

For God So Loved the World: Not Just the People

Carol R. Jacobson
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California

As someone who finds value in making the connections between the natural world and the theological world, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker's article "For God So Loved the World?"¹ precipitates in me two questions. First, what do the traditional Christian doctrines of atonement have to say about how much God loved *the world*? And second, what would a theology of atonement look like, if we believed that God so loved *the world*, not just the people?

Perhaps you are wondering what the Christian doctrine of the atonement and the natural world have to do with one another at all. For me they have belonged together for as long as I can remember. As a child, I first started to learn about how much God loved the world, and me, through my explorations of the outdoors. Every summer we would spend our vacation from school at Cotton Lake in North Dakota. Each day there was an opportunity to explore the lake and surrounding woods. God must love me very much, I thought, to have created such beautiful places for me to play in. There was so much *life* there. Every inch of that lake and those woods was alive with plants and animals—God must enjoy living things very much, I surmised.

As I grew older and started learning in confirmation about the teachings of the church concerning salvation and atonement, I discovered something that surprised me. The natural world wasn't even a part of the discussion. Salvation was God's gift to *me*, by grace through faith, a promise not to hold my sins against me.

At best the natural world was benignly present, like stage props and scenery, or more likely it was theologically suspect—matter, not spirit—a vale of tears, not my true home. The natural world had no consequential role to play in God's plan of salvation. Jesus' death and resurrection as the price of my individual salvation was the proper point of departure for atonement theology. This world was not important. After all, God would replace it eventually with a new heaven and a new earth.

I wondered about the conflict between my experience and the teachings of my church, and I began to question my own experience. I tried to convince myself that "For God so loved the world" really meant "For God so loved the people." But I've never been able to succeed.

This leads me to ask my first question: Do traditional atonement theories have anything to say about how much God loved the world, that is, the cosmos? Unfortunately, each of the "classical" theories formulate an understanding of atonement which is exclusively anthropocentric. In other

¹ In *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30.

words, these "classical" understandings of atonement make the human individual the focus and recipient of salvation. Christus Victor suggests that the real struggle between good and evil is fought in the soul of every individual. Suffering in this life is only temporary. In reality, this life is only a prelude to the real life to come, our heavenly union with God. This more mythic atonement theology tends to trivialize tragedy and human suffering. But it also trivializes something else—the world, this place, which God so loved. If we take the Christus Victor theory seriously, the natural world is only a waiting room where we struggle, and the church becomes the place where we encourage one another to keep on waiting for the world which is to come. The natural world is simply scenery for the drama of human suffering and eventual rescue, and is ultimately expendable.

The Satisfaction Theory, with its understanding of atonement as blood sacrifice, is equally unconcerned with the natural world as a part of the reconciliation drama. Human beings must pay the debt they owe God, but they can't. God will pay—with the life of the Son. Suffering is trivialized and the natural world is ignored. Individual suffering is seen as trivial when compared with the ultimate sacrifice Jesus was required to make. Often the natural world does not even enter into the discussion, unless it is mentioned that the need for atonement is occasioned in part by our human tendency to turn our gaze from God toward the world in search of fulfillment.

It is not much different in the Moral Influence Theory. There too, the focus is the moral development of the individual believer, who is called to imitate the moral development of Jesus, namely the willingness to suffer and die although innocent. Atonement is the constant "weeding" of the soil of the soul. Suffering is "Christ-like," and the natural world? It is either unimportant or perhaps, once again, an unwelcome reminder of our sinful tendency toward "worldliness."

Ecofeminist thinkers have unmasked this rather sinister correlation that keeps showing up in our theology and philosophy, the correlation between the necessity for human suffering and the justification for the degradation of our planet. This insight into the relationship between oppression of marginalized people and planetary degradation gave some impetus to this attempt to critique traditional atonement theories.

Twentieth century theological attempts to critique classical atonement theories, and even Brown and Parker's own suggestions for re-visioning atonement, still focus on liberation and salvation. And so a second question arises: What would a theology of atonement look like if we believed that God so loved *the world*, not just the people? How can the natural world be included in the theological conversation about atonement?

I'd like to suggest that such a theology would be incarnational as opposed to anthropocentric in its orientation and formulation. God's creation of the world is an incarnational act, it is the enfleshing of divine creativity. The birth of Jesus is an incarnational event, it is the embodiment of divine presence in the life of Jesus. In the same way, reconciliation between the Creator and the created must be envisioned incarnationally. Perhaps atonement is the enfleshing of divine affection, a revelation of God's love, given skin and bones. Incarnation is embodiment, and God likes that—God's way of self-revealing is always incarnational. The natural world exists as God's creative Word made flesh, Jesus stands as God's Word of presence made flesh, and Jesus' death and resurrection is God's Word of affection made flesh, so that the breadth and depth of God's capacity for love could be revealed as embodied. Atonement as incarnational event, then, means something other and more than a preoccupation with the fate of individual souls.

I am particularly fond of one of the lines in Donna Seamone's poem, "The Holy Room: Ten Years Later" (1991). She writes, "Walking grounded is the name of this game." Is it possible that atonement might be about learning to walk grounded and incarnate, even as God does? Could it be that reconciliation has to do with accepting the Word made flesh in the midst of natural and human history? Perhaps the problem is and always has been our unwillingness to be who we are: embodied creatures of God, as are the birds and trees, with no special place at the center of the universe. Maybe atonement is about learning to be ourselves, learning to be God's created ones. Perhaps reconciliation involves learning to walk grounded, celebrating our creatureliness as one among many expressions of the divine Word made flesh. Atonement, may mean rejoicing in our interconnectedness with the rest of creation, learning to journey through life with respect for that which nourishes and sustains us and that One who nourishes and sustains us.

I'd like to conclude by mentioning two pitfalls that an incarnational theology of atonement must seek to avoid. First, the pitfalls of anthropocentrism. An embodied understanding of atonement must be careful not to assume that the most important bodies to God are our own. An incarnational theology of atonement must stress the fact that God so loved all the world, not just the people. God loves the work of incarnation and so brought the world, including humanity, into being. God loves the reality of incarnation and so desires reconciliation between Creator and created above all else.

The other pitfall is that of dualistic thinking. In each of the classical theories of atonement an unbridgeable abyss yawns between God and the world. This abyss is a familiar way we have learned to picture the radical difference between the Creator and the created. Maintaining this abyss as a conceptual tool, we believe, protects us from creating God in our own image. But it also perpetuates a method of theological reflection which continues to make radical distinctions between body and soul, matter and spirit, nature and human beings, not to mention God and everything else. Such dualistic theological reflection leads to an understanding of atonement centered around the necessity of suffering and death as the only way of bridging the gap between a perfect and spiritual God and imperfect and embodied creatures. I am not suggesting that the Creator and creature are not different, nor am I suggesting that human beings and trees are essentially the same. I only want to suggest that an abyss is not the only way to picture the difference between Creator and created.

Reconciliation is incarnation, just as creation and the life of Jesus are incarnation. If the theological conversation can begin here, a place opens up in the discussion for the incarnate world. If this place is allowed to remain, then I believe we can understand Jesus' words to Nicodemus recorded in John 3:17 in a new way: "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." When we remember that God so loved the world, not just the people, we are beginning to envision a grounded, incarnational theology of atonement. Such an incarnational point of departure offers us new ways to think about and act out the meaning of atonement right here in this world which God so loved.