

**MOTIFS OF CRUCIFIXION:  
SUBSTITUTION  
Isaiah 53:4-6  
Galatians 3:13-14  
I Peter 2:20-24**

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on The Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 3, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part in a series entitled “Motifs of Crucifixion,” drawn heavily from a book written by Reverend Fleming Rutledge.<sup>1</sup>*

**SCRIPTURE**

***Isaiah 53:4-6***

*Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

***Galatians 3:13-14***

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

***I Peter 2:24***

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

When I graduated from college in 1976, I was a history major at the University of Arkansas. As a requirement of that major, I wrote a senior thesis. The subject was a Presbyterian minister in the small town of Texarkana (on the border of Texas and Arkansas). In 1908 he was charged with heresy by his local Presbytery. He was convicted, but because he had the strong support of his congregation, the church voted to leave the Presbyterian Church and become congregational. The minister served the new church until his retirement twenty-nine years later.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Larry R. Hayward, “F. E. Maddox: Chaplain of Progress, 1908,” in *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 1979), pp. 146-166. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40018709?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Aaac6e1e64e387d67a72314d4feb91a91&seq=7>.

Essentially, the minister, whose name was F. E. Maddox, was found guilty of not being a Fundamentalist. Among the doctrines the fundamentalists held at that time was one called “the substitutionary atonement.” The version to which they ascribed maintained that

- The human race had sinned
- God was angry with our sin
- In order for God’s anger to be appeased, someone had to be punished
- Christ took the punishment for us through his death on the cross
- Therefore, God’s anger was appeased.

The concept of Christ “appeasing God’s wrath” has not disappeared from theology and preaching today, especially among more Fundamentalist churches.<sup>3</sup> However, one can believe in the idea of “substitution” without tying it to appeasing the wrath of an angry God.

*Substitution* is in fact an important aspect of what I have been talking about the last few weeks: namely, the *victory* of Jesus Christ over the powers of Sin, Evil, and Death, through his *crucifixion*, *descent into hell*, and *resurrection* – the events we acknowledge this week following his joyful Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem we have enacted this morning.

In this next-to-the-last sermon on Motifs of Crucifixion, started last September, today’s motif is *substitution*, freed from the concept of appeasing God’s wrath in which it is often clothed.

Let us pray: *Come, Holy Spirit; Heavenly Dove; Kindle the flame of sacred love in these waiting hearts of ours.*

## I.

When children attend Sunday School and come forward for the Children’s Sermon, we often tell them that Jesus loves them, that Jesus loves all people, that Jesus welcomed children into his lap, that Jesus gave food to people who were hungry and healed people who were sick. When a bit later children learn that that Jesus died, they are surprised and saddened. When they learn that he died on a cross, put to death by people who didn’t like him, it can be their first encounter with grief and the first time they learn that “bad things can happen to good people.”

When children ask: “Why did Jesus die?” we often answer: “He died to show us how much he loves us.” That answer will sometimes satisfy children for a few years, and surprisingly adults for many years.

The answer is not *wrong*, but in the largeness of our faith, it is *incomplete*. A more complete answer is Jesus Christ died “*on our behalf*” and “*in our place*.” This is the motif of *substitution*: “*on our behalf and in our place*.”

What does it mean?

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<sup>3</sup> See for example <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/substitutionary-atonement/> and <https://layman.org/presbyterian-pcusa-hymnal-vontroversy-around-doctrine-atonement-part-3-scripture-substitutionary-amends/>.

## II.

One of the best-known passages of the Old Testament bears witness to *substitution*.

Isaiah 53 is one of six depictions of “God’s Servant,” depictions which after the death of Christ, the early church saw as resonant with him. We know it from Handel’s *Messiah*:

*...he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces  
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

*Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed...*

The First Letter of Peter in the New Testament picks up this imagery from Isaiah and proclaims:

*[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,  
so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness;  
by his wounds you (we) have been healed.*

A hymn we sang last week picks up the motif of substitution:

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul,  
What wondrous love is this, O my soul!  
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,  
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul!*

This is *substitution* – in all its beauty, in all its weightiness, in all its suffering, in all its tragedy, in all its pain, in all its hope. *What wondrous love is this!*

## III.

In addition to these scriptures and hymns, other passages take the motif of substitution even *deeper*.

In Galatians, Paul reads portions of Deuteronomy he doubtless learned as a child in the Judaism in which he was reared. As you may remember, Paul was no ordinary child in Judaism. He was a child prodigy, like Mozart at the keyboard or children today can recite the names of Presidents or the capitols of the states.

