

We believe-I believe

We recite what we believe, but what do YOU believe?

January 8, 2023

Goals for this class

Work through 3 big questions over 5-6 classes

1 - Nature of God - What is God like?

2 - God and humanity - Problem of Suffering?

3 - Atonement - How does the cross save?

4 - Atonement

5/6 - Trinity - What is the relationship among members of the trinity?

Exposure to range of theologies, move from “we believe” to “I believe”

Hold each other on journey

Ask questions together

Common understandings

- This is hard for me and for you - risk and vulnerability
- None of us has all the answers, or maybe any answers
- You will know more than I do about certain topics
 - This is not a seminary class; no long citations of primary sources
- Three legged stool - scripture, reason (including experience), tradition
 - Use scripture wisely, gently
- Remember to let others talk; remember to talk
 - Try to stay on topic
- Kindness, gentleness, openness

Nature of God

What is God like?

- Assumption: God exists.
- Assumption: The common starting points for asking how we know God are equally valid.
 - E.g., natural theology (know God through rationality/intellect), revealed theology (know God through God's revelation), revisionist theology (know God through our experience/aware)
- Three different dominant ways of thinking about God
 - Classical, Process, Modern
- First, remind ourselves—what is God like in Hebrew Bible?
 - God of whole world
 - God is active - dynamic, anthropomorphic images
 - God is personal - shares with us the capacity to decide, intend, require, and love

Classical Account

What is God like?

- God is perfect
 - Otherwise God would not deserve ultimate worth of worship
 - Otherwise God could not be the cause of all else in creation
- Perfection involves completeness, no more is needed (also known as Divine Simplicity)
 - Perfection as unchanging (also known as Divine Immutability)
 - Perfection as timelessness (b/c time is a measure of change)
 - Perfection includes all time (leads to all-knowing, all-present)
 - Perfection as all powerful
- God cannot suffer, sin, etc. b/c that implies change
- Augustine of Hippo (354-386 CE), Thomas Aquinas (1225-74); starts with Hellenist philosophy

Process Account

What is God like?

- God is closely linked to universe
 - Reject separation between God and world (e.g., world is God's body), creation is about "forming" (not out of nothing)
 - World is sacred, God is in the world
- God includes time and change
 - Change is not imperfection, passion is not imperfection
 - God empathizes with us and grows old (both are forms of change)
 - There is a "before, during, after" (e.g., creates, redeems, world to end are separate moments in time for God)
- God makes humanity truly free
 - Future is genuinely open, not pre-determined
 - God doesn't know everything; God takes risks in letting us act; we become co-creators
- A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947), J. Cobb (b. 1925), W. Hasker (b. 1935); starts with Hebrew Bible accounts

Questions

- *How have you thought about God the creator? (Don't include Jesus or Holy Spirit for this discussion)*
- Does God know what it is like to have a headache? What would a classical account say? What would a process account say?
- Does God know what you will have for breakfast tomorrow? What would a classical account say? What would a process account say?
- Which of the classical or process account do you find more appealing?
- Remember: classical (God = perfect, timeless, dispassionate, all knowing); process (God = creation, experiences time and change, future is truly open)

Modern Account

What is God like?

- Most people today find some middle ground
 - Find problems with both Classical and Process Accounts
 - Weave idea of deeply connected God with God worthy of worship
- One example of a middle ground: Keith Ward (b. 1938)
- Dynamic infinity — need a classical God who is creator of everything and self-sufficient; need a process God who acts, loves, and cares within time
 - God chooses to be “imperfect,” chooses to relate to humanity
 - God is unlimited except by limitations God creates, like laws of physics, plate tectonics, etc.
 - God chooses to let us have free will, even with resulting chaos
 - God is cause of infinity of creative freedoms—> creates things that create, humans are sub-creators
 - God possess omnipotence, goodness, omniscience and also has capacity to continue to create
 - God is the master creator, lays down blueprint, humanity general nature given by God, specific character determined largely by humanity

We believe-I believe

We recite what we believe, but what do YOU believe?

