

“Vicarious, Substitutionary Atonement”

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Palm Sunday
Luke 19:28-40
Isaiah 53:4-6

Luke 19:28-40 - Luke account of Palm Sunday

I read this week that Christians in Rome would read the account of Good Friday on the Sunday before Easter. And Christians in Jerusalem would reenact the events of Palm Sunday (and this goes back to at least the 4th C.). Eventually the two traditions were combined, like we are doing today - Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday. Palm Sunday is an important day for not only does it begin Holy Week, it's also an act by which Jesus is presenting himself as the Messiah. Zechariah had prophesied that one day the Messiah would enter Jerusalem on a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9). Religious Jews were very familiar with this prophecy. So Jesus is publicly claiming to be the Messiah by making this ride, a ride as we'll see that he prepared for ahead of time.

Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Isaiah 53 - a chapter known as *"The Suffering Servant"*

This passage describes a Messiah who does not come as a powerful, political ruler. Instead he comes to suffer for the people. We're going to talk about the Cross of Christ this morning. This passage was crucial for the earliest Christians in understanding the events of Good Friday.

Isaiah 53:4-6

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

This message is entitled, *"Vicarious, Substitutionary Atonement."*

You folks are either very brave, or you simply just don't read ahead in the bulletin! That has got to be the worst sermon title in the history of preaching. It's also the classic understanding of the meaning of the Cross - "Vicarious, Substitutionary, Atonement"

Before we talk about what that means let me make a critical point about something as enormous as the Cross of Christ. The event itself is far bigger than any theory or analogy that seeks to explain it. CS Lewis makes this point in his book, *Mere Christianity*: "The thing itself is infinitely more important than any explanations that theologians have produced."

Illustration. I could hold up a small model of one of the Great Pyramids in Egypt. And it might be accurate in scale, and perhaps they've come up with a theory on how they built the pyramids, but the explanation and the model could never do justice standing in the desert sand at the foot of one of the Great Pyramids.

When it comes to the Cross, the same is true - the event itself is far greater than the analogies and theories that seek to explain it. But we have to try. The Cross is the symbol of our faith. The Apostle Paul told us that what he preached was simply, *"Christ Crucified"* (1 Cor. 2:2). Martin Luther said that the Cross is where we see most clearly, *"the heart of loving God."*

"Vicarious, Substitutionally Atonement"

There are a number of ways to understand the Cross (The Moral Influence Theory, the Empathy/Solidarity with Humanity Theory, The Battle with Evil/Satan Theory, etc.) But this is the classic theory - Vicarious, Substitutionary Atonement

I. Vicarious.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the adjective, vicarious in two ways:

A. experienced in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person:

Ex. I gain vicarious pleasure from watching an underdog win in March Madness.

B. acting for another or something done for another:

Ex. a vicarious atonement

Both definitions have this sense of gaining something through another's action - vicariously.

"He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed." (Is. 53:5)

What Christ went through on the Cross achieved something for us - vicariously. We gain it through his actions. Salvation is not man-made. Salvation is a divine endeavor, won by God's Messiah upon the Cross. We share in that - vicariously.

To compare it to something much smaller, think back to when the Red Sox were good. In 2004 when they broke the curse and won the World Series, they then traveled throughout New England with the World Series Trophy. And there were rallies in Manchester, Portland ME, Providence RI. And at these rallies Red Sox players held up the trophy and said, "This is for you. You share in this victory. We did this for you." We never swung a bat or tossed a pitch, but we shared in a great victory - vicariously through them. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory," says the Bible. (I Cor. 15:57)

II. Vicarious, Substitutionary Atonement

Substitutionary means of course that he took our place.

I Peter 3:18 says: "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God."

“The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is. 53:6)

Now we don't live in a society that utilizes animal sacrifices, thankfully. So this concept is foreign to us. But it's clear from the Gospels that Jesus' death was not a martyrdom, because he willingly laid down his life.

John's Gospel says, *“No greater love has this than a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)* *“No one takes my life from me. I lay it down on my own accord.” (John 10:18)*

In Luke's Gospel Jesus says, *“It was necessary that the Christ should suffer.” (Luke 24:26)*

In Mark's Gospel Jesus states, *“The Son of Man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)* So it's clear from the earliest records that Jesus willingly went to the Cross - that's what makes it a sacrifice - and it was a sacrifice made for us.

My favorite illustration for understanding the Cross comes from the 1993 movie, *“In the Line of Fire.”* In the film Clint Eastwood played Secret Service agent Frank Horrigan. Horrigan had protected the life of the President for more than three decades, but he was haunted by the memory of what had happened thirty years before. Horrigan was a young agent assigned to President Kennedy on that fateful day in Dallas in 1963. When the assassin fired, Horrigan froze in shock. For thirty years afterward, he wrestled with the ultimate question for a Secret Service agent: Can I take a bullet for the President?

In the climax of the movie, Horrigan does what he had been unable to do earlier: he throws himself into the path of an assassin's bullet to save the chief executive. Secret Service agents are willing to do such a thing because they believe the President is so valuable to our country and the world that he is worth dying for. They would not take a bullet for just anyone. At Calvary the situation was reversed. The President of the Universe actually took a bullet for each of us. At the Cross we see how valuable we are to God. (From Douglas G. Pratt, Leadership, Vol. 16, no. 2.)

“Vicarious, Substitutionary Atonement”

It was Vicarious - we receive from what he endured.

It was Substitutionary y - he died for us, in our place.

III. And what he achieved for us was Atonement.

Atonement is literally at-one-ment - reconciliation. The New Testament puts it this way: *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” (II Cor. 5:19)*

Again the words of Peter: *“For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.” (I Peter 3:18)*

That’s the purpose of the Cross - to bring us to God. And that’s what billions of Christians have allowed the Cross to do through the centuries. Seeing his love poured out for us brings us to God.

I’ll offer you one more way to understand the Atonement. It has to do with forgiveness. When you forgive someone, especially a friend or a loved one, in a sense you take the pain of the injury into yourself - you refuse to fight fire with fire, you refuse retaliation or revenge - you absorb the hurt, in hopes of one day getting rid of the hurt and restoring the relationship. When you forgive you offer someone, not revenge, but friendship. God did that on the Cross. God absorbed the pain, the hurt, the destruction caused by human sin. Jesus took upon himself the sin of the world, so that our relationship with God could be restored - “the veil of the temple into ‘the holy of holies’ was torn in two,” so we could enter in and have friendship with God.

That’s the atonement, the at-one-ment.

Thanks be to God!