

We know the story...if we've hung around church at all...

In the beginning God created the heavens and earth.

God—Father, Son and HS, got together and planned, imagined, created and played.

And in their wisdom, because they wanted to share the love and joy they knew.

And so the Spirit hovered over the chaos and they made order and beauty.

They made life and humanity.

And said it was good. Good. Very good.

Humans lived in peace and togetherness and lived in the visible presence of God who walked with them through the garden.

Shalom.....the peace and wellbeing.....

And then like, every good story. Something went sideways.

Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Symbolizing their desires to do life on their own.

And thus began the loop of pride, greed, violence, betrayal, scapegoating and blame, envy that finds its way through all of human history.

Cornelius Plantinga in his book “Not the Way it’s supposed to be” says it like this (p 30):

“Adam and Eve’s...pride and disbelief trigger disobedience, scapegoating, and flight from God. Their first child then extends his parent’s trajectory: Cain blames and kills his brother Abel, launching the history of envy and [killing our brothers] within the human family...The story of the fall tells us that sin corrupts: it puts asunder [apart] what God had joined together and joins together what God had put asunder [apart]. Like some devastating twister, corruption both explodes and implodes creation, pushing it back toward the formless void from which it came.”

Sin has one thousand faces.

It can look like not doing something, or doing something.

Doing it voluntarily or involuntarily.

And it’s never as plain as it looks.

Being a “good man” or a “good woman” is hard to know when we’re in the midst of complicated and complex situations.  
(ie: lying or letting someone be killed?)

What all these sins have in common is that sin says Plantinga (16)

Sin “disrupts what is good and harmonious...sin is an intruder to what God has made....We need to see first that sin is one form of evil and that evil, in turn, is the disruption or disturbances of what God has designed. This design naturally includes not only the proper relation of people to people and of people to nature and of nature to God but also the proper relation of people to God....Sin offends God not only because it bereaves or assaults God directly, as in impiety or blasphemy, but also because it [grieves] and assaults what God has made. ....In sum, Shalom is God’s design for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder.”

When we look around the world, we know the loop of sin and evil continue. Our lives have been touched directly by the sins others have done to us.

We become overwhelmed and heavy with grief when we watch the news and truly take in the violence, horror, lack of food and care so many people go through life experiencing.

We know somehow, that this is NOT the way it’s supposed to be. We know, or at least we hope, that there is something better than this that is intended.

And, though it can be hard to acknowledge, we know too that we are complicit, or involved, in this sin and evil too. That we struggle to know what it means to follow Christ, to do good, to break from the ways our society operates because it continues evil quietly, to love truly when things get hard.

I don’t want to blow things out of proportion or make us feel guilty for all we are not guilty of. And I know, talking about sin can be

offensive. But. It is true. We do things and participate in things that break down shalom. And we must be honest about it.

We know sin can kill, dividing our inner person, our vital relationships, whole societies and institutions. And sin is seemingly everywhere....sin is like

“a plague that spreads by contagion or even by quasi-genetic reproductions. It’s a polluted river that keeps branching and rebranching into tributaries.” While everything still bears the mark of the goodness of God, everything has been touched by sin.

We know that this is not the way it’s supposed to be. And we long for something different. We long to be whole.

God made the world. But did not leave it to falter.

God’s been committed since the beginning to walk with humans step by step to bring about the restoration of shalom, the healing of our world, the cleansing of ourselves.

And so in the Old Testament we see that God created a number of ways for sin and evil to both be named, considered, and dealt with in a way that would shape and form society and hearts.

There were sacrifices and rituals that had to be done. But Hebrews references the Day of Atonement which was done once a year found in Lev 16. So we’ll use that a little bit to unpack a few things.

Sin cost something and so had to atoned for. (amended and made right). freed

There’s the idea that it cost the sinner something and so in Lev 16 on the Day of Atonement, the priest would slaughter a bull for his own sin, and a goat for the sins of the people. (Lev 16)  
(Black lives matter are asking for reparations)

Sin left a mark and so had to be cleansed and purified. Free.

There’s the idea that through the giving of a life healing can happen?

The high priest would take the blood of the bull and the goat and sprinkle them in the Holy of Holies and in the Tent of Meeting and on the altar.

(Mark, the scarlet letter—we know we need to be cleansed).

“wash me and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7)

Sin had a thingness. and so had to be borne away. Or sent away. So we could be free.

The high priest would bring the live goat, lay both his hands on its head and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and then send the goat into a remote place in the wilderness. (Lev16:20-22)

Sin was borne away, carried away back into the wilderness, and in their understanding, back to the place of chaos or evil from where it had originally come.

(Similar to the tearing down of statues and renaming of institutions if they were involved in slavery...)

