

We have a "Savior" sermon series during Lent, reflecting different images of the Cross described in the Bible. The first image of the Cross we had was the image of "substitutionary atonement." Jesus died in our place on the Cross for us because of our sin. There is no way we can pay back for what God has done for us. So, for that, we say, "Thank You," and live the life God has given us fully in gratitude.

Today, on this 3rd Sunday in Lent, we have the image of our Savior's "ransom atonement." It is the image of FREEDOM. We love our freedom. For those of us who are citizens of America, the idea of freedom is woven into the very fabric of our identity. We love our cars and the freedom to travel. We love our mobility. This is so true for my hubby Sung and me, especially as we love to travel around the world. On the flip side, however, we hate feeling confined, trapped, and limited. Many of us, during the COVID-19 pandemic, feel that the freedom in life has been confiscated. So, the second atonement image of the Cross—ransom, the idea of freedom from our captivity—is a touchy image for many of us.

The ransom atonement suggests that God secured for us a release from that which was keeping us confined. It understands sin as that which enslaves us and acts as a force beyond our ability to free ourselves.

The formation of ransom atonement is based on two captivity stories of the Old Testament—the Exodus (Exodus 25-27) and the Exile (Jeremiah 39-43, the final section of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, and the opening chapters of Ezra). In the story of Exodus, the Israelites were held under the torturous rule of Pharaoh in Egypt. It was through Moses who secured the Israelites freedom through the casting of the ten plagues, the power of the Passover, and the triumphant journey through the parted Red Sea. This story was told and retold again and again, and eventually, it influenced the understanding of who Jesus was and what He did.

On the other hand, we see a different notion of captivity in the Old Testament's Exile story. On the succession of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, around 930 BC, Israel got split into two kingdoms: the Kingdom of Israel in the north and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. After this division, they were conquered by Babylonians and taken into captivity in 70 years of Exile.

One of the most powerful Advent hymns that we sang this morning as the opening hymn—"O come, O come, Emmanuel"—sings about ransom captive Israel, which is an essential part of the mission of Jesus. From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus understood His mission means real freedom for those who are being held captive not just to economic and political systems of oppression that affected their lives but also the spiritual forces of sin and evil that imprisoned their souls. Latin America's liberation theology and Black liberation theology in America are based on this understanding of ransom atonement.

Perhaps, you have felt enslaved by forces that seemed beyond your ability to break. Maybe it's some kind of addiction or self-destructive behavior, guilt, fear, anger, bitterness, or resentment that feels like it's keeping you from living into the freedom of God's grace. Perhaps you consider the systemic sins all around us, like racism or sexism or economic inequality or discrimination against persons for who they are. Maybe it feels like our social systems are being held captive by forces beyond our control.

If any of these sounds like a good metaphor describing the struggles you are facing in your life, then the Cross of Jesus Christ offers you this good news. Jesus has come to set you free. Let me repeat one more time. Jesus has come to set you free. He has paid your ransom, guaranteed your release. So, let us come to the Lord today and live in the freedom that Jesus has secured for us. Amen.