

For the Lenten Journey 2021 at Kona UMC, we have a "Savior" sermon series, reflecting different approaches of the Cross described in the Bible. "Substitutionary atonement" was the first approach we had, where sin is defined as an action punishable by death. So, Jesus had to bleed and die on the Cross to become our Savior. The second approach was the Savior's "ransom atonement," focusing on freedom from the imprisonment we cannot escape because of our sin. Jesus came to set us free from this bondage.

The third approach of the Cross frames the atonement of Jesus with His moral examples from the Incarnation to the Ascension, climaxed upon the Cross. Sin in this approach is our inability to fully reflect the image of God—*Imago Dei*. Its fundamental belief is that we have the capacity and potential to reflect God's love into the world because we are created in the image of God (tselem, תְּצַלֵּם) and the likeness of God (demuth, דְּמוּת) (Genesis 1:26).

Like the "moral examples" atonement, the fourth approach of the Cross we have this morning, which is the reconciliation atonement, is based on *Imago Dei*—the image of God. The reconciliation atonement is based on an essential quality that God and human beings share. It is the quality of being relational.

The doctrine of the Trinity we uphold as a core part of Christian belief reminds us that God is relational by God's very nature. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit relate to each other and work together in mutual respect.

Back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had perfect fellowship with God as they reflected the quality of God in their relationship. Then, in Genesis 3, they ate the fruit from the tree they were commanded not to eat (Genesis 2:16–17). Sin entered into the Garden of Eden in the form of temptation and disobeying God. As a result, Adam and Eve hid from God. They willfully attempted to separate themselves from God's presence, hiding in their shame and their guilt.

As with other atonement approaches, reconciliation recognizes that we are helpless to save ourselves. We cannot build a bridge to God; we cannot draw near God by our own actions. The only one who can mend our broken relationship with God is

God. So, we need to rely on God's unconditional love shown on the Cross through Jesus Christ.

Some of you may notice in the Garden of Eden story that when the relationship with God was broken, Adam and Eve did not just hide from God but started blaming others for what happened. They became so full of themselves and turned inward to follow their own agendas rather than surrendering their will over to God.

The Garden of Eden story is true of the past in the Bible, but also it is true in our experience today over and over again. Hate is everywhere. Blaming is everywhere. Fighting is everywhere. The spirit of "I am right, and you are wrong" is everywhere. Divisiveness has infected every aspect of our social condition today. Many of us feel alienated from God and feel so helpless as we see what's going on in our lives, our church, and our community. Because of our current "ugly" situation, the idea of reconciliation is an easily relatable approach of the Cross.

I don't think anyone would disagree that we need the Reconciler today more than at any other time. Thankfully, our God is Emmanuel God, who is with us always even for the time we feel so distant from God. Our God never gives up on us. Our God, the initiator of reconciliation, is willing to work with us to restore the goodness of life as He restores our relationship with God. In Christ, we are a new creation. The old has passed away. Through this, we are called to be the agents of reconciliation, overcoming the tribalism that exists in our culture and healing the world of its polarized divisions (2 Corinthians 5:18).

So, what are we going to do as reconciling agents of God's love? As a suggestion, I would like us to start first with strengthening our relationship with God. For those of you who do not know how to go about it, I am inviting you to take on the ministry opportunities Kona UMC offers, especially during Lent and Holy Week. In this worship service, we intentionally verbalize these ministry opportunities for you to hear and see, and take on for strengthening your relationship with God. By doing so, I believe that you will know what you need to do as a reconciling agent of God. The choice is yours. Amen.