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“Jesus Came to Live”

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In the Episcopalian liturgy, and in the liturgies of many of the Western Churches, it’s not uncommon to hear something like “God sent his son Jesus to die for our sins”

Does that kind of ring a bell?

For instance, in today’s liturgy, in Eucharistic Prayer A, which we are using this month, you’ll hear: “In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.”

That is a key element to the Christian faith there at the end - that God sent Jesus, as the prayer says, to reconcile the world to God

But, a theological question arises: what is it about Jesus that reconciles us to God? Jesus’ life? Jesus’ death? Or, as the prayer says, Jesus’ life and death?

Western Christianity has made a lot out of the idea that it is Jesus’ *death* that reconciles us to God – this line of thinking gives us that phrase I mentioned at the beginning “God sent his son Jesus to die for our sins”

Crosses dominate our buildings, Jesus is referred to as the “lamb of God” because his death took away the sins of the world

In this line of thinking, Jesus came to die

It’s a line of thinking that’s called substitutionary atonement

Let me break this down for a second:

Atonement - literally “at-one-ment” with God – are the things of our faith that help to put us in right relationship with God

Substitutionary Atonement is the idea that what makes us right with God is that Jesus died *for* us, as a substitute sacrifice for us

God sent Jesus to earth to die on the cross to make the world “at one” again with God’s self

Some of you might be thinking, “well, I’ve never really thought about it so specifically but, yeah, that sounds like what I was taught”

Others may have studied this kind of thing in Bible studies or confirmation classes

But, ultimately, this belief dominates in Western Christianity - we hear it in our liturgies, our hymns, and our prayers

But, what about the other options? What if it’s Jesus’ life that reconciles us to God? Or, what if it’s both Jesus’ life and his death?

What if God sent Jesus to the world to *live*?

What if it weren’t crosses that dominated our church buildings but loaves and fishes, upturned tables, and symbols of healing - the things we hear in the meaningful stories about Jesus’ life?

Sometimes, because substitutionary atonement is such a dominant theory of our Christian culture, we neglect the stories of Jesus’ life to help us make meaning of what it means to be in right relationship with God and jump immediately to his death on the cross

Our lectionary tells ALL the different stories about Jesus, not just his death, but somehow when it comes down to defining what it is about our faith that is most important, the healings, and teachings, and interactions with powerful systems in the name of justice are overlooked for the trump card of the cross

If you were to ask me personally, I think it's the non-binary "both, and" – Jesus came both to live, and because of how he lived he died

For me, the cross gains more meaning by knowing the narrative of his life that comes before it.

This is a lot of theological, technical talk for a priest on a hot July morning – why on earth am I trying to preach about atonement theories this morning?

Well, because when I read this morning's gospel I felt like it helped to paint a picture of the corruption of the political systems Jesus lived in which, to me, is partially why Jesus died

As I said previously, I don't hold so fastly to the idea that Jesus came to earth *only* to die on the cross 33 years later

I believe Jesus died 33 years into his life because his God-filled, God-embodied mission and ministry – God's plan to break into the kingdom on earth and to reconcile it to God's kingdom in heaven – I believe that the radical acts of justice and love that this ministry required of Jesus put him at odds with the systems of the day – the systems of sin and brokenness, hubris and tyranny – and, I think it was in radical solidarity with God's creation and God's love that Jesus gave over his life to those systems and died with and for us

And God's miraculous resurrection of Jesus three days later shows us that we are set free from these evils, that we are resurrected as Jesus is resurrected

John the Baptist was Jesus' friend and maybe even his one-time mentor

Remember it was John who baptized Jesus in the river as part of John's ministry to prepare the way of the Lord not realizing until Jesus emerged from the water that it was indeed the Lord whom he baptized

John had his own following and his own disciples

John was a prophet and as a prophet he said things and did things that put him, too, in conflict with the powers that be

So much so that his words got him arrested, and the anger his words caused those in power eventually cost him his life

John didn't come to die, John came to prepare the way

And as Professor Matt Skinner writes, "John prepares the way of the Lord in death as well as in life"<sup>1</sup>

"John's demise gives Jesus a glimpse into his own possible future," Professor Skinner says, "this is the fate of too many prophetic truth-tellers"

I think this story of John's death at the hands of King Herod, rather than simply an odd interlude that pulls us away from the stories of Jesus' ministries for a Sunday, is actually an important insight into and reminder of the very world that existed that Jesus came to reconcile to God

This very power structure, which Professor Skinner describes as "noxious people with little impulse control who hold positions of power," stands in opposition to God's power structure

This is the dissonance Jesus was sent into when Jesus was sent into the world to live

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-mark-614-29-6>

Jesus, as God's beloved child, embodied all that was good, all that was kind, all that was loving, all that was just (as we hear about in so many of the other stories in Mark's gospel), and he was sent into a world with oppressive systems that were all consuming, power-hungry, and sin-filled (as we see embodied in this story of trickery, pride, and unbalanced power).

I think that by glimpsing this story of John's death, we see a bit more plainly why Jesus died

Jesus, who showed radical love, forgiveness, and mercy; who ate with the rejects and the outcasts; who overturned tables and called out the corruption of the leaders of his day – not just for fun, but as the embodiment of God on earth – yes, *that* Jesus is going to clash with the systems of the day and it is no wonder, to me, that that world put him to death

But, to be honest, it doesn't feel so far removed to compare the corruption and brokenness of the systems of *that* world with the brokenness of our world, too

The escalation of enmity in our politics – to the point where violence breaks out and assassination attempts kill innocent bystanders and injure others – is matched by an escalation of enmity in our social networks and civil orders, and it has escalated the very same thing in our families and even our faith

In that way, this morning's reading from Mark feels like a mirror being lifted before our faces with a call to remember and recall

That Jesus was sent into this very world to live...to heal, to teach, to love, to forgive, and to serve; to embody God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven

That Jesus, when he entered this world, didn't align himself with the political, religious, or social powers of the day; rather, Jesus aligned himself with the power of God's love, mercy, forgiveness, and justice by aligning himself with the outcasts and the rejects

And that it was broken political, religious, and social systems that crucified our Lord, because of how he lived

To me, this feels like a calling to discipleship that I need so desperately in this time

That regardless of allegiance to one political party or another, or another, or another, as baptized children of God we seek first the kingdom of God, we seek to reconcile the world in which we live to God as Jesus did

And we do that by how we live, how we heal, how we teach, how we love, how we forgive, and how we serve; how we embody God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven

How Jesus lived in the face of those powerful systems that killed his friend and then killed him mattered, how we live in the face of the systems of today that tear sibling from sibling matters

Let us pray: O God, in your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we fall into sin and become subject to evil and death, we are reminded that you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all. Amen.