

Jesus Saves: Amazing Love

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Text: Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29; John 12:12-19; Romans 5:1-11

Introduction

Jesus Saves. As a church community, we have been journeying through various metaphors that have helped Christians throughout the ages reflect on what it means that Jesus Saves us. We have considered Scripture, looked at how different periods in church history worked to bring one approach or another to the forefront. We have talked about various images for the atonement such as creation & re-creation, ransom, substitution, and most recently adoption. Some of these ideas have resonated deeply. Some have felt uncomfortable or out of place. Some have intrigued us and challenged us to add a new “golf club” to our bag. Perhaps, what has spoken most deeply to me as I have engaged with each approach along the way is the challenge to see these metaphors working together – none can fully describe the complexity of what it means that Jesus Saves and none can be fully dismissed – the words of Scripture invite us to weave a tapestry that tells a story of profound love and reconciliation. Each of these metaphors reveals something about God’s relationship to humanity and our relationship with God. Re-creation. Liberation. Justice. Forgiveness. Acceptance.

So many different ways to say: Jesus Saves.

We will continue this journey together this morning as we look at one more metaphor for reflecting on how it is that Jesus Saves us – *God’s Wondrous Love*, or, what has historically been called, the moral influence theory. We will explore how this theory, or metaphor, was developed and where it has resonated most strongly. We will think about how we might weave it into our own understanding of what it means that Jesus Saves. But, this is only one part of our journey this morning. The other part of our journey is to reflect on Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Today is Palm Sunday and the start of Holy Week. We have come through Lent, a time that mirrors Jesus 40 days in the wilderness. We have wandered as we have searched our hearts and lives in step with our Lord. Now, the focus narrows, and the path leads directly to the cross. As we consider God’s Love and how it relates to the idea of atonement, we will also reflect on the path that led Jesus to Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. How might this Palm Sunday story speak to us about the Deep, Reconciling, Saving Love of our God?

Moral Influence – Unpacking the Metaphor

So – let us begin by looking at this idea of “Moral Influence”. Briefly outlined, this is the idea that God created the world in love and for love. Sin causes a break in the relationship between God and humanity, and so Jesus appears on earth to reveal the love of God in human form. Jesus lives a life of obedience and love which leads him to his suffering and death. The resurrection is God’s stamp of approval on the way Christ lived & died, and in light of this approval, we know that the life of Jesus is an example for us as to the way we should live. God establishes a new community of love – the church – that is compelled by the example of Christ to live loving, reconciled lives, and in-so-doing, the church brings redemption to the world. We are transformed by the example of Amazing Love lived out for us in the life of Jesus. We are motivated to model ourselves after Christ and when we do this, we are saved by the Love that has been lavished on us.

I remember a moment when I thought it important to start conveying to Arthur that I love him. I did lots of things for him that showed him I loved him, but I didn’t verbalize love very often, if at all. Then, one day, he was playing with a programmable toy dog he had been given, Scout. You can program Scout so that Scout says your child’s name and then inserts that into all sorts of songs and sayings. I realized one day, as Arthur was playing with Scout and Scout was saying over and over “I love you, Arthur” (in its awkward computerized voice) that Arthur had likely been told that he was loved more often by Scout than he had by me! Now, I don’t think that minimized the ways in which I showed my love – indeed, for Arthur, at his age, the doing probably means a lot more than the saying. But, it challenged me to think about the messages Arthur was receiving about what it means to be loved and who loves him.

The pages of Scripture are filled with stories and teachings that serve to remind us how very much God loves us and how this impacts us as his beloved creatures. Verses that quickly come to mind are:

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

1 John 3:16: “¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Ephesians 2:4-5: “⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—.”

Romans 8:35-37-39: “³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And, of course, the passage from Romans 5:1-11 that Carol read for us earlier: *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”*

All of these verses remind us, again and again, that God created us, God cares for us, and God desires to save us, because GOD LOVES US. Even though we are weak, even though we suffer from the temptations and the effects of sin, even though we struggle to live in ways that are healthy and reflect the shalom God desires for us – God stepped in and stepped down to earth to show us what it means to love – fully, deeply, in a transformative way. God, in Jesus, showed us what it looks like to live a life of obedience and service – one that touches the lives of those around us. Jesus, in his earthly body, felt joy, felt anger, felt comfort, felt pain – and through it all lived and ultimately died in a manner that revealed the Amazing Love that radiates from the divine to all of humankind.

