

Sermon Preached March 9, 2014
Year A, Lent 1
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Jesus and Satan have an argument as to who is the better computer programmer. This goes on for a few hours until they agree to hold a contest with God the Father as the judge. They set themselves before their computers and begin. They type furiously for several hours, lines of code streaming up the screen.

Seconds before the end, a bolt of lightning strikes, taking out the electricity. Moments later, the power is restored, and God announces that the contest is over. He asks Satan to show what he has come up with. Satan is visibly upset, and cries, "I have nothing! I lost it all when the power went out." "Very well, then," says God, "let us see if Jesus did any better." Jesus enters a command, and the screen comes to life in vivid display, the voices of an angelic choir pour forth from the speakers. Satan is astonished. He stutters, "But how?! I lost everything, yet Jesus' program is intact! How did he do it?!" God chuckles, "Jesus saves."

On this first Sunday of Lent we hear about another contest, of sorts, between Jesus and Satan. Jesus is out in the wilderness for 40 days, which is where we get our 40 days of Lent, and during this time he is tempted by the Devil. Satan wants Jesus to do all sorts of things which are against God's will, he tempts him to sin, but Jesus doesn't fall for it. Throughout the New Testament we hear of Satan and demonic forces trying to oppose Jesus and his mission. There is a constant battle between the forces of good and evil, culminating with the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This is how Jesus saves us from sin and death.

But what exactly do we mean by the word "salvation?" From what are we being saved? Are we being saved from hell? What do we mean by "redemption?" What exactly did Jesus accomplish on the cross? Sometimes that can be a bit unclear, because we hear different answers to that. In fact, there is no one answer to what Jesus was doing on the cross. There are several different, legitimate, somewhat competing claims by various Christians as to what it was Jesus accomplished by dying for us.

So during Lent I am going to offer a preaching series describing several of the most popular theories of atonement, or theories of redemption. Each week I will describe a different theory and what that means for us and our faith life.

Today I am beginning with the oldest theory which is called the *Christus Victor*; it is also known as the "classic model." This model is what Christians believed for the first 1,000 of Christianity. It fell out of favor for about 900 years but in the 20th century made a comeback.

In its simplest form the Christus Victor model believes there are spiritual forces at work in the world. That there is a cosmic battle going on between God and Satan, between good and evil. This spiritual warfare is played out both in heaven and on earth. At the moment, humanity and the world are under Satan's control, but through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God defeats the devil, releasing us from our slavery to sin and death. Jesus defeats the Kingdom of Satan and begins the restoration of the Kingdom of God.

There's a lot of scriptural back up to this. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he writes, "For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" [Eph. 6:12].

I am going to quote from theologian Gregory Boyd who wrote an essay about the Christus Victor model. He writes, "What went on in the 'spiritual realm' affects what transpires in history, and vice versa. So in the ancient Israelite worldview, part of the explanation for why a prayer is not answered quickly, why people suffer injustice and are in poverty and why 'natural' disasters fall on someone may have something to do with the contingent activity of these rebel gods."¹ It's a pretty comprehensive understanding of reality, because it explains not only why we choose to sin and do bad things, but also why bad things happen to good people. It explains why an earthquake and tsunami would kill thousands in Japan, it explains why there are corrupt governments, it explains why someone we love gets cancer. There is a cosmic battle going on and Satan and his followers are seeking to overthrow God. They do this by affecting the world and the people in it.

While God may be the ultimate authority over the earth, at the moment Satan is the functional lord. In fact, in our gospel today Satan offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he would worship him. The devil made that offer because the kingdoms were his to offer. He is currently largely in control. It's not that we are puppets, that evil forces make us do bad things. But that we are tempted, as Jesus was, to do the wrong thing. And Satan creates evil events in the world to hurt and confuse us.

So God sent Jesus to the earth, not so much for our sake only, but for the sake of the entire world, the whole creation. Salvation, in the Christus Victor model, means deliverance from the devil. It doesn't mean salvation from hell or salvation from God's anger, those are more recent understandings. It means salvation from Satan. It does mean, also, the forgiveness of sins, but sin is "rooted in a person getting freed from Satan's grip,"² because it is the Devil who controls sin. Once the devil is overthrown, everything else is healed. It's like saying that you have a terrible fever and back cough. But those aren't your real problems - having the flu is your problem. Heal the flu and the fever and cough will disappear. So too, get rid of Satan's hold on us, and we can resist sin. Sin is a symptom of a larger problem: the Devil.

In the Christus Victor model, Jesus did two main things to overthrow Satan: 1) his life, 2) his death and resurrection. In his life, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God. He said this Kingdom is coming, and then he modeled for us what it looks like: loving your enemies, serving others, not retaliating, not using violence, forgiving others, showing mercy. He crossed social, gender, and racial barriers. He healed the sick and stood with the poor. "This is

¹ Boyd, Gregory A. The Nature of the Atonement, Editors: James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy. p 26.

² Ibid. p. 32

what the reign of God looks like, and therefore this is what confronting the destructive powers looks like.”³ Jesus was at war with evil, and his weapon was love. He showed us how to do it. That’s what his life accomplished.

And the second part was his death and resurrection. Jesus entered the world where the Devil was master. This made Jesus fair game. He was targeted because he was suddenly accessible. The powers of this world, the Roman Empire and evil people, provoked Jesus throughout his life, they tried him in court on trumped up charges, ultimately executing him on the cross. He died. The cosmic evil powers were ecstatic! They thought they had won! But Jesus had the last laugh when he rose again from the dead.

He took our sin on himself, the sin which we were under through Satan. So when he died, the evil powers didn’t realize that the sin died with him. When he rose, the sin was gone. Jesus tricked the Devil. The sin died. Jesus lived. We were then released from that sin and given a new nature. Jesus suffered and died for us, because he loves us, and so we are released from bondage to evil.

In their spiritual warfare, Satan and his minions had used cruelty, lies, corruption, and violence to fight Jesus. Jesus used only self-sacrificial love, forgiveness, and compassion. And Jesus won. In Colossians [2:15] Paul writes, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.” The tools and standards of the Kingdom of God are stronger than those in the Kingdom of Satan. Jesus’ death and resurrection set humanity, and all of creation, free from the forces of evil. He reconciled the world to God.

Everything about Jesus: his life, death, and resurrection were about one thing, “victoriously manifesting the loving kingdom of God over and against the destructive, oppressive kingdom of Satan.”⁴

If you look at the words of our closing hymn today, “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” written by Martin Luther, they express this very theology. “for still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal.... Christ must win the battle... and though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us; we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.”

In the Christus Victor model, whenever you affirm Jesus and repent of your sins, his saving work on the cross releases you from those sins and the clutches of Satan. It also means that in our call as disciples of Christ, we are to imitate Jesus’ example: to oppose evil, to stand against injustice, to engage in self-sacrificial love. We are to embody, today, God’s kingdom. Whenever you shovel snow from your neighbor’s walkway, whenever you give to Beverly Bootstraps or volunteer at Monday Night Suppers, whenever you are kind to those who are not kind to you, whenever you forgive, you are engaging in spiritual warfare against evil, and you are winning. You are making the Kingdom of God real right now.

Amen.

³ Ibid. p. 39.

⁴ Ibid. p. 40.