

“No More of This”

S. Mark Heim

Professor of Theology, Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School  
Marquand Chapel, April 12, 2022

Luke 23:12  
John 8:1-11

Prayer: Holy One, Savior,  
May our next steps be with you.

Amen

As you came into the chapel today you picked up a stone. Please hold on to it, in the palm of your hand. If I am doing this anywhere near right, it should feel heavier as we go.

Jesus on the cross: Two things about this have overwhelmed and submerged me since my adolescence, like the tide coming in and the tide going out.

The first comes as a wave of humility and gratitude, knowing myself as a pallid, unimpressive member of a vast company of much, much better people than I, braver people, wiser people, people more just, more anti-racist, more non-violent, more loving...a vast company whose lives have been utterly changed and shaped by this sight. Transformed by the conviction that Christ (and—because of Christ—God) loved them this much.... and by that very knowledge convinced that God loves all others by this same improbable measure.

People to whom the world gave no quarter and no scrap of human respect, found in the cross an unshakable ground for their own dignity: I am somebody, because God thinks so and is willing to do this for me. This is also an unshakeable ground for human rights: God cares and acts thus also for all, for those I am tempted to think are not somebody.

The second wave, which has haunted me pretty much as long as the first, is a perplexity that does not cancel the first tide, but breathes inside it: why this? I know what gift the cross is giving. Why is the wrapping of that gift, the way to

show God's love, the suffering death of a crucified criminal? And why has so much evil, so much evil, as well as so much blessing grown under its banner?

Jesus died because God wanted to help me. Why is it so hard to diagram or explain how that works? Jesus and the woman against the mob tells of an act of rescue, of care, and solidarity. Shouldn't the focal point of redemption be something as transparent and as immediately applicable in this world as that? Let's see.

Have you ever noticed that the only people with a well-articulated atonement theory for Jesus' death in the passion narratives are the wrong people? Caiaphas is an enthusiast for the reconciling effect of Jesus' death, and even chides others for not recognizing that one person should die for the sake of the people. Pilate is convinced someone needs to be executed this Passover as an example and a distraction, just as someone needs to be released as a token and a sop. In principle, it's all the same to him which one is Jesus and which one is Barrabas.

In Luke we have this extraordinary verse which comments after Herod and Pilate have shipped Jesus back and forth between them and each has humiliated him. It says "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other, before this they had been enemies." Passover in Jerusalem is a volatile tinderbox, with the occupying Romans at odds with the Judean Jews. Jewish factions at odds with each other. The Romans are afraid of rebellion. The religious leaders are afraid of repression.

Pilate is ready to make Jesus a politically redemptive sacrifice. Some of the chief priests are ready to make Jesus a religiously redemptive sacrifice---to keep his blasphemy and sin from contaminating the community perhaps, but also to avoid any apparent dissent from Rome. They all want Jesus' death to have a pacifying, reconciling effect on this situation. It makes enemies like Pilate and Herod friends before it even happens. There's nothing like a little redemptive violence to bring us all together. Moral of the story: There are right ways and wrong ways to make peace through the cross.

We can be so caught up in looking for a cosmic meaning in the cross----- all the more so because there is no obvious “rescue” component to the passion story----- that we blank on its obvious similarities to something like the story of the woman taken in adultery. In that account, Jesus is invited—challenged in fact—to join a collective killing: the stoning of a woman according to law.

That week end in Jerusalem, Jesus’ guilt or innocence is not an important consideration. He dies for reasons quite above that pay grade. Similarly, the woman’s guilt is at best a prop for the real purpose behind the exercise, which is to get Jesus on record as guilty of opposing divine law, so as to make him a victim also, or else to assimilate him to the unanimous violence of the crowd against the isolated woman.

What is similar in that story and the cross is the dynamic at work. If sin kills Jesus, we can say that the specific, immediate, proximate sin that does this is scapegoating. We humans took a terrible thing—scapegoating violence against the innocent (or against those who are guilty of something, but not the demonic effects we claim)----and made it a good thing. It brings us together, stops escalating conflict among us, unites us against a common enemy. We overcome our differences and make peace by finding a common victim, by hating together. We restrain violence with violence. Satan casts out Satan, and becomes all the stronger for it.

The most likely candidates are always those already marginalized, feared, and distanced. But the more homogenous we make our groups, the more we will find ways to purify ourselves further and find the troublemaker within (consult social media). This isn’t a random evil. It is woven into the way our communities work, from family systems, to junior high school cliques, to religious congregations, to street gangs, to international politics. The problem it solves is real and that is its dreadful power. The signature of this sad thing is its internal invisibility: we never see our own scapegoats. We keep no honest record of them, and carry no regrets.

There is a saving act of God in the cross, and there is a sinful human act. The two are so close together that it is easy for them to get mixed up in our understanding, and in our theology. Our theologies always run the risk of taking the diagnosis for a prescription.

