

Atonement

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Romans 3:21-26

I Corinthians 15:3-8, 13-22

When I was a kid, there were no cable movie channels.

In fact we didn't even own a television.

I do remember my father listening to his short wave radio every night.

My connection to films was to go to the movies with my folks.

Since we lived in Argentina, seeing a film in English was a rarity.

Some films were shown at the American Embassy

Others at a theatre with Spanish Subtitles.

I particularly remember three films that scared the socks off me.

I was scared mostly, because they each had sad endings.

I remember a black-and-white version of Titanic

staring Clifton Webb and Barbara Stanwyck.;

and a tear-jerker called I Want to Live, starring Susan Hayward
as an innocent woman on death row;

and most pathetic of all, perhaps, was

The Bird of Paradise, starring the lovely Debra Paget
and very suave Louis Jordan.

In The Bird of Paradise,

Debra Paget is some kind of island princess named Kalua.

I forget what brought Louis Jordan to the island in the first place;

let's just say he and Debra Paget fall in love.

Jourdan's acting was very good also as the lover.

I don't know if the negative of this film has been lost or what.

But a good question is, why haven't the studios released this film on video?

Any way the island's volcano erupts.

To the astonishment and horror of Louis Jordan,

part of the job description of island princess

calls for his sweetheart to jump into the volcano,

***Sacrificing her life, in order to appease the volcano
and keep it from destroying the island.***

**I remember the final scene (Louis Jourdan)
is leaving the island after the volcano eruption,
and he is thinking and remembering her,
and you can see that beautiful sweet smile of Kalua.**

**Having been raised on happy endings
and the conviction that goodness and reason shall prevail,**

**As a nine year old boy those three movies shook the very foundation of my being.
Titanic, of course, sinks, most of the people dying.
Susan Hayward in fact dies in the gas chamber,
the title of the film coming from her last cry, "I Want to Live".**

**And, yes, Debra Paget jumps into the volcano,
whereupon the volcano calms down, fulfilling the scripture, John 11:50,
"It is better for one man (in this case, one woman)
to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed."**

**Of course, that scripture refers
not to an island princess, but Jesus of Nazareth.**

**We move the second act now and a Biblical overview of sacrifice,
starting with Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 5, verses 6-9:
For while we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteousness person—
though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die.**

**But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners
Christ died for us.
Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood,
will we be saved through him from the wrath of God.**

**Those last four words really got my attention: The Wrath of God.
Remember, when God's wrath was let loose in the time of Noah:
virtually everything that walked, talked, crawled and breathed
was destroyed; only Noah and his family were spared.**

One could be excused, I think,
for imagining Jesus in the Debra Paget role,
God's wrath about to go off again,
Jesus jumping into the metaphorical volcano, in the form of the cross,
sacrificing himself to appease the angry god,
taking the wrath upon himself.
Truth be told, I'm not entirely sure how I feel about that.

Sacrifice plays a major role in both the Old & New Testaments.
After the flood, first thing Noah does upon exiting the boat
is to build an altar for sacrifice,
selecting animals and birds from those who had survived the flood
to be burnt as an offering to the Almighty.
Talk about killing endangered species.
We're told *the odor of the sacrifice was pleasing to the Lord,*
who set the first rainbow in sky
as the sign of a new beginning in the relationship
between God and human kind.

In the time of Moses, an *elaborate system of sacrifice* is put in place.
Particularly appropriate to this discussion is Exodus 29:36,
where the Lord says to Moses,
"Every day you shall offer a bull as a sin offering for atonement."

As it's the title of this sermon, let's look at the word Atonement.
Reading from The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible:
"The English word 'atone' is derived from the phrase 'at one.'
To be 'at one' with someone is to be in harmonious personal relationship...
Similarly, 'atonement' originally meant 'at-one-ment,' or 'reconciliation.'
To atone' for a wrong is to take some action
which cancels out the ill effects it has had."

The daily slaughter of bulls, therefore,
seems to have been intended as a ritualistic act
to cover that day's-worth of sin and wrong-doing
among the Hebrew people.

Other cultures, we might note, including Israel's neighbors,
engaged in human sacrifice, including the sacrifice of children.

Back in the days of Abraham and Isaac,
the Lord had specifically banned human sacrifice.
I like to think one of the reasons the Lord told the Hebrews
to sacrifice bulls and such
was to thwart the impulse to sacrifice their children.

Then and now, the Lord was and is pleased by our offerings.
The old Hebrew currency was bulls and other livestock; *ours is money.*
In giving our tithes and offerings, we are acknowledging that
all that we have ultimately comes from the Lord.

