

What Kind of God?

communion meditation

September 28, 2004

Psalms 103:1-4, 8-12; Mark 1:9-15

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You may have heard of it. It's called "the penal substitution theory" and by some, "*the doctrine of atonement*," as if there is only one. It assures us 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 through the generations that our relationship with God was irreparably damaged; and try 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 in our place.

It can be couched in words about God's pain and God's great love for us; and the deeply moving concept that Jesus' presence in this world and his death are somehow *pro me*, for me, holds great meaning. When, however, it is focused on God's wrath and demand for blood, it becomes frightening and even repulsive. Recalling experiences in childhood where some of us quaked before that sort of God, we reject it. Some of us chose 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 mandates all kinds of human suffering and, on the other side, a God whose bland acceptance and easy forgiveness tips over into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of as "easy grace," freeing 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?

We can turn the good news that God was in Christ into a legal transaction. An angry, wrathful God stood separate from and over against Jesus, exacting a price from sinful humanity. Such an interpretation, however, does not do much with the grace of God in the past or the present. It often becomes bound up in constantly weighing out judgment against ourselves and/or against others. Accompanied, as it often is, by turning the spotlight of our terrible sense of justice upon the presumed failures of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people, it can account for a tragic misreading of scripture and presuming that the God of grace we know in Christ is ours and ours alone. Or, if we are willing, we can turn again to scriptures—the whole of scripture—and discover that the anguished sense of humanity's estrangement from God and simultaneous desire for God hangs over every word. The God of grace and forgiveness we meet in Jesus was and is the God also present to the people Israel.

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 [*This Is My God*, 62]. Prescribed in the book of Leviticus, it is the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance. The scrolls are opened by God containing all the thoughts and actions one has entered into them over the past year and God's judgment impending upon them. 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 and then turn to make things right with God. The process ends in the drama of *Yom Kippur*. Again the sound of the ram's horn rends the air as a sound of warning. With descending darkness, the books of judgment close and the opportunity to set things right with one's neighbor and with God is coming to an end. Again and again throughout the next day, the horn sounds with urgency as the people gather for a long and intense liturgy focused upon confession and seeking forgiveness.

Yom Kippur, spoken of by Rabbi Abraham Heschel as the Jewish faith's "holy of holies," has stood for thousands of years as the most holy moment in the Jewish faith. Directly opposite the sentiment of the popular movie that proclaimed "Love means never having to say you're sorry," the Jewish faith insists that love does and love can 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, the struggles of Jacob and Esau, the rebellious behavior of the wayfaring tribes in the wilderness and the frequent standoff between Israel's prophets and kings, the biblical narrative is the story of human conflict, enmity and presumption.

And yet the biblical narrative is also the story of hope. Its frequent calls to repentance are a call to homecoming, a call to return to the God who expectantly awaits the return of God's children. "The LORD," the psalmist sings, "is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." These words, which occur many times in the Psalter and in the Prophets as well, are the self-descriptive words of God to Moses in the story of the Exodus. Comforting the anxious Moses who ascends to Mt. Sinai to receive new tablets of stone after the people have bowed down to other gods, the story depicts God encountering Moses with the gracious words: "The LORD, the LORD, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). Recognizing that it is just this gracious God who continues to hold open the door of welcome, the psalmist issues the joyful summons to "Bless the LORD, O my soul. All that is within me bless God's holy name."

The story of the welcoming God is also the story embodied in a Hosea who symbolically seeks out his offending wife. Committed to healing the rift between them and representative of the way God deals with God's repentant people, Hosea gently brings his errant wife 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 welcomes and forgives. "Disaster, protracted poverty, mass murder," Wouk explains,

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 [*This is My God*, 69].

The call to repentance was at the heart of Jesus' ministry. With something of the same rending of the air as that of the alarming peal of the ram's horn, Jesus begins 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 sounds that sense of urgency. Repeatedly, Mark peppers his story of Jesus with the word "immediately." The rapidity and decisiveness with which time was moving and the urgency of Jesus' teachings and especially his parables stress the critical nature of the moment. "Today," Mark, following Jesus' lead, insists, "is the moment of decision."

And yet throughout, the gospel story simultaneously presents Jesus' invitation as a call to loving relationship. "Come to me, all you that are weary, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). Far from placing us in our imperfection at a distance, Jesus' call of repentance is a call of return to the God who graciously waits to embrace us in forgiveness and welcome us into community. More than a legalistic transaction, the story of Jesus conveys to us the good news of a God who stayed not at a safe distance, but a God who cared enough to come among us in welcome.

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 together 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).

And so be sure that as we gather here today, we can gather in honesty and openness before the God who meets us here. Like those who came before us, we gather in repentance. It is not, however, a repentance that drives us to despair. Recognizing the God of inclusive love who meets us here, we gather in hope for the openness of the future and the hope of abiding community.

So, come this morning and make your confession. Make your confession knowing that the one who greets you here is the one who removes our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west. Thanks be to God!