

Leviticus 16:29-34

This shall be a statute to you forever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you.

For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD.

It is a sabbath of complete rest to you, and you shall deny yourselves; it is a statute forever.

The priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the linen vestments, the holy vestments.

He shall make atonement for the sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly.

This shall be an everlasting statute for you, to make atonement for the people of Israel once in the year for all their sins. And Moses did as the LORD had commanded him.

Romans 3:19-31

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded.

By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith.

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

I selected these texts from our Year of the Bible readings because they are each, in their own way, about atonement. Atonement is an interesting word. It isn't a translation of Greek, Hebrew, or Latin. It is a word made up by William Tyndale in the 1500's to better explain the Hebrew concept behind the word "kippur". The Hebrew means "to cover over", or "to pacify". If a kid makes his or her parents angry, for example, they can often "kippur" by cleaning their room or unloading the dishwasher.

Tyndale thought that "cover over" and "pacify" didn't fully measure up to the meaning of the Hebrew word. So he created one.

"Atonement". At One Ment.

Kippur is, in a Christian sense, God's way of making us At One with God.

Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, is still a Holy Day in Judaism. And its roots trace back to Leviticus. Fasting, Sabbath, and corporate prayers of forgiveness are all a part of Yom Kippur.

We carry the practice of Kippur over into our worship each week with the prayer of confession. And I know some of you don't like the prayer of confession. You may think it is depressing or a downer in the middle of a worship service.

But here's the thing that they knew in the desert and we should know now. We need kippur. In the midst of our lives, kippur, atonement, has a place. And it isn't to depress us or to make us feel bad. It is because, as Paul says, "all have fallen short of the glory of God." That is not depressing. That is reality. And when we face our reality clearly, we can make better responses in the future. It gives us hope.

So, back to "at one ment". Confession is a part of atonement, but atonement is bigger than our acknowledging that we need it. In

Leviticus, if you've been reading along in the Year of the Bible, you read about the scape goat. Here it is from Lev. 16:20-22 When he has finished atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

My apologies to those of you who don't like the idea of cute barnyard animals being sacrificed or set loose into the wilderness, but I like the tangible nature of this ritual. Here are our sins, we're heaping them up on this goat, and sending them out away from us. There they go! All gone!

And in addition to being a visible sign, it is an act that requires humility. Because we can't get away from our brokenness on our own. We need help. We need God.

Don't underestimate what a countercultural message this is for us. Society would tell us that if we can't do it on our own, we're weak. If you can't pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, then you are out of luck.

The concept of a Day of Atonement, where the community comes together to acknowledge that they individually, and corporately, need God, is very countercultural. And I suspect it was countercultural 3,000 years ago as well.

And then Jesus shows up.

He lives a life that was also countercultural. He, who knew the Holiness Codes so well, ate with sinners and touched lepers. And you know what happened? It wasn't their uncleanness that spread. It was his holiness that spread. He treated women as human beings. He spoke to children. He spoke in parables. He spoke of the Kingdom of God. Was he the Messiah? The anointed one for whom they had been waiting?

But he never organized an army. He just collected a rag tag bunch of followers. How was he going to overthrow the Roman Empire with that bunch of fishermen from Galilee?

And then he was arrested. And convicted. And crucified. And three days later, his tomb was empty. There were reports. Of messengers. Of angels. There were sightings—by the disciples. By crowds.

And then they were left wondering what it all meant. Because all they were left with was their tradition, his teachings, the memories they had of his life, and what he told them about God's kingdom.

And you can see how his followers would have seen Yom Kippur in a new way that next year, after the crucifixion. As they talked about God's merciful act of at one ment that brought humanity into right relationship with God, you can understand why they would have thought of Jesus. As they looked at the scapegoat, carrying the sins of the people on its back, you can see how they would have thought of Jesus.

Listen to these words of Paul one more time.

“But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.”