January 15, 2023

Goals for this class

Work through 3 big questions over 5-6 classes

1 - Nature of God - last week - classical account (God as perfect in sense of static and removed, worthy of worship), process account (God is integrally connected to world, co-creators), middle ground developing (dynamic infinity)

2 - God and humanity

3 - Atonement

4 - Atonement

5/6 - Trinity

Exposure to range of theologies

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God and Humanity

Problem of suffering and evil

- Assumption: We worship God because we believe that God is all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing and will triumph.
- But: If we trust God because God knows all things, vastly more than we know—> what does this mean when there is evil and suffering in the world?
- But: If we worship God because we are confident that God is in control—> what does this mean when there is evil and suffering in the world?
- Key points review of last week
 - Classical account of God - God is all-knowing, all-powerful; but distant, passionless?
 - Process account of God - We are co-creators with God; but unknowing, unworthy?
 - Modern account of God - God is self-sufficient, but limits self to relate to humans?
- Today: Free will defense and greater good defense

Free Will Defense

Augustine (354-430CE), Platinga (b. 1932)

- Goal of creation = creatures in a loving relationship with each other and with God
 - Love can't be compelled or programmed; love requires freedom
- Humans were created perfect and then destroyed perfection through this freedom
 - Suffering is a product of sin *
- But: how to explain natural disasters?
 - If turn to Evil = gives Evil a creative power to control nature
- But: does this imply that God knew/wanted people to act badly?
- But: could God have anticipated this and given us fewer choices?
- But: could God have created really good people who choose to do good?

Greater Good Defense

Irenaeus (130-202 AD), Hicks (1922-2012)

- Humans = Imperfect and immature in creation, but moving toward perfection God intends
 - Creation is not yet complete
- Goal of creation = God desires a world in which move from immaturity into maturity
 - We exercise freedom and learn to interact with each other, move toward promise of heaven
 - We develop character as we deal with tragedy, come closer to God as deal with suffering
 - We can only understand moral choices by being faced with them*
- But: how can natural disasters/cancers be learning moments?
- But: do we think we have to earn God's acceptance this way?
- But: does this makes God ultimately responsible for our bad actions?

Questions

- How do you think about bad things happening at this juncture in your life?
- Do either of these accounts (“free-will” or “soul-making”) make sense to you? Would they help you deal with your own sadnesses in life?
- If you think God designed us to be truly free, does that affect whether you think God is all-powerful and all-knowing?
- If you think God designed us to learn from suffering, does that affect whether you think God is good?

Christian Response

Turn to Jesus Christ

- No amount of free will or maturing can justify pain caused by people or nature, price is too high
- The Bible has no attempt to justify suffering
- The Book of Job explores why bad things happen, but gives no answers
 - For the most part, Job's friends give traditional theodicy = suffering is a result of sin
 - God never explains to Job why, just that God is God
- Christian response
 - God transforms lives so that love, not evil, becomes dominant theme → learning to love
 - God offers us grace to overcome our propensity to sin and to allow love to dominate
 - God offers us eternal life after death so that this life is not all there is
- Doesn't answer question *but* responds to problem of evil and suffering though our Christian theology

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January 22, 2023

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Theories of Atonement

What does Jesus dying on the cross do for us? (Week 1)

- Important for responding to questions about evil and suffering—> promise of atonement is we can be forgiven/made whole
 - At-one-ment, to be in harmony with God, world reconciled to God, individual redemption
 - Not the only way to think about Christ's saving power (Paul gives us adoption, redemption from sin/death, justification through faith, past/present/future of salvation; note also focus on healing/wholeness)
 - Assumption: We sin and something needs to be done about it.
- Our catechism:
 - Q: What is the great importance of Jesus' suffering and death?
 - A: By his obedience, even to suffering and death, Jesus made the offering which we could not make; in him we are freed from the power of sin and reconciled to God.
- Idea that Jesus has saved humanity is a key and central theme in New Testament, diverse images sit alongside one another
 - This is also true if you look at Easter liturgy and hymnody in the Episcopal Church
 - Most theories are some form of substitutionary atonement (Christ died “for us”)
- This topic covers two Sundays (not next Sunday, Jan. 29, which is annual meeting Sunday)

Christ as Sacrifice, Christ as Victor

Two early accounts of the atonement

- Christ was made a **sacrifice** for our sins
 - OT system no longer working because forgot that sacrifice was sign of penitence
 - God had to change the system; God is both the recipient and the giver of the sacrifice; teaches us how to sacrifice selves to God as act of compassion to God
 - True sacrifices restore relationship with God
 - Augustine of Hippo (here), also Athanasius; *Hebrews, Romans*
- Christ's death was **victory** over sin (as cosmic force), death, Satan
 - Devil acquired rights over fallen humanity
 - Christ was ransom paid to Devil for us to be freed through resurrection
 - Origen, Ireneaus, Gregory the Greek; *Mark, 1 Cor.* (also C.S. Lewis)