“as far as the east is from the west so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12)

These things were meant to be a gift...the point being to restore people to God, to each other, to the world. To bring healing and to set all things right.

So committed is God to this goal of making all things right, to justice and peace that God continually worked with people. God took sin seriously so that healing could happen.

God’s wrath against sin that we hear so often...is

“a way of describing God’s absolute enmity against all that’s wrong and his coming to set all things right” (130, Rutledge, Crucifixion)

And yet we find, Hebrews says, that this way of dealing with sin, rituals that were there as a gift to the community, did not bring the full

healing needed. It provided some outward cleansing, but not always the inward transformation needed.

So committed was God to leading us to full restoration that we see in Hebrews:  
That Jesus enters the Most Holy Place in the God-realm to do what the high priests did in the earthly temple:

To bear away our sin. To get rid of it.

To cleanse us from our sins.

To atone and make amends and repatriations for us.

Jesus along with the Father and the Spirit at the beginning of time decided to do this together. And

“He endures the penalty that is ours to reveal how much he loves us. Like an innocent Jew accompanying them into exile to redeem them. Radical nature of love that gives self completely.”

The blood of Jesus is an imaginative and in your face way of showing God’s complete and utter commitment to making all things right....to restoring shalom and mending the world...so much so that God, through Jesus, will give his very own life. Outpouring of love. And it is done before we are ready to even acknowledge our own participation in sin,

God gives up the right to collect on debt, instead offers justice and forgiveness, grace and mercy so we can be healed...so shalom can be restored.

Once and for all.

Through the blood of Christ we have been cleansed.

Forever. We have a high priest who intercedes for us and bears away our sins. The sins of us and the sins of the world.

The thing that’s different about this work of Christ from the Day of Atonement says the preacher of Hebrews is:

“It cleanses our consciousness from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” (Hebrews 9:14)

We are not simply forgiven, set free from evil, and our sins borne away, or simply welcomed at the table.

We are set free, welcomed, forgiven so our personhood and relationships which is damaged or lost can be restored.

Our past cannot be remade through punishment but through grace and healing, through cleansing our conscience so we can live in a new way that honors the shalom God intends for all.

We are set free, welcomed, forgiven so that we can serve the living God.

No longer needing to repeat the loop of Adam and Eve's sin, we are able to step outside the tyranny of evil and work toward a different goal.

In some ways this is like a dystopian novel, film, or movie.

(Giver, Station 11, Hunger Games, 1984...and others...)

Which just means a movie, novel or film that describes society as dehumanizing, unpleasant as possible, bringing to light the horrors of humanity.

But in each of these, there is usually someone who suddenly realizes things could be different, there might be hope, there is a different kind of society possible.

And then they attempt to work for it.

Through difficulties and struggles, but they work toward their hope. They work toward a different kind of society, a setting free of culture so people can live again.

This is what the author of Hebrews is trying to do for the people he is preaching to.

There is hope of a different way. In fact, you've already been set free to live.

It might mean difficulties and struggles, it might mean sacrifice, it might mean tension and upending of the way you used to live. It might mean dying to the ways of sin and selfishness we are attracted to. But let us serve the living God who has gone through the same struggles as us and now lives to intercede for us. Has sent the spirit so we do not need to be pawns in the game of evil, but can be free to serve the risen Christ.

To work and live in this world in ways that bring about shalom, bring about the fruit of the spirit, bring about healing and restoration and mending.

We see this in varying degrees in this moment of racial reconciliation movement going on these past 4-6 weeks in the US and Canada. They've seen a different way, they have hope that things can be mended, repaired and look different, and they are calling us to walk in a new way.

There's beauty and difficulty in serving God.

Beauty because all we have to do is, in the kindness of God, take responsibility for the sin we've been a part of, our participation in the brokenness of the world and receive the healing and transformation the Spirit provides.

But there is also difficulty because it will always cost us something...a way of life, a value, an ease or comfort or control or certainty, perhaps it will cost us financially, economically, politically.

And yet. What if this hope is true. There is a different future possible. One God has already been working on since the beginning and is utterly committed to.

A different future that we have been invited into through the blood of Christ who cleanses us from sin and sets us free to love and serve God.

A different future that is not defined by evil and inhumanity and sin, but by the shalom of God....

How might that inspire you to live? To carry on? To rest? To do business or parent? To engage in the social and cultural world?

May you know Christ's outpouring love which offers you forgiveness, freedom from sin so that you may serve the Living God.

Prayer from the Church of England:

Almighty God,

You have broken the tyranny of sin  
And have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts  
Whereby we call you Father:  
Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,  
That we and all creation may be brought  
To the glorious liberty of the children of God;  
Through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
Who is alive and reigns with you,  
In the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
One God, now and forever.  
Amen.