In the pages of Scripture we hear, loud and clear, “God loves us”.

And, according to the moral influence metaphor of atonement, the knowledge of this love and the example set by Jesus are sufficient to transform us. We can be changed by love. Our very lives can be turned upside-down and inside-out when love enters in.

Peter Abelard, a French philosopher and theologian (1079 – 1142), is the scholar most often associated with articulating the “moral influence” theory of atonement. For Abelard, the love of God is revealed – to both Jew and Gentile – in Jesus Christ. And, while Abelard rejected some of the other atonement theories at work in his time (ie. Ransom), he was quick and decisive in his own reading of the Scripture. He believed love was God’s motivation, love was demonstrated in Christ’s life and death, and this same love prompted faithful people to live as Jesus had lived – and so be redeemed.

Abelard has been called single-minded and some criticize his theory for its tendency to smooth over complicated tensions by setting forward love as an appropriate catch-all for understanding the relationship between God and humanity. I mentioned that love can turn a life upside-down and inside-out, and it is possible that an experience of love from Abelard’s own life shaped his interpretation of God’s love and its influence.

Abelard was indeed a brilliant scholar, but he was also a man who fell hopelessly in love with a young woman named Heloise. Their relationship was intense and all-consuming – to the point that Abelard was criticized for repeating lectures and coming to class unprepared to teach. His life revolved around his encounters with Heloise and turned his world upside-down. Their affair was secret – a fact that was eventually brought to light and resulted in isolation and affliction for both of them. But, it has often been thought, that the intensity and the transformative power of Abelard’s love for Heloise was instrumental in the way his theological imagination conceived of God’s love for humanity and humanity’s response to God. His love for her turned his world upside-down. How much more our Creator’s love for us?

It is humbling to consider that I am the recipient of such a Holy and all-consuming Love. It is challenging to come face to face with the idea that the God I serve loves me better than I love myself. It is...overwhelming, even troubling, to see the ways that I have neglected this love, been dismissive of this love, failed to be transformed by this love, or missed the expressions of God's love for me altogether.

And it is at this point that the weakness of such a metaphor for atonement surfaces. It would be easy to slip into a works-righteousness posture; to take on the burden of manufacturing emotion and transformation; to live out a fake it until we make it kind of salvation that shackles our souls rather than freeing them. While I think there is much to recommend the power of Jesus' example and Jesus' transforming love, left entirely on its own, this approach has the potential to slip to one side or the other and leave the rate of success up to the devoutness and ferventness of the earnest believer.

And so, the saving power of God's Wondrous Love almost always appears in partnership with some of these other metaphors we have discussed, and in this way, the balance provided by Scripture allows for much needed nuance along the way. Jesus becomes flesh to re-create humanity and in this way repair the damage caused by sin. Why? Because God loves us. We are ransomed from our bondage to sin by a Saviour who is willing to take our place. Why? Because God loves us. We are adopted into the family of God and made heirs to the promise. Why? Because God loves us. Jesus is crucified as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Why? Because of God's great love for us. In every case, the Love of God is the punctuation mark at the end of a complex and transformative sentence.

John and Charles Wesley, the great preachers and hymn writers who emerged out of the 18th century Protestant revivals in Britain, often appealed to the grand framework of God's Wondrous Love. In their hymns, especially, the Love of God provides the broad theme with images of sacrifice, substitution, and ransom filling in the details. For John Wesley, such an understanding of the Love of God explained both God's motivation *and* provided a consistent link between the Love of God and how this Love, present in Jesus, passed on to the disciples, and imparted to the believer through the Holy Spirit could produce fruit and change lives in the here and now. The hymn we sang today, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" opens with this verse: "Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav'n, to earth come down: Fix in us Your humble dwelling, All Your faithful mercies crown. Jesus, You are all compassion, Boundless love that makes us whole: Visit us with Your salvation, Enter every trembling soul." Or, another familiar Wesleyan hymn, "And Can It Be" climaxed each verse with the chorus: "Amazing love! How can it be that You, my Lord, should die for me!" These songs speak to a deep yearning to know and be known by such a great love. To be changed by such a love.