Christ who Pays the debt

Satisfaction, penal substitution

- God must find a way to **satisfy** the debt of our sins against God (Anselm, 1033-1109)
 - God's plans for humanity can't be thwarted by our sins; God's honor at stake
 - Debt was so large that only Christ has ability (as God) and obligation (as human) to satisfy debts of all humanity
 - Cross is about forgiveness, provides basis on which God is enabled to forgive sins
- Cross was about **punishment** us for our sins (Calvin, 1509-1564)
 - God allows Christ to stand in our place taking our guilt upon himself so that his righteousness, won by obedience, might be ours
 - Rightful judgment of sinful humanity; crucifixion was to be ours
 - Focus continues on forgiveness of sins

Summary & Question Slide

- Cross as sacrifice (so we learn sacrifice selves), Cross as victory (cosmic battle w/evil)
- Cross as satisfaction (of our debts) and Cross as punishment (for our sins) —> focus on forgiveness
- What theory of atonement are you most familiar with? Do you like that theory?
- Which of the other theories are you most curious about?
- Do any of these theories work for you?
- Cross as love , Cross as moral authority —> next week
- Also looking at our worship and hymnody (if time permits)

We believe-I believe

We recite what we believe, but what do YOU believe?

February 5, 2023

Goals for this class

Work through 3 big questions over 5-6 classes

- 1 - Nature of God (classical, process, modern accounts)
- 2 - God and humanity (how to defend the existence of evil and suffering)
- 3 - Atonement
- 4 - Atonement
- 5 - Trinity
- 6 - End times (with David Madeira)

Exposure to range of theologies

Hold each other on journey

Ask questions together

Summary of Last Time

- Two early theories of how the cross saves
 - Cross as sacrifice (act of compassion toward God; Christ gives and receives sacrifice; changes system; gives example so we learn offer selves as sacrifice; about restoring relationship by bringing sinful nature before God)
 - Cross as victory (cosmic battle w/evil; Satan acquires rights over fallen humanity; Christ freely gives self as payment of ransom to Satan to release humanity; resurrection shatters Satan's rights)
- Two later theories —> focus on forgiveness for sins
 - Cross as satisfaction (developed along lines of existing feudal legal system; God's honor stained by our sin, challenges nature of God; Christ, as sinless being, freely satisfies debt owed to God by humanity)
 - Cross as punishment (humanity should have been punished for sins; Christ stands in our place taking our guilt on himself; exposes delusions of self-sufficiency that were beginning to develop)

Christ who loves us

Moral transformation

- Christ's mission demonstrates **love** of God for humanity
- Christ's human nature united humanity to God, took on our suffering, took on death
- Lived and died out of love for us and this love frees us from sin and fear
 - Cross changes our minds/hearts
 - Only response to this love is for us to love God
 - Only response is to overcome sin in our own lives by giving our lives to others
- Seen in early writings of Augustine, but Abelard was most important (1079-1142), in response to Anselm's satisfaction/substitution account

Christ as Condition for Forgiveness

Moral authority

- God cannot forgive on another person's behalf, only on God's own
 - God has to actually suffer, not simply to be aware or sympathetic to suffering
 - God has to be actual victim to be morally credible
 - Only the one who is harmed can forgive (Apartheid/Mandela example)
- Work of the cross = gives God the moral authority to forgive humanity
 - Touches all tragedy in creation → the one who suffers is also the creator
 - Assumes: Creation is God's body, God/creation is harmed, God forgives *all* wrongs
- God takes responsibility → 20th C sense that God needs to suffer for wrongs committed by humanity
 - Our response to God's forgiveness is to forgive selves and others
- Vernon White, Brian Hebblethwaite

Summary & Questions

- Cross as sacrifice (so we learn sacrifice selves), Cross as victory (cosmic battle w/evil)
- Cross as satisfaction (of our debts) and Cross as punishment (for our sins) —> focus on forgiveness
- Cross as love (example for us, redeems us b/c we respond in love)
- Cross as condition for forgiveness (gives God authority to forgive us b/c harmed God in death of Jesus)

- What theory of atonement are you most curious about?
- Do any of these theories work for you?

In our tradition

- Nicene Creed: *For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried...*
- Eucharistic Prayer - *You, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.*
 - *He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.*
 - *This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.*
- Hymnody - #207, *Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim Till all the world adore his sacred Name.* 1. *Led on their way by this triumphant sign, The hosts of God in conquering ranks combine.*
 - #174, *At the Lamb's high feast we sing praise to our victorious King, who hath washed us in the tide flowing from his pierced side; praise we him, whose love divine gives his sacred Blood for wine, gives his Body for the feast, Christ the victim, Christ the priest.*
 - #182, *Christ is alive! Let Christians sing. His cross stands empty to the sky. Let streets and homes with praises ring. His love in death shall never die.*
 - #178, *Alleluia alleluia, Give thanks to the Risen Lord, Alleluia alleluia, Give praise to His Name.* 3. *We have been crucified with Christ, Now we shall live forever*