The scripture says *the Lord is pleased by the acknowledgement,*
particularly when it represents some kind of sacrifice
on the part of the giver.

Turning then to the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, we read of
what was called The Day of Atonement (*known to us as Yom Kippur*).
On Atonement Day, the priest is to bathe in water,
then put on a holy linen tunic.

A bull is to be offered as atonement for the priest's sins
and the sins of the priest's own household.

As a professional religious guy, I find it interesting that the ritual began
with a reminder of the priest's own sin.

Two goats were then selected: *one will live, the other die, their fate chosen by lots.*
The goat fated for slaughter, will be sacrificed as a sin offering,
its blood sprinkled inside the sanctuary,
"thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary,
because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel,
and because of their transgressions, all their sins."

I find this helpful: *The priest, who started the day reminded of his own sin,*
is then called to wash away the sins of the sanctuary—
which I read as the sins of the church.

The church of any generation, *including our own,*
does well to remember our own need for forgiveness.

As to the second goat, we read:

*“(The priest) shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat,
and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel,
and all their transgressions, all their sins,
putting them on the head of the goat,
and sending it away into the wilderness
by means of someone designated for the task.*

*The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region;
and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.”*

This where we get the term “scapegoat”:

the goat that ritually bears the sins of the people into the wilderness.

These passages shape the New Testament understanding of what Jesus is all about.

The Book of Hebrews, for instance, *lifts up Jesus himself
as the ultimate High Priest, offering sacrifice,
not by the blood of bulls or goats, but his own blood.*

In chapter 9, verse 26, we read,

*“But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age
to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.”*

A few verses later, we are told,

he is “offered...to bear the sins of many.”

I’ve known Christian people, including Christian leaders,

who were downright repulsed by these passages,

arguing that

blood atonement has no place in modern Christian thinking.

The idea that the Father God

requires the bloody, painful sacrifice of his son

smacks of the same kind of superstition

that required Debra Paget to jump into the volcano.

While I’m not generally one to quarrel with

scripture and Christian doctrine dating back the apostolic church,

I have wondered myself.

*If God wanted to be known to the world in Jesus,
would it be enough that God's Son would go from place to place,
performing some miracles, feeding the poor,
handing out little happy face buttons
for people to wear on their robes, saying,
"I'm okay and you're okay—now pass it on?"*

Instead, *the story is one of a cross.*

At least it's over quick for Debra Paget.

In contrast,

*it's not enough that the Son of God is sacrificed;
he has to be tortured first, beaten to a bloody pulp,
nails driven into his hands and feet,
a crown of thorns pressed into his scalp,
his side pierced by a sword.*

Not even bulls on the altars of Abraham and Moses
had to go through anything so gruesome.

NOW FOR PART THREE:

When the movie *Atonement* came out on DVD early this year, I bought it.

I got caught up in all the Academy award hype.

All the reviews were glowing.

The movie is a bit slow (*It reminds me of a 20th century Jane Austen novel*)
but the ending got me thinking

so I bought the book and read it.

It is a powerful book, and while it was still kind of slow,
it is powerful in its impact.

I noticed, from the opening pages on, a *pervasive theme of brokenness.*

The young lovers, get into a tug-of-war over a vase.

The vase is a family heirloom, the only thing left of their Uncle Clem
who had died a hero in World War I.

Uncle Clem had been given the vase

by grateful people whose lives he had saved.

The lovers drop the vase now, breaking it—a sign of things to come.

The pages that follow are a chronicle of brokenness.

The story is set in an huge English home
described as an architectural monstrosity.

The film shows it as *people wandering all over the place trying to find others.*

In fact the film constantly shows adults lost
lost and wandering in the mansion, lost and wandering on a battlefield
lost and wandering in a hospital.

All who live in the mansion, may be fairly described in terms of an old hymn:
“rich in things but poor in soul.”

The father of the house is living a “*separate life*” in the city—
not sleeping there by himself, either.

His wife knows it, and he knows she knows it.

At age 47, *mother has retreated from life,*
spending most of her time in bed, *worrying and fighting off migraines.*

Mother’s sister, *having run off with a man who is not her husband,*
has sent her three children—a teenage girl and two small boys---
to live at the manor.

The little boys in particular are trying to cope (They are lost also)
with the reality that they *don’t have a home to go back to anymore.*
One of them *wets the bed and is punished for it.*

The reader wishes he could reach through the pages
and hug this sad, homesick little guy. It’s not his fault.

