

CONSTRUING THE CROSS: SCAPEGOAT

Leviticus 16:7-10, 20-22

John 11:45-53

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on the Second Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a Lenten series entitled "Construing the Cross."

Leviticus 16:7-10, 20-22 (KJV)

And [Aaron] shall take the two goats, and present them before the Lord at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the Lord's lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness. ...And when he hath made an end of reconciling the holy place, and the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar, he shall bring the live goat: And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

John 11:45-53

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. So from that day on they planned to put him to death

Let us stand and sing #624, "I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art."

Today's sermon is the second in a series I am giving during Lent entitled "Construing the Cross."

- In this series we explore *differing* but *complementary* understandings of the death of Jesus Christ: sacrifice, scapegoat, deliverance, tree and serpent.
- I am basing the sermons on a series of lectures Dr. Frances M. Young delivered at Nazarene Theological College, in Manchester, England, in 2014, and which were later published in a book whose title is the title of this series. I read her work in seminary in the 1970s and was pleased to learn that 45 years later she is still studying and writing on the meaning of the cross of Christ.¹
- Today's sermon explores the association of the death of Christ with the ancient practice of sending a scapegoat into the wilderness and the common phrase that ritual has bequeathed to our language.

I hope these sermons will move us to deeper reverence for the death of Christ as we anticipate his resurrection on Easter Sunday and as we live in the power his Spirit all our days on this good earth.

¹ Frances M. Young, *Construing the Cross* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015).

Let us pray: “Churchill once said: ‘Words are the only things that last forever. The most tremendous monuments or prodigies of engineering crumble under the hand of time. The Pyramids moulder, the bridges rust, the canals fill up, grass covers the railway track; but words spoken two or three thousand years ago remain with us now, not as mere relics of the past, but with all their pristine vital force.’” Lord, may the words we speak and sing, in this place, in this service, be worthy of those words spoken two or three thousand years ago that ‘last forever’.²” Amen.

I.

In common usage, the word “scapegoat” refers to a person or group that is blamed – almost singularly – for the sins and sorrows, anger and anxiety, frustration and failure of those asserting the blame. Scapegoats are usually the victims of mob mentality, in which a group as a whole is worked up into sufficient frenzy to do more damage and cruelty *collectively* than any one of its members is likely to do on his or her *own*. It is easier for us to be cruel *en masse* than as solo performers, though the mass shootings we have seen in recent years and recent days – targeting Muslims, Jews, people of color, gay and lesbian teenagers, and, in our own community, Members of Congress – have for the most part been carried out by solo performers while being no less acts of scapegoating.

It is easy to see how in his death Christ came to be viewed as a scapegoat.

When Jews were living as a minority community under Roman domination, one of their strategies for survival was to go about their business, be good citizens, call little or no attention to themselves; in other words, “go along” with the ways of Rome in order to “get along” within its Empire. The New Testament Letters of First and Second Timothy and Titus reveal this attitude among early Christians as well.

But when Jesus appeared, as a fellow Jew, doing signs and wonders, attracting a following, being hailed as Son of God, many feared that his growing popularity would draw undue attention to their community and put them at risk of the wrath of Rome.

Their Council – called the Sanhedrin – took immediate and far reaching action: “It is better for...one man [to] die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed,” said Caiaphas, who was High Priest that year. Thus, they began to draw up plans to put Jesus to death. As Young writes:

They patched up a charge near enough the truth to get him condemned in the Roman courts...

He was cast out of the community and [executed] because of their frustrations and fears...

Jesus became the scapegoat, the focus of hostility, because [they thought] he brought [the causes of their] insecurity and anxiety.³

II.

Thus, on one level, the death of Jesus as scapegoat reveals a human tendency – not far from within all of us – to seek to blame *one person or group* for fears we have, *sufferings* we know, *frustrations* which are upon us. When we are under pressure, it is easy for us to blame the outsider, the stranger, the one who is different.

² *The Collected Essays of Sir Winston Churchill, Volume IV*, edited by Michael Wolf (London: 1974), 438; quoted in Andrew Roberts, *Churchill: Walking with Destiny* (Viking: 2018), 428.

³ Young 26.

Again, Frances Young:

...we come to see Christ...[as scapegoat] whenever school bullies operate, whenever staff in...care homes collude in abuse, whenever military personnel resort to...sadistic horseplay...

Christ's victimization is ...a perpetually horrifying possibility in human history...

People gang up to get rid of anyone weak, vulnerable, or just different.

She concludes:

The cross exposes what Christians have called 'original sin' – the only empirically demonstrable Christian doctrine...⁴

III.

But this association of the cross with scapegoating has a more positive and constructive function within our faith than simply exposing our tendency to blame others. To see this more constructive association, we need to venture back to the roots of the term "scapegoat" in an ancient ritual of the people of Israel, found in the Book of Leviticus, a ritual out of which grew *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

In Leviticus, God tells Moses to tell his brother Aaron to institute a *sin offering* for *himself* and for the *people*, using a *ram* and *two goats* to be offered to God for atonement and reconciliation. God says to Moses:

[Aaron] shall take the two goats, and present them before the Lord at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat..... the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement...

