning. With descending darkness, the books of judgment are closing and the opportunity to set things right with one's neighbor and with God before their closing is coming to an end. Again and again, the horn is sounded throughout the next day as the people gather for a long and intense liturgy focused upon confession and seeking forgiveness.

Directly opposite the sentiment of the popular movie that proclaimed "Love means never having to say you're sorry," Judaism insists that love does and love must say "I'm sorry." The very seriousness of human sinfulness is gathered up not just in the prescription of the high and holy days of repentance, but throughout the biblical story. Beginning with the infraction in the garden and continuing through the murder of Cain, the sale of Joseph to an Egyptian caravan by his jealous brothers, the struggles of Jacob and Esau and between Israel's prophets and kings, the biblical narrative is the story of human conflict, enmity and presumption.

And yet it is also the biblical narrative is also the story of hope. It is the story symbolically embodied in a Hosea who seeks out his offending wife and, committed to healing the rift between them, gently brings her back into loving relationship. Far from the rigid legalism to which many in the church have sought to consign our Jewish cousins, the story of Hebrew scriptures and the story of the Jewish people that has emerged through the centuries as rabbis have poured over those

scriptures is not only the story of a people forever called to repentance; it is also the story of a people forever called before one who receives and forgives.

Disaster, protracted poverty, mass murder, have never dissuaded the Jews from the vision caught at Sinai of an unseen God. They believe not only that God exists, but that God is interested in human beings and wants them to become better than they are; and that God gave them a law that points the way to a better world. This is solid ground underfoot for those who find it. If God is indeed in the universe, there is hope [Wouk, *This is My God*, 69].

The call to repentance was at the heart of Jesus' ministry. And so with something of the same rending of the air in the alarming peal of the ram's horn, Jesus began his ministry with the call to repentance. Mark, the oldest of the four Gospels, places that call as the first words from his lips: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; *repent*, and believe in the good news" (1:15). With the same urgency with which *Yom Kippur* announces the closing of the book of judgment, Jesus pressed the urgency of the moment. Mark's entire recounting of Jesus' life reeks with that urgency, as he repeatedly peppers his story with the word "immediately," indicating the rapidity and decisiveness with which time was moving. Jesus' parables press the urgency of the moment, of "today" as the moment of decision.

And yet throughout the gospel story, there is simultaneously Jesus' invitation to loving relationship. "Come to me, all you that are weary, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). Far from a distancing, Jesus' call to repentance is a call to forgiveness and to community. His Table around which we gather today speaks to us not of a legalistic transaction, but of a God who stayed not at a safe distance, but a God who cared enough to come into our midst.

Be sure that no words, no doctrinal statement ever fully captures the mystery of that reality. Be sure that it is okay if we interpret what it means in different ways. Perhaps, as we have remembered in the Covenant of Grace around which we gather, no words say it any better than Paul's: God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self (II Cor. 5:19).

As we gather today at the beginning of this season of Lent, it is appropriate that we gather first and last at Christ's Table. Like those who have come before us, we gather in repentance; but recognizing the God of inclusive love who meets us here, we also gather in hope. So in the words of an ancient invitation to the Table, we say: "Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and make your humble confession to Almighty God, devoutly kneeling" [An ancient invitation to the Table in the Book of Common Prayer].

Make your confession, knowing that the one who greets you here today is he who forgives. Thanks be to God..