

Sermon Preached March 23, 2014
Year A, Lent 3
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There once was a minister who was livid when he confronted his wife with the receipt for a very expensive dress she had bought. "How could you do this!" he exclaimed. "I don't know," she wailed, "I was standing in the store looking at the dress. Then I found myself trying it on. It was like the Devil was whispering to me, 'Gee, you look great in that dress. You should buy it.'" "Well," the pastor persisted, "You know how to deal with him! Just tell him, 'Get behind me, Satan!'" "I did," replied his wife, "but then he said 'It looks great from back here, too.'"¹

As I mentioned the other week, during Lent I am offering a preaching series looking at various views of the atonement. "Atonement" means the work Jesus did to save us and overcome sin. There are a number of accepted Christian models for this.

Two weeks ago we considered the Christus Victor model. As you may remember, the Christus Victor model was the primary understanding for the first 1,000 years of Christianity. It is a view where the world is under control of Satan, and it was by the life, death, and

¹ source: <http://www.jokebuddha.com/Pastor/recent/19#ixzz2wjFdcWi>

resurrection of Jesus that the devil was conquered and we were saved from evil. Salvation means salvation from the devil and evil.

The Christus Victor model worked well for a long time, but after a while, some folks started finding fault with it. Specifically, if Jesus came to defeat the devil because all sin is from Satan, then it looks like we are not responsible for sin.

We can do bad things and just say, “the devil made me do it,” and get off scot-free. Like our opening joke, it can be used to justify a lack of personal responsibility.

So in the 11th century, another model of the work of Christ was promoted by a monk named Anselm, who was the then Archbishop of Canterbury. His model became known as the substitutionary atonement model. For the next 800 years, this became an important way of understanding what Jesus did in coming to earth. In particular, by the 16th century, the Reformation churches adopted a modified form of this model, known as the “penal substitution model,” and made it their primary view of what Jesus is all about.

To this day, you will likely hear this view promoted in more Protestant churches, those leaning towards the evangelical end of the spectrum. However, this is a position you are unlikely to find in Episcopal churches, and not one I personally advocate.

In short, the penal substitution atonement model says that all humanity is basically evil and sinful. This separates us from God, who is deeply angry with us. We owe a debt to God

for our sin which we cannot pay. So in his love God sends his son to die on a cross on our behalf, therefore canceling the debt and setting us free to be in right relationship with God.

There is a story which can illustrate this. It is “about a small boy who was consistently late coming home from school. His parents warned him one day that he must be home on time that afternoon, but nevertheless he arrived later than ever. His mother met him at the door and said nothing. At dinner that night, the boy looked at his plate. There was a slice of bread and a glass of water. He looked at his father’s full plate and then at his father, but his father remained silent. The boy was crushed. The father waited for the full impact to sink in, then quietly took the boy’s plate and placed it in front of himself. He took his own plate of meat and potatoes, put it in front of the boy, and smiled at his son.

When that boy grew to be a man, he said, “All my life I’ve known what God is like by what my father did that night.”² We deserve to be punished for our sins, but God takes the punishment on himself instead. Because of his love for us, He gives us the goodness we don’t deserve.

The full belief of the penal substitution model goes like this: in order to have a relationship with God, we must live in perfect obedience to him. We do this by keeping the law. But of course no one can keep the law and we all fall short. Therefore, we are all sinners. In fact, according to the theologian Thomas Schreiner, “we ourselves are radically evil.”³ While the Christus Victor model says the world is under the control of the evil tyrant Satan, the Penal Substitution model says humanity itself is evil.

² J. Allan Peterson. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/a/atonement.htm>.

³ Schreiner, Thomas, “Penal Substitution View,” *The Nature of the Atonement*, p. 68.

Those who sin will be judged. Both the Old and New Testament are filled with passages proclaiming judgment. The reason for this is that God is “personally angry with sinners.” Look at our reading from Romans last week which says, “For the law brings wrath” [Rom 4]. We can’t follow the Law, therefore we sin, therefore God is angry with us. And to make things right, God must judge and punish those who sin. This need for judgment from God “flows from his holiness.” If we believe God is all goodness and love, then God cannot tolerate sin. If he just forgave us our sin, “it would violate his justice and holiness.”⁴ It would deny his very being as God. To be God means you love what is good and hate what is evil, therefore God cannot do other than be angry with us evil sinners, and not excuse our sin.

The penalty for sin is death and eternal damnation. In 2 Thessalonians it speaks of sinners saying, “these will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord.” This has usually been interpreted as meaning hell. If you are a sinner, you will go to hell.

In the penal substitution model, humanity is in a tough spot. We cannot not sin, and God cannot just ignore the sin, so we are separated from God. In fact, we are in debt to the Almighty. We owe God for our sins and the debt is so huge that we can never pay it back. In the Old Testament, people would make animal sacrifices to appease God for their sins. The person’s sins would be transferred to the animal and as the animal was sacrificed, the sin would die with it. The spilling of blood appeased God’s anger. But it was never enough. The debt was and is too great. We are destined for hell.

⁴ Ibid. p. 94

But God loves us so much, that even though he is angry with us, he wants to help us out of our impasse. He wants to help us pay our debt to him, yet he also needs to maintain his position as one who hates evil. So God hits upon a great plan which satisfies both challenges. God's plan is to send his own son to be sacrificed in our place. Jesus would take our sins on himself and die in order that our sins might die also. He would be our substitute and take on the punishment of death that we deserve: penal substitution. In that way, the debt would be paid and the Almighty wouldn't have to ignore evil. God's anger is appeased. Our reading from Romans today is also used to support this model where it says, we "will ... be saved through [Christ] from the wrath of God." At the same time, God's love is shown in this action because of the great sacrifice of offering his own son to be killed in our place. Both God's justice and love are found in the cross. The definition of salvation in the penal substitution model is: forgiveness of sins and therefore salvation from hell. Unlike the Christus Victor model where we are saved from the Devil, in the penal substitution model we are saved from hell.

Also, while in the Christus Victor model, Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection are all necessary components of Christ's saving work, in the penal substitution model it is only Jesus' death on the cross that has any real importance. His life and resurrection are incidental.

So in this model, “how do people become right with God? Not by keeping the Law, but through faith in Jesus Christ... God’s holiness is satisfied by Christ’s bearing the penalty of sin, and God’s saving activity is realized in the lives of those who trust in Christ.”⁵ Therefore, in this model, faith in Jesus and in his work on the cross is what saves us from hell. As we read on posters at sporting events, “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.” We are to have faith, believe in Jesus, and be saved from hell.

In the penal substitution model we now have a renewed relationship with God. We are now pure enough to come before God. At the same time Jesus gives us an example to follow of a love that goes to death. It shows us how to be better disciples and live self-sacrificial lives as Jesus modeled for us. We will want to go out and help at soup kitchens, and house the homeless, and care for the sick, because we know what real self-sacrificial love looks like. We know we can trust God with our pains and grief because he has known them too. Acceptance of the penal substitution model and the extraordinary love God in Christ has for us encourages us, in turn, to share this great self-sacrificial love with the world.

Amen.

⁵ Ibid. pp 87-88.