

Jesus is alive! He is risen! Happy Easter!

Today, I don't plan to get into a lot of details of the story. Instead, I'd like to think together about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Easter story shows us how God dealt with the sin of humanity through God's Son, Jesus Christ. The biblical view of sin is not just the bad things we do. It is in our nature. It is that force that draws us away from what is best for us, from what God desires for us.

Last week, we figured out that there are mice in the attic of our house. Since we have two cats (Ace and Sabo) that love to hunt and catch things we got the idea that maybe we could just push them up through the attic door in the ceiling and see if they could take care of the mice. They both seemed to enjoy hunting around and exploring. After quite a while, they hadn't caught the mice, so we called them back with the rustling of their food bag. I thought it was wise to send them out before their supper, so we could give them good motivation to return to us. Sabo right away came back. (He's always hungry). But, when Rie tried to take him down through the hole to the attic, he panicked and we had to drag him down while he growled, hissed, and meowed loudly. We finally got him down, but because of the commotion, Ace was scared and would not come no matter what we did. We held out food, we brought out cat-nip, we banged on the ceiling near where he was sitting in order to scare him to us, but nothing worked. It was now after 11pm. We usually go to bed around 10pm, and we were quite tired by then, so we finally gave up, closed the attic panel, and decided to go to bed. At around midnight Rie woke up to the sound of Ace meowing. So, she got up and was able to bring Ace down.

This experience reminds me of how we are often caught up in the bondage of sin. Just like Ace was excited to explore the attic, and chose not to return to us, we may be lured away by some temptation. We easily start to think that something is the best for us, when we're really heading down a path that is harmful. Ace was either too excited to explore his own way, or he became scared, thinking that to return to the entrance of the attic was not the best for him. When we're submitting to the influence of sin in our lives, it may take a while, but we then start to feel the pain of the choices we've made, and we want to return home. Ace's crying out in the dark attic is like the point where we realise that we've been wrong in our choices, and we need the grace of Jesus Christ to help us get back home. It reminds me of the story of the prodigal son, who went his own way, spending all his inheritance money, had a change of heart, and then decided to humbly return home and beg forgiveness, in Luke 15.

Through the cross and resurrection, God dealt with the problem of sin. Many Christians may think that there is only one way to understand the meaning of Jesus dying on the cross and being raised to life, but that's not true. There are actually a number of different perspectives on how we are saved from the power of sin, through Jesus' death and resurrection. They are called "theories of atonement." These days, the most common explanation is that Jesus (who had no sin) hung on the cross and took the punishment for our sin so that we can be forgiven. For justice to happen, sin needed to be punished. This way, God's justice could be satisfied.

But, this was not always the most common understanding. For the first 1000 years of Christian history, a different explanation was that Satan held all of humanity in bondage to sin. God tricked him into taking Jesus instead of humanity. Jesus then faced all the powers of evil and death when he died on the cross. But then, in his resurrection he triumphed over Satan and all the evil powers. Through Jesus, God "redeemed" or "bought back" all of humanity, from Satan.

There are many other variations of how we can understand how Jesus saved us from the power of sin, and most of these have some truth, but none have the total truth. A lot of these explanations assume that violence was necessary... I've been exploring an explanation by theologian J. Denny

Weaver who wrote “The Non-violent Atonement.” He suggests that Jesus’ purpose was to show us the reign of God, and show us God’s character. If we read Mark 1:14, we see that before Jesus was crucified, he started his ministry by proclaiming the “good news” of God’s Kingdom, that God is reigning and in control, and that in Jesus God was present. So, we see that there was good news to share already, before Jesus hung on the cross! Of course, the cross and Jesus’ resurrection were significant because we see that God’s reign is even stronger than our sin which ultimately leads to death. God’s reign, as shown in Jesus, was filled with grace, and forgiveness. It also included uncomfortable challenges to people to see the truth of their own sin, but Jesus showed the way of God to be loving and non-violent. This was consistent from his coming as a vulnerable baby, his teaching and preaching, and finally in his death and resurrection. Jesus was faithful to God’s ways of love, non-violence, and truth, even when it meant following a road that led to his torture and being hung on a cross to die. This view understands Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross as being “pure gift,” (totally and completely a gift) since it was not seen as him needing to die on the cross in order to pay a ransom to satisfy the devil, or in order to pay a punishment for our sin so that God could be satisfied. It showed humanity the seriousness of sin, but it also was the greatest revelation of how God is reigning and in control, far beyond the power of sin and death in our lives.

In the 13th century, the Franciscans developed an explanation that was just as theologically sound as other accepted views, but it was non-violent. The Franciscans said,

Jesus wasn’t solving any problems by coming to earth and dying. God did not need Jesus to die on the cross to decide to love humanity. God’s love was infinite from the first moment of creation; the cross was Love’s dramatic portrayal in space and time.

This argument was built on Jesus as described in the books of Colossians and Ephesians. As Colossians 1:15 says, Jesus was “the image of the invisible God.” [Jesus] was revealed to humanity so that we could “see God’s unconditional love for us, in spite of our failings.” The Franciscans also said,

The image of the cross was to change humanity, not a necessary transaction to change God—as if God needed changing! ... Jesus’ death was not a substitution but a divine [revelation] for all to see. Jesus was pure gift. The idea of gift is much more transformative than necessity, payment, or transaction. It shows that God is not violent, but loving. It is we who are violent... If God “needed” or demanded a blood sacrifice to love God’s own creation, then God was not freely loving us. [According to the Franciscans], Jesus was not changing God’s mind about us; he was changing our minds about God. If God and Jesus are not violent or [vengeful], then our excuse for [being violent or vengeful] is forever taken away from us. If God is punishing and torturing, then we have permission to do the same. Thus grew much of the church’s violent history[such as holy wars]...

Jesus personally walked through the full human journey of both failure and rejection—while still forgiving his enemies—and then he said, “Follow me” and do likewise (see John 12:26; Matthew 10:38). The cross was not necessary, but a pure gift so that humanity could witness God’s outflowing Love in dramatic form.

I find this explanation exciting. In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” And, in Luke 22, when Judas comes with a group to arrest Jesus, one of his disciples “struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched his ear and healed him.” There are so many places where we see Jesus taking the way of non-violence, including his submitting to the authorities, and allowing himself to be killed. In Matthew 5, Jesus said “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” Since Jesus shows us who God is, and since he always took the way of non-violence, it

makes sense to see God as a God of non-violence. That idea fits with understanding the violence of the cross to be the violence of humanity rather than something that God requires. I feel like my understanding of the cross has deepened...

But, none of the explanations for Jesus' death and resurrection reflect the entire truth of how Jesus took care of the problem of our sin. We may need to accept parts of different explanations in order to get the fullest understanding of the meaning for Jesus' death and resurrection. What ever way we conclude, the way we understand this central event in history will affect our image of God, and it will affect how we treat others. What do you think? Thanks be to God for the power that goes beyond death, in raising Jesus Christ, and for freeing us from sin by his grace. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank-you for Easter, for your coming to live with humanity, for showing us your love through Jesus, for giving of yourself, even to the point of experiencing death on a cross. Thank-you for your power, that you reign above all, that you are stronger than evil and death. And, thank-you that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. May we better understand your love. May there be no more violence in the world. We confess that we have not always lived with love. Help us to walk in your way of peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.