The teller of the story is a thirteen-year old girl named *Briony,*
who features herself as a writer and has an *active fantasy life.*

Briony is an infuriating child, but she, is, after all a child,

Like the others in the novel, she is lost and confused,
trying to sort through issues that still perplex me at age 57,
concerning the *nature of reality and the mystery of other human beings.*

Briony’s older sister, Cecilia, and Cecilia’s lover, Robbie,
carelessly, but inadvertently put words and images in front of Briony
that the *13-year-old can’t understand.*

Then comes the breakage of Humpty Dumpty proportions:
Briony making a false charge against Robbie,
resulting in his imprisonment,
lasting alienation from her sister,
and the fracturing of a family
*that not all the king's horses and all the king's men
will be able to put back together again.*

Now the brokenness then takes on global proportions in the form of World War.
With the winds of war blowing at gale force,
we see one of our lovers resolutely
trying to make his way back to the other.
And whether we're reading the book
or watching the film we want these lovers to be reunited.

No one wants that more than Briony herself.
At this point in the story, she is 18 years old.

Briony has surprised her family by
forgoing school and signing up as a nurse in a unit
that will be tending wounded soldiers.

She has long-since realized the injustice done to Robbie,
and her work in the hospital itself can be seen as an atonement of sorts.

Remember, we said, "*to atone for a wrong
is to take some action which cancels out the ill effects it has had.*"

You get the sense that Briony is trying to atone
by caring for the broken men coming back from France,
as if in doing unto them, she is doing unto Robbie.

We see her taking leave of the hospital for a day,
dropping in unannounced on her sister, who she hasn't seen in years.
The viewer's heart leaps to see that
Robbie is there, in the sister's apartment! Yea!

The reunion of the lovers and Briony isn't exactly happy.
Neither Cecilia or Robbie are in any frame of mind to forgive just yet—

*though if Briony will tell the truth,
to her family and the authorities,
reconciliation is not out of the question.*

But then the reader/viewer comes to understand,
that's not the way the story ended at all.

We meet Briony again, nearing the end of her life now,
a very successful author,
who has been trying to tell this story for years.
Let's play that scene from the movie now.

(Show Film second take of interview ...until credits.)

She finally decided to give it a happy ending of sorts,
the lovers reunited, when in fact there was no reunion.
She wanted to give Robbie and Cecilia,
not the ending they got, but the ending they should have had....

At the very top of this message,
we read from the letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verses 21-26.
I want to look at it again, reading this time from The Message translation:
*Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners...
and proved that we are utterly incapable of
living the glorious lives God wills for us,
God did it for us.
Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself.
A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in
and restored us to where he always wanted us to be.
And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.
God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world
to clear that world of sin.
Having faith in him sets us in the clear.
God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—
to set the world in the clear with himself
through the sacrifice of Jesus,*

finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured.

*This is not only clear, but it's now—this is current history!
God sets things right.*

He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness.

Here's how I see it:

*Jesus jumps into the volcano, NOT when he submits to the cross,
but when he comes into the world in the first place—
born as the Word of God become flesh—
jumping into this cauldron of brokenness and sin.*

Remember, we broke the word atonement down this way: *at-one-ment.*

When Jesus is born, the angels sing “Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.”

God with us in the mess of the human experience.

God at-one-with-us in the brokenness.

*At-one-with-us in our long and sorry story
of doing terrible things to one other.*

At-one-with-us in our most crushing disappointments.

The cross, far from cosmic sadism,

is the ultimate message of at-one-nes:

God at-one-with-us in the most pitiable of endings.

I think of those films: The sinking of the Titanic,

The innocent woman dying in the gas chamber

and the poor girl going into the volcano

and the brokenness of Atonement

as parables of the human situation,

a bottomless pit of sorrow and suffering with sad endings for everyone.

But then I heard the echoes of another ending.

And my soul heard the triumphant passage from John's gospel:

“For God so gave the world that He gave His only Son,

that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have eternal life.”

I've got this idea, you see,

that Jesus jumped into the pit of the human experience

so that those who have faith in him and his resurrection

might be raised with him.

*So that in the life of the world to come,
we might ultimately receive
NOT the ending many of us will get in this sad world,
but the ending we should have had.*

I remember a conversation I had with a friend of mine.

He was talking to me about his son
who died in a motorcycle accident a number of years ago.

That Easter Sunday I had preached
on Mary hearing the resurrected Jesus call her name.
She recognized his inflection of affection.

He said to me
*when he called on the telephone and called me by name: "Dad
I could always recognize my son David's voice."*

He said to me
*I believe in Mary's story and I believe in the resurrection.
It is the only hope I have for hearing my son call my name again.*

His words are at the core of my hope:
*I believe God wants this good man and his son to have a happy ending,
rather than the sad one they received in this life,
and that heaven is all about glorious reunion
and the way things ought to be.
That's what I believe.*

Amen.