This is why Christian theology has what sounds like the same language overlaid on this event twice: once for what it means according to our scapegoating sacrificial patterns, once to turn it around. Christians say the cross is a sacrifice....but a sacrifice to end sacrifice. We say "We are reconciled in his blood," but we mean we have been freed to live without the kind of reconciliation that requires blood, the kind Caiaphas, and Pilate and Herod had in mind.

Jesus died to save us from what killed Jesus, from being the victims of it or being participants in it. Jesus' death isn't necessary because God has to have innocent blood to solve the guilt equation. Redemptive violence is our equation. Jesus didn't volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteered to get into ours. God used our own sin to save us from it.

Once we see this, it is like a red thread through the gospels, tying together things familiar and yet new. We see how Jesus' end in Jerusalem strangely mirrors the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth when the entire congregation in the synagogue carries him out to a cliff to collectively throw him down from it ---the cliff, Luke says, upon which the city was built. We see the beginning of the book of Acts, with the collective stoning of Stephen, in which Paul is a participant.

We see the conversion of Paul. Paul has taken over the fierce persecution of the church as a threat to the unity of the people. On the road to Damascus, he suddenly sees a great light and is thrown to the ground. He hears a voice saying "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, Lord?" he replies, and the voice answers "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." The divine voice raises only one issue. For Paul, to accept Jesus is to be awakened from scapegoating violence to identify with those against whom he had practiced

it. Conversion at that moment on the Damascus Road is just this: put down your stone.

The early church loved to use types from Hebrew scripture to interpret and express the meaning of the cross. Their favorites were Abraham and Isaac, Jonah, Daniel in the lion's den, Susanna (if you don't know it, look it up). These are odd choices, when you think of it---these are all cases of people who do not die, but are delivered from death, from killing based on false accusation or on supposed divine command.

So why have Christians seen all these as images of the same thing? Because they see them as having the same point----Isaac the victim whose sacrifice is averted: Jesus the victim whose killing is undone, who will not stay sacrificed.

In showing us the truth about this sinful and destructive dynamic at the heart of our very human community making, the Gospel also claims us to be followers of Jesus, which means to identify with the victim in this process. God has taken up the place of the victim to be on the side of the victim. Once we take the crucified one as our savior, victims of such acts, including our acts, become harder to hide....they look too much like Jesus.

We heard today the reading of the story of the woman taken in adultery. And all of you know (as you may not all have known before coming to seminary) that this story comes with the scarlet letter of biblical criticism attached to it: "not found in the earliest manuscripts."

When I began to see this reading of Jesus's death---the anti-sacrificial, anti-scapegoating power of the passion---I wondered. Is this an optical illusion, wishful thinking? Did early Christians really see that meaning? Looking anew at what was there all along---whether Paul's conversion, or the early Christian use of types like Isaac and Susanna and Jonah and Daniel, or that single verse in Luke I had never noticed before---convinced me it was not a projection.

Now perhaps the story of the woman delivered from the mob was a vagrant memory of Jesus, passed around in obscurity separate from the other

gospel traditions until people thought to retrieve it and gather it in to the story of the crucified one...because now they saw how it fit.

But I almost hope the woman taken in adultery is a later construction, made up out of whole cloth, because, if so, it would show beyond a shadow of a doubt that those Christians saw that the meaning of the death of Jesus lies in preventing deaths like the death of Jesus.

The miracle of the first stone is that it was not thrown. I doubt very much we would ever have heard of it, if not for the one taken to the cross.

Christ is wounded for our transgressions—so we shall hear frequently this week. We can hardly deny that Jesus bears our sin: none of us who live in communities can claim that we are not beneficiaries of that human use of violence to maintain peace. Christ died for us. He did so first in the ordinary, evil sense in which all scapegoated victims are made to die for their communities. That we know this, is already a sign that he died for us in a second sense, to save us from that very sin. Jesus dies in our place, because it is literally true that any one of us, in the right circumstances, can be the scapegoat. And Jesus dies in our place, as a condemned evil doer, because it is literally true that by commission or omission our usual role is to take part in the scapegoating, to belong to the mob, and so to deserve to be judged.

Finally, Christ's passion and resurrection offer a promise of a new kind of community, challenged to build another basis for peace than unity in violence. That is what the gathering around the communion table seeks to do, God help us.

When Christians gather at communion, we see this clearly in the unequivocal reminder of Christ's bloody death. When we hear "Do this in remembrance of me...." we should hear the heavy, implied contrast that comes with emphasis on this. You can come to this meal; you can hold on to your stones. You cannot do both.

At that table we are to become the anti-mob. Christ has offered his very real body and blood, so that at the last supper he can set a new pattern. Remembering, Christians believe this meal of the new community is able to

accomplish all the peace that scapegoating violence could, and more. In it, we recall a real sacrifice and celebrate a substitutionary redemption. On that table, bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, are to be continually substituted for victims---substituted for any, and all, of us. Amen.