God continues:

...Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send [the goat] away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

When we first hear this ritual, with our ritually challenged and ritually suspicious Presbyterian ears, it may sound to us as if offering our sins to God – *individually* or *collectively* – is simply a matter of placing them on a goat who will carry them into the wilderness, never to return, as if our sins are tin cans strung from the rear bumper of a '56 Chevy with "Just Married" painted across the rear windshield, headed down a road named "Happily Ever After."

But atoning for sins is not quite that easy or cheerful, no more than tin cans on a bumper ensure actual happiness. You see, the process of transferring our sins onto the goat is a *public, personal, truth-facing* and *truth-telling* process.

- When God instructs Aaron to "lay both his hands on the head of the live goat," the verb *lay* involves *leaning into*, creating almost a connection of intimacy.⁵

⁴ Young 26-27.

⁵ footnote

- In addition, to use *both hands* involves an act of transference of ownership,⁶ similar to a commissioning, a swearing in, an ordination, a baptism.

On behalf of the community and the individual, Aaron is to get “up close and personal” with the goat (Aren’t you glad you came today!) so that the sins of the community and the sins of its individuals are *brought out into the open, confessed, faced* and literally *transferred in ownership* from the committers of the sins to the goat who will bear them into “a land not inhabited.”

The sins of the community and its individuals, the mistakes and missteps, the pain, the suffering, the heartache, the grief, the guilt, the shame, the sorrow, the anger, the frustration, the fear and anxiety, the hopelessness and hate that infects the community and weighs down its members are carried off into a part of the wilderness that no human eye has ever seen, never to return.

IV.

In early *Jewish* writing on this text, speculation grew up that the scapegoat was not only *left alone* to die in the uninhabited wilderness, but was actually *sacrificed* – pushed off a cliff – the sins it carried careening to the base of the cliff with its mangled body.⁷ Early *Christian* writing – growing up after the New Testament – followed this line of thinking and began to equate the *scapegoat* with the death of Christ on the cross. Fifty or more years after the death of Christ, and early theologian named Barnabas asked:

Is not this He,
Whom once we crucified?
...When they shall see Him coming,
They may be astonished at the likeness of the goat.⁸

V.

Thus far we have said:

- That the ritual association of the scapegoat and cross helps expose our deep human tendency to blame the other, even to the point of rejection and violence
- And that the association of the scapegoat with Christ can lead us to face our collective and individual sins honestly, to place them onto the person of Christ our Scapegoat and that he might bear them away and we start anew.

To bring this home, I want to close with four questions, or rather, four versions of the same question:

- What is the *one thing* in the whole history of *Christianity* – from our roots in Judaism to our origins in Bethlehem to our growth in nearly every civilization today – that you would have us join together and place on Christ our scapegoat, leaning into him with both hands in such a way that we transfer this stain on our faith to him that he would bear it away, into the wilderness, that it might never return, and that we might reborn as a faith, fresh and new?

⁶ Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 16:21n, in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, Wayne A. Meeks, general editor (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁷ *Mishna Yoma* 6.6.

⁸ *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 7:9, 10, written between 70-132, according to most scholars. There is also a subtle connection that can be drawn between The Ceremony of the Red Heifer in Numbers 19 (especially 19:6) and to the sacrifices of Hebrews 9, especially verses 9:12, 15-18, the latter of which are attributed to Christ.

- What is the *one thing* in the history of our *nation* – from our roots in the earliest exploration of this continent to the deliberations and decisions in the halls of our branches of government just across the river, to our life together as divided as we are today – that you would have us join together and place on Christ our scapegoat, leaning into him with both hands in such a way that you transfer this stain on our national history to him that he would bear it away, into the wilderness, never to return, and that we might have “a new birth” as a nation?
- What is the *one thing* in the history of the *family* from which you have come or the family which you may have created or entered – that you would – join together and place on Christ our scapegoat, leaning into him with both hands in such a way that you transfer this stain of the genealogical past to him who will bear it away, into the wilderness, that it never return and that your appropriation of your family past or your life or family present might begin “fresh and new”?
- What is the *one thing* in *your life* – past or present – that you would place on Christ our scapegoat, leaning into him with both hands in such a way that you transfer this stain on your life to him, that he would bear it away, into the wilderness, that it would never return and that you would be reborn, fresh and new?

Christ our scapegoat
 Who bears our sins and sorrows,
 Our fears and frustrations,
 Our wounds calloused and still festering.

Christ our scapegoat
 Who carries them into the wilderness
 Into which only he journeys,
 That we might start again,
 As a faith, as a nation, as a family, as a child of God
 On this good earth
 To which he came
 And on which he gave his life.

Christ our scapegoat
 Walks into the distant wilderness
 Bearing on his back
 All that we have given him.
 Watch him take what we have given
 Over the horizon
 It – but not him – never to never return.

Amen.