

Why did Jesus have to die, and why does it matter? There are two very different messages floating around about why Jesus died about 2000 years ago. About half the protestant religions believe that Jesus died for our sins. The other half, and most of the rest of us, whether or not we call ourselves Christian, believe that this is what Christianity teaches. The other reason for the execution of Jesus is the historical reason; Jesus was seen as a threat to Roman imperialism and had to be eliminated. I'll get to the "why does this matter?" question later.

First, we'll look at the belief that Jesus died for our sins. Here's how this story goes. Humans are born in sin. Our sin goes all the way back to Genesis and the eating of the apple by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Without direct intervention by God, we cannot be saved. This idea was not part of original Christianity. According to the late New Testament scholar Marcus J. Borg, this idea of substitutionary atonement (where Jesus substitutes for all of us) was first articulated by

St. Anselm of Canterbury in the year 1097 in his book *Why God Became Man*.ⁱ Anselm reasoned that we had sinned and that God demanded that there be payment for our sins. Only the sacrifice of a perfect human being would suffice. The answer? God sent his son, the perfect Jesus, to be that sacrifice. Jesus served as a substitute for all of humankind. He atoned for our sins.ⁱⁱ

By the way, this is called retributive justice, or justice by punishment, and is the basis for our penal system. It is also used to justify corporal punishment of children and spouses in some families. If someone has erred, then payment must be enacted in the form of punishment.

Borg offers that this understanding obscures why Jesus was killed. First, this reasoning "domesticates his death." By following this substitutionary atonement line of reasoning we can ignore the teachings of Jesus, teachings which are really hard to follow.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Rev. Ted Sandberg is a colleague at the liberal First Baptist Church here in Chico. In a conversation a few weeks ago, Ted offered this insight into some of his fundamentalist Baptist colleagues. According to Ted, they believe that "All that stuff Jesus taught about

how we are to be in the world and with one another? He didn't really mean that we had to follow that here on earth-that stuff is for heaven. It's too hard, we're all sinners. Jesus died so that we could be saved. No need to tackle those hard teachings now."

The second reason that Borg takes exception to Anselm's theory of substitutionary atonement is that it impugns the character of God. It belittles God. It makes God out to be that angry old white guy with a beard and a switch. For some of us, this has been the only God that we

have been exposed to, and we are here at UUFC because we have rejected that God. A God that forgives out of love, not after punishment, does not include this imagery.^{iv}

Finally, Borg says, this idea distorts Christianity, which then becomes primarily about sin, about believing that Jesus died so that our sins can be forgiven, and reward in a blessed afterlife. These are the basis of what Borg refers to as heaven and hell Christianity.^v This understanding of Christianity is about salvation in a coming world. This world doesn't matter. What if Christianity is instead about the transformation of ourselves and this world?

Now what about that second reason that Jesus died? Quite simply, Jesus was a threat to Roman imperialism. He had to die.

Passover is the Jewish celebration of their liberation from slavery in Egypt. It was during this time that Jesus traveled from the rural areas where he had been teaching and healing to the city of Jerusalem. He traveled to the city of the Temple, the center of the Jewish faith as it was practiced in his day.

So what did Jesus do when he got to Jerusalem? According to the evangelists who wrote the Gospels, he rode in on a donkey, a dig at Roman rule by war and chariot.^{vi} He entered the Temple and created a scene, declaring it a den of thieves for the extortionist money lending taking place there.^{vii} He entered into a series of arguments with the priests.

Now the high priests of the Temple were cozy with the Romans. Unlike other peoples conquered by the Romans, the Jews had been allowed to keep their own worship practices and beliefs. They were not forced to worship the Roman emperor. And here was this upstart itinerant preacher challenging everything that they stood for, exciting the commoners about a peaceful, equitable kingdom here on earth, ruled by God and not by Rome.

As a **social prophet**, Jesus criticized the elites of his day, the rulers, the religious leaders and the rich. He advocated an egalitarian social vision in which people were treated equitably. Remember, Jesus

associated with the down and out, the people outside the purity laws such as tax collectors, lepers and the mentally ill. In contrast to the male dominated society of that time, women had leadership roles among Jesus' followers.

Is it surprising, then, that the priests made arrangements to have him arrested? They had to do this in secret, because they were afraid that a public arrest would cause a riot. In the ensuing mock trial, the priests and their followers insisted that Jesus be crucified as a state threat. They knew that if Jesus' following kept growing it would catch Rome's attention, and only bad things could happen out of that.

Because of his social advocacy, he was crucified. He died because he loved his community and the world and that love and compassion led him to challenge the conventional wisdom of those in authority.

Why does this matter? I've given some hints along the way this morning. Like it or not, Christian thinking, specifically fundamentalist Christian thinking, deeply influences how our American society functions. Punitive punishment is deeply engrained as a social and family dynamic. The health of this earth doesn't matter. All the creatures on the earth don't matter except in how they can feed us, clothe us, heal us, or make our lives more comfortable. What we do here doesn't matter, so we might as well make as much money as possible, have fun and be comfortable. Heaven is the goal. We don't really have to be compassionate and accepting of everyone, only those who think about the Bible and God like we do, and who are therefore right.

It behooves us as liberal religious people to know the stories being told by those who think so fundamentally differently about God and religion than we do. It also behooves us to know the stories told by Jesus, stories of transformation and renewal. Stories of acceptance. Stories of kindness. The Lord's Prayer asks that God's will be done, on earth as in heaven. Imagine what that might look like, heaven on earth, whether or not you believe in God or heaven. What would it mean to work towards that ideal? How would your life be changed. Maybe it already has been, whether you call yourself Christian, Jew or Moslem; pagan, humanist or atheist.

Jesus had to die because he was a threat. His ideas are still threatening to many, difficult to live by for all. However, the meaning of his death and resurrection, celebrated by millions of Christians on this day, is that of transformation and renewal.

// Blessed Be and Amen

ⁱ *Cur Deus Homo?*

ⁱⁱ Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian*. Harper Collins, NY. 2011. 98-100

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} John 12:14-15

^{vii} Mat 21.12-13