
'Flip the Script': What Happens in Holy Week?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Palm Sunday – Year A

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

What really happens in Holy Week? What really *happened* 2000 years ago in our Lord's journey to the cross? In this week that we begin today, three moments stand out as we walk the Way of the Cross (*Via Crucis*) in scripture and in liturgy.

- The first moment began today with our Liturgy of the Palms.
- The second moment will occur later this week with our Maundy Thursday liturgy of foot washing followed by the Lord's Supper.
- And the third, of course, is Good Friday; the end of Holy Week before the great celebration on Easter Sunday.

Now if I were to sum up what happens in Holy Week with a single phrase it would be the expression: 'hero to villain flip.' That's right: hero-to-villain flip. In Holy Week we go from welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem as a hero, to vilifying him as a criminal—all in one week of drama and passion.

So I call it the hero-to-villain flip because we flip-flop from acclaiming someone to vilifying someone. And it's a flip-flop that that be so swift and unexpected that it can take your breath away. Other times we can shift from amity to enmity more gradually. In any case it's what we human beings all too often do to each other; both in our intimate relationships and on the stage of world history.

But let's take a less intense example and lighten things up with some familiar humor. You've probably heard the joke about two friends hiking in the woods. Suddenly a bear comes roaring after them.

They both start running for their lives. But then one of them stops to put on his running shoes. His friend says, "What are you doing? Do you really think those are going to help you run any faster than the bear?"

His friend replies, "I don't need to outrun the bear; I just need to outrun you!"

Well, if we're able to laugh at that we should. Laughing can relieve the disappointment we may also feel. Because what kind of friendship is that? It's the opposite of friendship, of course.

And that brings us to the second moment in our Holy Week rituals this week: Maundy Thursday. Because on our Maundy Thursday liturgy is about being true friends of one another as we ritually wash each other's feet. Just as our Lord himself did that night of his last supper with his disciples, we too act out being true friends to one another. But also on that night Jesus gave us his New Commandment:

Love one another as I have loved you. By this shall the world know that you are my disciples: That you have love for one another. (BCP, p. 275)

So Maundy Thursday is about committing to love one another in obedience to our Lord's New Commandment to love one another.

Loving one another as he loved us, however, is what brings us to our third moment in Holy Week. Because it was Jesus love for us, we proclaim, that led him on the Way of the Cross to Good Friday.

But precisely how is love expressed in the Way of the Cross that leads to Good Friday? And here I ask again the same question that I asked earlier: What really happens during Holy Week, and specifically now: What really happens on Good Friday, with Jesus on the cross?

In trying to answer that question one pastor has asked us to reconsider our familiar Christian teaching during Holy Week. He challenges us who believe that what happens on the cross is that Jesus substitutes himself for us, in order to take on himself God's righteous judgement on our sins.

Here's how he challenges that substitution theology. He writes

In the church I pastor we omit certain verses of hymns because of allusions and references to Jesus' death as a substitution. Most members in most Baptist churches across the country don't know it as theory; they believe it as gospel ...

Popular Baptist preachers and evangelists over the years have emphasized trust in Jesus' substitutionary death as essential for salvation. It is such a staple in many Baptist churches that pastors, even though they don't believe it themselves, refuse to touch it.

I believe, however, we have to try. There are serious flaws with the theory.

The major problem with substitutionary atonement is the way it imagines God. This interpretation of Jesus' death makes God the source of redemptive violence. God required/demanded a violent death for atonement to be made. God required the death of an innocent victim in order to satisfy God's offended sense of honor or pay off a penalty that God imposed. What kind of justice or God is this? Would a loving parent make forgiveness for the child conditioned upon a violent act?

After further comments this pastor concludes:

The nonviolent God of Jesus, however, is [not] a God who makes ... violence a divinely required act of atonement. Jesus didn't die because God needed a sacrifice. Jesus died because ... he bore the suffering, hate and evil of the world. We are called to do the same ... We, too, are called, on behalf of the kingdom of God ... to be lightning rods, to bear the hate of the world without returning it, so that it might be exposed and so that forgiveness is given a chance.

I'm not sure anyone in the church today wants to hear this. But this is the gospel that has the potential to bring peace and reconciliation. This is the gospel that has the power to change lives, communities and whole societies. Now, if we could just get some preachers to preach it.

"It's time to end the hands-off attitude to substitutionary atonement" CHUCK QUEEN | MARCH 24, 2017
<https://baptistnews.com/article/its-time-to-end-the-hands-off-attitude-to-substitutionary-atonement/#.WOHfXyviIW>

Well, here's one way to preach that gospel. I'll give it a try by offering another hikers' story. In this story two hikers notice that abandoned babies are caught in a river that's flowing downstream toward them. One hiker jumps in the river and swims to rescue each baby one by one. The other hiker, however, starts running upstream. So his friend calls out, 'Hey, why aren't you helping me rescue these babies?' The runner answers: 'Somebody's got to go upstream to stop whatever it is that's throwing these babies into the river.'

So right here I propose an atonement theology where Jesus is both the swimmer, who rescues us one by one, and also the runner who goes upstream to stop whatever it is has been destroying our lives at its source. That's the kind of atonement that I find proclaimed in today's popular theology of 'beloved community.' A beloved community is a community that practices both rescuing our lives from destruction one by one, and also following our Lord upstream to stop that destruction at its source.

The cross is God's resource, in this way, for stopping destruction at its source. What shall we call that source? I call it enmity—ill will or malice against our human nature. It's the enmity or malice that pits us against each other, and even

against God and creation itself. By contrast we have our Lord's willingness to go to all the way to the Cross to atone for our enmity against each other, and against God and creation. The originator of this atonement theology, Josiah Royce, states it this way:

No baseness or cruelty ... so deep or so tragic shall enter our human world, but that loyal love shall be able in due time to oppose to just that deed of treason its fitting deed of atonement. (Royce 2001 [1913], 180) Parker, Kelly A., "Josiah Royce", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2004 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/royce/> accessed Oct. 11, 2010).

"In due time," therefore, as we proclaim on Good Friday, God in Christ opposed to all of humanity's self-directed enmity its collective and "fitting deed of atonement."

Therefore, Christian friends, as we hear in our Philippians reading appointed for this Passion Sunday: "Let this same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus ..." Yes, let that be our atonement theology: a divine willingness—maximized in Jesus but also to be imitated in us, individually and collectively, in ways small and intimate but also large and grandiose—let there be in us a divine willingness to bear our own cross wherever we can go the distance with our Lord in the Way of the Cross: to 'oppose to each and every deed of enmity its fitting deed of atonement.'

In the name of God: "Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend." Amen.
—*The Hymnal*, no. 388, "O Worship the King," v.5