In the section Paul is reading, he encounters some of the most heinous acts people commit in or too the people of Israel, and he encounters some of the harsh punishments meted out under Jewish Law. Listen to some of what he reads:

- If you hear it said about one of the towns that the Lord your God is giving you to live in, that *scoundrels from among you* have gone out and *led the inhabitants of the town astray [into idolatry]* ...you shall *put the inhabitants of that town to the sword*...<sup>4</sup>
- ...if someone at enmity with another lies in wait and *attacks* and *takes the life* of that person, and flees...then the elders of the killer's city shall send to have the culprit taken...and handed over...to be put to death. Show no pity; you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may go well with you.<sup>5</sup>
- [And finally, Paul read:] Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.<sup>6</sup>

I imagine when Paul reads this portion of Deuteronomy from the book of his childhood his heart sinks when as adults we go back and look at cartoons we watched as children and realize how violent they were, when *The Three Stooges* is more violent than we remember and we can't laugh at *The Honeymooners* any more. I imagine he wondered why such violence – begun when Cain killed Abel in an argument over whose offering to God was superior<sup>7</sup> – was still being committed and sanctioned among God's people. In the holiest of books Paul read as a child, why was there so much pain to revisit as an adult? Paul reads further:

...if a man has committed a crime punishable by death  
and he is put to death,  
and *you hang him on a tree*,  
his body shall not remain all night *upon the tree*,  
but you shall bury him the same day,  
*for a hanged man is accursed by God*...

Reading that “a hanged man is accursed by God” leads Paul to ponder the awful crucifixion of the Christ he has followed since encountering him risen in a blinding vision over a decade earlier when he was traveling on the road to Damascus to round up Jewish youth who had left the synagogue to follow Christ to bring them back to enforcement by the synagogue leaders.

Contemplating the “hanged man,” Paul comes to a radical new conclusion about the death and resurrection of Christ, crucified on the cross. He writes:

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’...*

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 13:12-15.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 19:11-13.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 19:21.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 4.

Paul stresses that Christ was not hanged because he was guilty, but because he was *substituting* his life for all who otherwise would have been cursed: all who were from the *beginning* of time, who and are guilty in *Paul's* time, and who will be guilty in *future* times. Paul sees that "Christ is taking the place of all the stoned, massacred, enslaved, defiled and beheaded idolators, rebels, apostates, murderers..."<sup>8</sup> Christ "is suffering the curse and defilement that would have fallen upon them," and that falls upon every person and institution and government that violates another human by shooting a missile into a train depot, putting a bullet through a body, dragging a young man out of his home and hanging him on a lynching tree. In other words, Christ "is suffering the curse and defilement that falls upon us."

This is *substitution*. "On our behalf" and "in our place."

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But the impact of this substitution is *not* simply to appease the anger of God, but rather to open access to the Holy One for literally everyone, including those considered the worst sinners. As Rutledge writes:

*None of the categories of sinners cursed by the Law...are beyond the reach of God's unique saving act.*

Paul's gospel is *radically expansive*, and clearly suggests that Christ *substituted* himself for us all, godly and ungodly, Jews and Gentiles alike (3:28), [all who live] under the curse of Sin...<sup>9</sup>

This is substitution: "On our behalf" and "In our place."

It is heavy, but it is beautiful, because it is so much more all- encompassing than Christ simply appeasing the wrath of an angry God and nothing changing but God's disposition. F. E. Maddox was right to preach a Christ whose love was deeper and broader than the placation of God's anger.

#### IV.

One of the Westminster members who travelled last week to Birmingham and Montgomery and Selma has come back with a deeper awareness of the blighted conditions in which many African Americans in our country live, conditions this pilgrim saw first-hand, particularly in a quiet neighborhood in Birmingham where a small, heroic church carries on against overwhelming odds.

I have heard this traveler say, twice: "Ask yourself if you would be willing to flip a coin and substitute the conditions we saw for the conditions in which most of us live." The implication is that most of us would not want to make such substitution beyond a day or two.

By contrast, theologically when we say:

*Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross...*

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<sup>8</sup> Rutledge 472-473.

<sup>9</sup> Rutledge 472-473.

We are saying that Christ took upon himself all the sins and evil that all the years of human history have done to create the conditions we saw, and all the sin and evil that have “not yet perished from the earth”<sup>10</sup> since the days of Noah, sin and evil that still flourish in the wake of human history and despite all the progress we have made.

*Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,  
So that, free from sins,  
we might live for righteousness;  
for rectification;  
and so that by his wounds we – all of us –  
victim and victimizer,  
participant and by-stander,  
unknowing but willing,  
knowing but unwilling –  
all of us are healed.*

*By his stripes, we are healed – as a people, as individuals.*

*Amen.*

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<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address,” November 19, 1863, altered.