

Genesis 4:1-7 (NRSV)

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the LORD."² Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.³ In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,⁴ and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,⁵ but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.⁶ The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷ If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSV)

¹⁵He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers
all things have been created through him and for him.
¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church;
He is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

This week we turn to Christianity, the apostolic, orthodox, historic faith handed down to us by the followers of Jesus who preceded us, for there is no hope without Jesus Christ.

And the truth is that he lives and has put us at peace with our Creator.

For the last six weeks we've surveyed the world's major religions, desiring to learn more about these belief systems and better to understand our own. We've seen the Buddhist efforts to achieve enlightenment, the Muslim striving to live in God's will, the Mormon labors to achieve Godhood. We've struggled to grasp just how unique is the Christian proclamation of God's absolute and unconditional grace poured out on a humanity that simply cannot save itself.

Last week was a particular challenge as we looked at the rise of a new religion within Christianity – a pseudo-Christianity or "pop Christianity" as we put it. In this Christian-ish worldview, as in the other major world religions we've examined, the solution to our problems lies within ourselves, for fundamentally we are "ok." This new "world religion" is sucking the life out of Christianity in America, reshaping it into what Christian Smith calls a "pathetic version" of the "actual historical Christian tradition." In other words, Christianity is being undermined and displaced by this new set of beliefs, this new worldview.

You'll recall that based on their extensive and well-done research, Smith and his fellow sociologists found the key tenets of this new "Christianity" to be:

- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

What's missing from this creed? Jesus, of course. We don't need a savior if all we need is help with a tough problem from time to time. And if Christianity doesn't really *need* Jesus, then what would be the big deal about becoming his passionate servant?

Thus, we have to come to grips with our absolute need for a savior, a rescuer . . . for Jesus. As we've seen each week in this world religion series, the human problem underlying all our troubles is neither ignorance nor a lack of effort. It is sin. This has been the Christian proclamation for 2,000 years and so it will be until Jesus' returns.

The Truth about Sin

I've come to understand that without acknowledging the reality of sin, there is simply no reason to go any further with Christianity. The whole point of the cross, the climactic moment in the Christian story, is that there is something deeply wrong with us that we cannot fix; i.e., we are not "ok." Instead, God must rescue us from ourselves and reconcile us to himself. This we simply cannot do for ourselves, not a single one of us. Not a Christian, not a Muslim, not a Jew, not a Mormon.

I think at least part of the problem is that we don't really understand what the Bible means by "sin" and "sins." In the story of Cain and Abel, murderous anger overtakes Cain and God gives him a chilling warning: "sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). Notice that God speaks of sin almost as if it is a person. It isn't, but its power often seems that way. It is like a beast that stalks us and hungers for us. We must master this beast or it will devour us.

Sin is like a tragic flaw or deformity that is shared by all humans. It is something with which we all are born. It is that beast always lurking, ready to enslave and to destroy. In my classes, I often use the metaphor of a flaw in our moral DNA. It is just there and we all have it – from birth. From this flaw, from Sin¹, springs the destruction wrought by pride, greed, envy, hatred, lust, vainglory, and the rest.

Look at the course of human history. How else do you explain the destruction and hurt we inflict on one another? Frankly, I have trouble grasping how anyone could fail to understand this. Humans used the awe-inspiring technologies of the twentieth century to kill more humans than anyone could ever have contemplated. Not just by the millions, not even by the tens of millions, but by the hundreds of millions. More than anyone, Christians ought to be realistic about our hearts of darkness.

Where did we get this flaw? It has been with humanity almost from our beginning, when our earliest ancestors chose against God rather than for God, desiring to be like gods themselves. This is the tragic story of Adam and Eve.

But the worst consequence of all is that Sin separates us from God. Indeed, you can think of Sin as the giant chasm that separates us from our holy God. Adam hid from God after he rebelled against God; i.e. Adam separated himself from God. The biblical story is the long story of a gracious God determined to restore the relationships that *we* wrecked, to close the chasm.

In contrast to Sin, "sins" are specific transgressions of God's law, which boils down to loving God and loving neighbor. God showed us how to live fulfilled and joyful lives together. That is what his Law, his teachings, is all about. Sins are nothing more than the many self-destructive ways we live when we think we know better than God. It is Sin that drives us to gossip about others, and it is a sin when we do so. This may all seem a bit pedantic, but your Bible reading will be easier if you can differentiate between the beast called "sin" that lurks within us all and the specific sins that we commit.

¹ I think it is sometimes helpful to capitalize the singular "Sin" when used in the sense of a beast that threatens us. It reminds me that there is Sin and then there are the various sins or transgressions we commit.

Reconciling

What can we do about this beast called Sin? On our own, sadly, *nothing*. There is no path to our Maker that is paved with our efforts or our good intentions.

Go to a bookstore sometime (are there any left?) and look at the long shelves of self-help books. Reams of them. All filled with much good advice and wise teachings. What's the problem? We don't follow that good advice and those wise teachings. Want to lose weight? Eat less and exercise more. It isn't a lack of knowledge on our part; it is a lack of will. We are simply incapable of doing what is truly in our own best interest. Often, we don't even know what is our own interest.

