

Sermon Preached April 6, 2014
Year A, Lent 5 – The Kaleidoscopic Model
St. John’s Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don’t know if you have ever noticed this, but TV commercials can be sneaky! A few years ago a commercial came on advertising a minivan. In the ad, a child was put in the backseat of the van and was immediately swathed in kid-luxury. A screen was pulled down from the ceiling for videos complete with its own sound system, a fancy cup holder held his drink, a tray table provided space for coloring, the announcers voice made the child’s experience to be one of being a king. While driving by, his friends stared at the boy in the van as their mouths dropped open in awe. It was a very effective ad, because as the commercial faded, Duncan, who was still a child, looked at me and asked, “Mom, can we get that car?”

Commercials are geared to the audience watching. This one focused on child-friendly features to get kids to make the sales pitch to their parents. While another minivan commercials shows a busy soccer Mom happily hauling a neighborhood of kids to the game. I’ve even seen a minivan commercial geared towards men, illustrating how the van allows them bonding time with their kids. One product, various commercials, each promoting different aspects of the vehicle. They are all true, but each one focuses on the features that are meaningful to their target audience.

This variety approach is a lot like the model of the atonement we will look at today known as the “kaleidoscopic” model of the atonement. During four Sundays of Lent we’ve been looking at various models of the atonement to discover the ways faithful Christians have understood God, Jesus and his work, as well as us and our salvation. Atonement is the word we use to describe what it is that Jesus did which reconciled us to God. The story of the Dry Bones from Ezekiel we heard this morning is a great metaphor for the atonement. We were once dead and then were given new life in Christ. Why and how did this happen? That is what the various models of the atonement try to answer.

As you remember, we looked first at the Christus Victor model which was the primary understanding of the atonement for the first 1,000 years of Christianity. It sees Christ’s life, death, and resurrection as a conquering of Satan and evil. In summary: We and the earth are good, but under the influence of Satan, and God through Christ released us from this bondage.

The second model we looked at was the Penal Substitution model which was popular for the next 900 years and one which we still hear a lot about today. It says that we are evil and sinful and God is angry with us, but out of love sent Jesus to take our sins away and make us worthy to be reconciled to God. In summary: We are evil and broke the law, and Jesus paid the legal price for our sin.

The third model was the Healing model which has been the primary view of the atonement in the Eastern Orthodox Churches for 2000 years. This model looks at sin as an infection, not an infraction. Sin is a sickness, not a debt we legally owe to God. Jesus died to

take our sins, which results in healing for us and our world. We are good, but sick, and Christ is the great physician.

The fourth model, which we will explore today, is the kaleidoscopic view. This is a contemporary understanding of the atonement. In short, this view says that there is no one primary view of the atonement expressed in scripture. That in fact the atonement, the reconciliation with God that we experience through Christ, accomplished many things on many levels and to limit it to only one meaning is to limit God. In other words, scripture supports the view of Jesus as the conqueror of Satan and evil, AND as the substitute for our sin, AND as a ransom for many, AND as a healer of brokenness... and a whole lot of other things as well! The Kaleidoscopic model suggests that all models tell us something about what Christ did, and we can't choose just one. Multiple metaphors are necessary. And the various models must be used contextually.

I did a Google search about this model and discovered an evangelical missionary to Africa who praised this approach. Apparently he found the penal substitution model very meaningful in his own personal journey, but after serving three years in Africa discovered that it didn't do so well there. The folks in Mozambique cast a jaundiced eye at their legal system, finding it corrupt and unhelpful. So to approach these folks saying that Jesus' atoning work was at its core to free you from your legal problems with God, was laughable to them. They didn't have legal problems. There was no effective legal system in their country. Why care about such a savior?

But the problems these people DID have was with evil spirits and demons. They believed in a powerful spirit world filled with demons who were out to get them. They sought security and protection from these evil forces. So even though he personally was moved by the penal substitution model, the missionary presented the folks in Africa with the Christus Victor model. This model, as you remember, is the one that states that Jesus' atoning work was to overcome Satan and the evil forces of the world. Now THIS was a savior that meant something to them! The missionary met them where they were. He presented them with the model that was the most effective for their context. And these African people found this understanding of Christ very powerful, meaningful, and reassuring.¹

It was a lot like the minivan commercial we considered earlier.

Telling a potential buyer that the minivan was great for playing your DVDs and computer games was perfect if you are targeting a child but, although true, was not as effective an approach for selling it to a Mom. There are lots of things that are true you can say about a minivan, but a commercial will only highlight the features that are meaningful to you. In the same way, the Kaleidoscopic view says there are lots of things that are true you can say about the atonement, Christ's work was too deep for there to be only one truth, but we will each in our own context gravitate to the model that has the most meaning for us. So we cannot lift one model above all the others. Scripture is too rich for that.

¹ Allen Howell, "Through the Kaleidoscope: Animism, Contextualization, and the Atonement"
http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/26_3_PDFs/26_3_Howell.pdf

The Apostle Paul did something similar. In 1 Corinthians he writes, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law..., so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). By his own admission, Paul used the gospel contextually. Always speaking the truth, but only using the parts that were helpful to his particular audience.

Was not Paul himself using a kaleidoscopic model of the atonement? It sounds like he was using the features of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection that had the most meaning to his audience.

Which brings us to ... US! What are our problems and concerns? For what do WE need a savior? If we adopt this kaleidoscopic approach to the atonement, we will want to use the model that is both A) supported by scripture and B) meets us where we are. The model which solves the problems we personally, actually have. Which of the ones, I have presented, speak to you?

As we finish this final installment of this preaching series and head into Holy Week, I’d like you each to consider the various models that have been presented over the course of Lent. Each has their strengths and weaknesses. And each model tells us something about who we are, what the world is, who Jesus is, and how it is we are reconciled to God. Is there only

one true model, or can many of them be true at the same time? There are dozens to choose from. The challenge to the kaleidoscopic model is that some of the models seem to outright contradict each other. Last week someone asked me, “which is the Episcopal model?” Good question, but not one for which there is a clear answer. Our church allows us to hold to the model which speaks to us most meaningfully, as long as it does not contradict scripture. My sense is that the penal substitution model is generally unpopular with Episcopalians, but not unknown. However, both the Christus Victor and Healing models have much to recommend them.

There is no clear answer in this short preaching series about which model is the best, and there are other models which we have not addressed, but I hope it has raised your awareness to the richness of what Jesus has done for us, and the way Christians have understood the work of his love.

Next week on Palm Sunday we will hear the story of the passion and crucifixion. During this holy season, let us remember God’s love and mercy and consider the many ways faithful people have understood it to be expressed.

Amen.

My thanks and indebtedness to the book The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views (IVP Academic, 2006), on which I based this preaching series. - SCB