

WGUMC March 29, 2015 Palm Sunday John 3:16-21
"Everybody's Parade: Perspectives on the Passion"

Parades—everybody loves them, and for all kinds of reasons. Some like the clowns because they throw candy. Others like the marching bands in uniform, the little kids in wagons or old men on motorcycles. As for me, I always like the horses best.

The parade in our Bible story featured a man on a donkey, not a horse, but he drew a crowd anyway. Everyone wanted to see this parade, and for all kinds of reasons. Some wanted to cheer. Others came to jeer. Some shouted their praise. Others whispered their threats.

But on that day, I wonder how many could see where this parade was heading. Could anyone see all the way to the cross? Before the week was out, Jesus was dead. There's no dispute about that. But why did he die and what does his death mean? There's never really been agreement on that.

To be sure, the early Christians argued over who Jesus was. That's why the Creeds were written. But they never settled the question of exactly what Jesus did and how he did it. We are accustomed to saying that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but it isn't immediately obvious what that has to do with our salvation. There is no clear, logical connection between *his* death and *our* life. So the cross needs some interpretation.

The situation is this: we want to live with God, but sin gets in the way. Our self-centeredness, our pride and greed: these things separate us from God. We say that Christ removes that separation, but how?

Over the course of a few thousand years, we have offered up many different answers to the atonement question, some more convincing than others. You might even say we have been watching a slow-moving parade of explanations to tell us

why Jesus is so important to us. Today's sermon is something of a parade review.

One of the first floats in the atonement parade was entered by a man named Irenaeus in the second century. Irenaeus was a Greek of the philosophical sort who saw how old Adam had disobeyed God and set the course for humanity's long history of separation from God and then how God intervened in history and sent us Christ, the New Adam, to bring us back to God. Christ did this simply by living a life and dying a death that was in total obedience to God. In other words, he lived the life Adam was supposed to live. In the life of Christ, the whole history of humanity was recapitulated or summed up and sanctified. What we had lost in Adam, our ability to be in right relationship with God, we regained in Christ. When we live in him, God lives in us. I've always liked this Recapitulation Theory because it emphasizes the life as well as the death of Jesus and appeals to the mystic in me.

But before long, here comes a second float, this one sponsored by Origen, a third-century scholar from Alexandria in Egypt. In his day, it was common to redeem war captives from slavery by paying a ransom, so Origen used the concept of ransom to explain how Christ redeems us. It goes like this: when humanity sinned, we became enslaved to the devil. In order to buy us back, God paid the devil a ransom. In exchange for all of us sinners, God gave the devil the One who had no sin. So God got us and the devil got Jesus. But just when the devil thought he had destroyed the Son of God, God tricked the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. In the end, Christ was victorious over sin and death, and when we join him, we are, too.

If you think this story is bizarre, you should know that variations on the Ransom Theory (along with its close cousin, the *Christus Victor* Theory) held sway in the Church for a very long time. There was about a thousand-year pause in the

atonement parade. It wasn't until the eleventh century that a French monk by the name of Anselm arrived to jumpstart the march. Anselm didn't believe that God would make a deal with the devil. He floated a different theory now called the Satisfaction Theory.

Anselm lived in the medieval world, a world defined by master-slave relationships, so it was natural for him to think of our relationship with God in those terms. When we sin, he says, it is like a servant taking honor away from his master, only much, much worse. Because our master is God, our offense is God-sized. There's a problem: while we humans are responsible for making restitution, our sin is so great that only God is capable of making it. Here's the solution: Jesus, who is both man and God. As a man, he can stand in for everyone who owes the debt. As God, he can pay it. According to Anselm, this is the payment or satisfaction that Jesus made on the cross.

At the same time, the star teacher Peter Abelard took issue with Anselm who seemed to think that God was motivated by anger over his violated honor. Instead, Abelard argued that God is motivated by love. What is displayed on the cross is not payment for sin but the ultimate act of love for sinners. For Abelard, we are saved from sin when God's selfless love inspires us to respond in kind.

My guess is that a lot of us resonate with what Abelard had to say, but it was Anselm's explanation of salvation that won the day. A whole bunch of folks climbed on his float. Then four hundred years later, John Calvin came in with a new and improved version of it. As one of the Protestant Reformers, Calvin joined the parade with a theory of atonement later known as the penal substitution theory.

It's not surprising that Calvin was trained as a lawyer, because he was not so worried about us offending God's honor as he was about us breaking God's law. Like God's district

attorney, Calvin argued that the demands of God's justice must be met. The sin must be fully punished. Thus, we all deserve to die. Enter Jesus, who becomes our substitute and takes the entire punishment on himself so that God will forgive us.

I don't think you can overestimate the influence of this theory of atonement on Protestant Christianity. Some don't even know that there are other theories out there. Some think that this is the only float in the parade. But do we really want folk to think that the atonement is all about punishment, or that Calvin has the one key to understanding the cross?

By now it should be obvious to you that, throughout our history, different peoples have had to interpret the cross in ways that make sense in their own cultural context. Well, it's been five hundred years since the Reformation and this parade could use an upgrade. In fact, new ideas and remixes of old ones have been emerging for a while.

I've been working on one of my own. It draws from the Bible, from Irenaeus and the Christus Victory theory. It leans more toward the Orthodox East than the Protestant West. By that I mean that I don't just focus on the death of Jesus. I consider the whole of his life, from incarnation to resurrection, to be crucial to our salvation and not just the crucifixion. In fact, my starting point is not the cross of Christ, but the resurrection. Call me an Easter preacher.

If I had to enter a float in this parade, it would have as its theme John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." [John 3:16]

John 3:16 has often been called "the Gospel in Miniature." In just a few words, it tells us a lot about what God is doing in Christ and not doing. Listen again: "God so loved the world." Notice that it doesn't say that God was so angry at the world

or so wanting to punish the world. No, it says that God so loved the world.

Now what is the world that God so loved? In the Gospel of John, the world is everything that opposes God. As Jesus says, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you." [John 15:18]

This is astounding to think that God loves a world that hates God. And to prove it, God gives us his Son, the Word made flesh, Love come down. That we may not perish, he ate with sinners and tax collectors. He healed lepers and forgave adulterers. And for our sake, he spoke truth to power and suffered the consequences on the cross.

But even there, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself [2 Corinthians 5:19], taking all the world's hate and transforming it into love, facing all the world's death and raising it to life. And our salvation is just this: if we participate

in Christ, if we join in his parade, we too can transform the hate, live in the love and have eternal life.

The amazing thing about the atonement parade is that there are so many different floats with so many different themes, but they are all going in the same direction. It's a shame that some Christians have tried to force everyone to ride on the same float. But I'm not sure it matters how you travel, just so that you get there. So pick up your palm branches and come along. In this parade, there's salvation for everyone.