These early followers of Jesus began to understand his death in terms of kippur, of atonement. Jesus never clearly spelled out a theory of atonement for us to study. But from the time the first letters of the New Testament were being composed, Christians have been struggling with what his death means. And we should still be thinking about it. What does the death of a Palestinian Jew 2000 years ago have to do with our lives today?

I'm going to give you some traditional theories of atonement to inform your contemplation. I don't think, personally, that any of these theories, on their own, are the “right” answer. But I do think that as a whole, they better help us understand. And different Christian

traditions emphasize different theories, so knowing these can help us understand each other and our different theologies. So, for your entertainment and enlightenment, I present Three Classical Theories of the Atonement.

Christus Victor

Christus Victor is Latin for Christ as victorious warrior. If there is a battle waging between the forces of good and evil, Christ's death is a ransom paid to correct original sin. But since Christ conquered death, the forces of good win the battle.

There are a few problems with this theory. One is that we don't believe in dualism—that the forces of evil are equal partners with God. But it can be helpful, especially to people who feel they are under attack. If you need liberation in your life, the image of a victorious Christ can have powerful meaning. The scriptural images in this theory are found in Isaiah.

Substitution

Substitution Theory came from Anselm, who was a Benedictine monk in the 11th century. Looking at feudal relationships between peasants and Lords, Anselm made a connection to our atonement. If a peasant dishonored his feudal lord, a satisfaction would have to be paid. But the peasants were often unable to pay that debt. Similarly, in our relationship with God, we are unable to pay the debt. Only God can repay the debt, but God doesn't owe it. Therefore, there had to be someone simultaneously God and human, who can both pay the debt and who owes the debt. The sacrificial death of JC that fulfills the debt, restores God's honor and grants humanity forgiveness and eternal life. This theory has its problems as well. Aren't we saved by God and not from God? This theory can also break up the Trinity a little too much with Jesus as 'good cop' and God the Father as 'bad cop'. But if we look at this as the act of a compassionate God, it is more helpful. And Anselm's theory also draws on many different scriptural images.

Moral Influence

*This theory was developed by Peter Abelard. He was a Scholastic and involved in returning the church to academic pursuits. He lived a generation after Anselm and you may know him best for "Abelard and Heloise". In any case, Abelard emphasized it was Jesus *life* as well as death that transform us from within and make us new persons, capable of obedience to God. His theory does make good sense of Jesus deeds*

and words. also resonates with the way good teaching can change us and transform us. However, Christ is not just a great moral teacher. Abelard reminds us that it is appropriate but incomplete to say he died for our sins, because his life matters. The way Jesus led his life led to his death.

Modern theologians tend to approach the question of atonement differently than the classical church fathers. Picking up on Abelard's focus on the LIFE of Jesus, as well as his death, theologians suggest that it is in the WHOLE of who Jesus was that we can best understand his death. And, as people living in a world that is saturated by violence, crucifixion shows that the world of violence is under God's judgment and will lead to its destruction.

Christ's death extends the healing love of God to all who are violated and extends forgiveness to all violators. What happens on the cross is that God takes violence into God's own self, absorbs all the violence. in so doing, Christ stops the cycle of violence. He offers healing and forgiveness, instead of retribution.

As we keep reading in the Year of the Bible, you'll notice that each writer has a different understanding of atonement. We begin reading Luke's gospel soon, and his understanding of Jesus' death is different than what you have just read in Matthew and different than what you've read in Paul.

So, if you don't agree with the theories I shared today and if you don't agree with some of the different voices in scripture, that is okay. Scripture is God's word to us, but it is also a collection of voices who were doing what we're doing—trying to figure out their relationship with God.

The important piece in all of this is that you keep trying to figure things out.

Keep reading scripture, expecting God to speak to you.

Keep reading scripture, expecting God to challenge you.

And keep thinking of atonement, paying attention to the different voices. And ultimately recognizing that while the scripture writers have different images and ideas informing their understanding of both

kippur in the Hebrew Bible and of kippur in the death of Jesus, they all acknowledge our need of it.

It is through the mercy and grace of God that we receive the gift of at one ment. May our knowledge that we have been made at one with God allow us to share that grace with others. Amen