The Triumphal Entry – An Act of Great Love (John 12:12-19)

This may be a good moment to stop and ask the question – can we really be changed by Love? Is someone else's example, even if that someone else is Jesus, enough to compel us all to change? Or, asked another way – does framing up our understanding of atonement with love take seriously enough the injustices, the hurt, and the brokenness that have wracked the world? Perhaps we collapse too many ideas into the same pot if we focus simply of the Love of God. Maybe we neglect some of the hard questions if we train our eyes in this direction.

It seems to me this would be a good time to turn our attention to Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.

All four Gospels include an account of Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Each focuses on a slightly different element of the story – but, this morning, I will read the account found in the Gospel of John 12:12-19:

¹² The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!

¹⁴Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey's colt!

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. ¹⁷So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify.* ¹⁸It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. ¹⁹The Pharisees then said to one another, 'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'

In John's Gospel, much like the others, Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem marks his return to a city where he will endure the trials of Holy Week that culminate in his death. He has spent his ministry in the 3 years prior to this healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching the multitudes, and driving out demons. He has gathered a group of disciples around himself. He has shown himself to be compassionate and kind-hearted. He has also shown himself to be critical of corrupt political and religious systems that bind the people and put obstacles in the way to peace. Jesus has radiated the deep love of God for humanity every step of the way.

As the great festival of Passover approaches, Jesus and his disciples journey to Jerusalem. That a great crowd greeted him as he entered the city gate is no surprise – Jerusalem would have been bursting at the seams with people come to celebrate the Passover. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ arrival and the crowd that greets him are connected to his raising of Lazarus in the previous chapter. He has demonstrated great power and this power has caused many to believe in him. It has also steeled the intentions of the religious leaders to seek his arrest and ultimately his death if he dares attend the Festival.

And so, Jesus enters the city, and the crowds greet him with festal palms and with singing. They sing the words of Psalm 118 that we read as our call to worship: “Save Us...Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” The exclamation “Hosanna” that we use on this day, translates – “Save, Now”. As Jesus was riding in, the people called out to him and asked for salvation. What were they asking for?

And here, we might read back into this story many aspects of the atonement metaphors we have been studying. Did they need to be rescued? Recreated? Cleansed from their sin? When the crowd shouts – “Hosanna, Save Now!” what kind of salvation are they seeking? What do they mean?

Jesus’ clear parody of a conquering king who rides into the city on a majestic horse after victory in battle quickly calls into view a political reading. Jesus enters on a donkey. He mimics an image of power and might but turns it on its head by executing it in a humble and unassuming way. The crowds have heard of his miracles – that he has raised the dead – and they call out to this “king” to Save Them.

And little do they know, Jesus WILL save them. Not in the way they expect. He will not use his power over life and death to overthrow the Roman government. He will not visit each of their families in turn to heal their sick and raise their dead. He will die. And, in this passage from John, we see that even his own disciples – whom he had taught – could not understand what was happening until later. Until after he had been glorified – that is, resurrected. Then they could look back on what had happened and remember. They could be transformed in their remembering – in seeing Jesus again, for the first time. Seeing his mission and his action in a new light.

It is one thing for Jesus to be loved and to show love at the height of power. Who wouldn't want to catch a glimpse of a man who is rumored to raise the dead? Who among us wouldn't welcome that kind of power and influence into our lives – especially in the midst of our desperation and brokenness. The *people* loved Jesus in this moment. They reached out to him. They wanted him to lead them. But, Jesus showed his love *for the people* by not ending his journey on that humble donkey. Jesus showed his love by continuing down a road marked by betrayal, arrest, trial, and death. And it was the example of this great love, vindicated (stamped with approval) in the resurrection, that enlightened the disciples and transformed them, changed them, saved them. Jesus' love is not a cheap, sentimental love. It is the greatest love, that led him to live a life and die a death that have the power to change us – returning to the words of the apostle Paul, “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us...For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life”

The Pharisees conclude this scene of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with words that haunt us even today if their truth were drawn out to its full extent: “*You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!*” Indeed, what if this happened. What if, in coming face to face with the great love of Jesus the world were to go after him...what if, his life and his example compelled us all to follow and we were changed in our following. The salvation found in the context of the Kingdom of God would be unstoppable.

Hosanna. Save Us. Amen.