Enter Jesus.

Who really is this man Jesus? He better be more than a wise teacher or an inspiring example, for we've got no shortage of those. He better be able to do far more than you or I. He better be a bona fide rescuer of us all, for we are all in the same boat.

And that is exactly who we have in Jesus. Not merely a friend or a helper, but a savior and more. In his letter to the Christians in Colossae, the apostle Paul directs our eyes and hearts to the true Jesus. Today's passage from Paul's letter is a bit like a hymn in two stanzas, v. 15-17 and v. 18-20. Though the passage is usually rendered in prose, I've printed it in verse form to help you see its poetry and its structure.

The first stanza emphasizes that all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. In case we miss Paul's point here, he gives us a list: all things visible and invisible, all thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul this way in *The Message*:

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — *everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the Lord God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated and zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousand years to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus! It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God's desire for us.

Notice also that Paul speaks of *all* things and *all* powers. There is no person, no government, no angel, no demon . . . nothing . . . that was not created in, through, and for Jesus. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, sits under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not they know it or acknowledge it. Hence, for 2,000 years, Christians have pursued the universal proclamation of the Good News.

The focus of the second stanza shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely human, unique? Because he is the one person in whom God's fullness² dwells.

And as it must, in closing, the hymn turns to what Jesus accomplished. Since we can't defeat Sin on our own, then God, in the man, Jesus, has done it for us. Jesus, God-made-flesh, fully God *and* fully human, has not only led by example, his sinless faithfulness even to death, death on a cross, reconciled all humanity to God. Here is how the Christ-hymn of Colossians 1 puts it:

²Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” From *The Message*: “So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.”

¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Strip Jesus out of Christianity and what are you left with? Another well-meaning but ultimately failed life philosophy, because it is precisely in the living that we fail; we are incapable of doing what we know we should and we are all too capable of doing what we know we shouldn't.

God's purpose in all this is the reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the "blood of his cross." This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus' death on the cross.

Thus, when we turn to those four questions that we've used to better understand each of the world's religions, we find that Christians give answers much like these from N. T.

Wright:

"(1) Who are we? We are humans made in the image of the creator. We have responsibilities that come with this status. We are not fundamentally determined by race, gender, social class, geographical location; nor are we simply pawns in a deterministic game.

(2) Where are we? We are in a good and beautiful, though transient, world, the creation of the god in whose image we are made. We are not in an alien world, as the Gnostic³ imagines; nor in a cosmos to which we owe allegiance as to a god, as the pantheist⁴ would suggest.

(3) What is wrong? Humanity has rebelled against the creator. This rebellion reflects a cosmic dislocation between the creator and the creation, and the world is consequently out of tune with its created intention.

(4) What is the solution? The creator has acted, is acting, and will act within his creation to deal with the weight of evil set up by human rebellion, and to bring his world to the end for which it was made, namely that it should resonate with his own presence and glory. This action, of course, is focused upon Jesus and the spirit of the creator."

This is the real Jesus, the Savior we proclaim, the God we worship. If he does not fill every nook and cranny of our Christian faith, then it isn't Christian at all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Why is it so hard to grasp and to acknowledge the universality of human sin? Why do we insist that "I'm ok" and "You're ok" when it is self-evident that we are not? What is the prospect for any human endeavors that deny this truth? Would it not be like trying to cure a disease working from a faulty diagnosis?
2. Why do so many try to reduce Jesus to a mere example for us to follow or a mere teacher instructing us on God's way? Why do so many find it so hard to embrace Jesus as Savior and Redeemer? What barriers do we put in the way of people coming to Jesus?
3. My experience is that we tend to have a lot of pat phrases that we fall back on when it comes to talking about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. "Jesus paid for my sins." "We are washed in the blood of the lamb." Such phrases have their purpose but they can blind us to other ways, biblical ways, of thinking about God's work in Jesus. What are some phrases that you've used or heard others use? What do you think they mean? If you are talking about this as part of a group, you might make a list of them. You might even try categorizing them. Which phrases are you most comfortable with? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Which ones surprise?

³ Gnosticism holds a dualistic world-view, in which spirit is good and material is evil. Thus, for the Gnostic, the human goal is to escape from the material world and body. This is accomplished by gaining access to some sort of special knowledge, the *gnosis*. Gnostic perspectives permeate much of the present-day religious and spiritual landscape. Sometimes people will try to escape this evil world by searching for their inner spirit, looking for the god within themselves. Others will attempt to escape by looking upward, seeking to climb some sort of spiritual ladder.

⁴ Pantheism holds that god and nature are identical. God is in everything and everything is in god.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 3:1 – 4:17 The origin and consequence of this beast called Sin.</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 1:1-18 Jesus is the Word and the Word was God.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 26:17-30 Luke's account of the last supper</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Peter 1:3-12 Peter gives thanks to God for the gift of hope and joy that is Jesus and the salvation of our souls.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Paul acknowledges that the proclamation about Jesus seems like foolishness to much of the world. It is the same now as it was then.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

