Class Notes #3: Lent-Holy Week

**Christ’s Suffering and Death**

Required Readings: Buttrick, Ch. 4; Moltmann, Ch. IV/1-4 (pp. 151-195); Hickman, et al., Ch. 6/A-H.

Suggested Readings: Park; McCarroll.

Introduction to the Season of Lent

In Western Christianity, Lent, as the forty days before Easter, begins on Ash Wednesday and ends before Easter Sunday (technically thirty-six days, as Sundays are not included in the count).[[1]](#footnote-1) It was incorporated in the Easter cycle in the 4th Century at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) as a time of preparation for Easter. Lent is generally understood both as the period of the church’s catechetical teaching for those who are preparing for baptism and confirmation and as a period of penitential discipline for Christians.

Originally, Lent was a time of preparation for the resurrection event rather than the crucifixion. In other words, it relates to Easter, rather than to Good Friday. Christ’s suffering and death is supposed to be understood from the perspective of the Easter celebration of God’s triumph over sin and death. Thus, the major theological theme of Lent is the renewal of God’s promise through the suffering and death of Christ in light of his resurrection. Lenten subthemes, such as penitence and participation in Christ’s suffering, need to be explored from this eschatological point of view. Readings from the RCL during Lent reflect this theological orientation. It is not penitential, but covenantal. Except for Holy Week, the liturgical color of the season is purple. Purple is not a color of penitence. In the ancient Western world, purple was the color of royalty, since only a royal income could afford the dye that made purple possible. During the Lenten season, purple therefore points to the kingship of Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)

When we reflect on the suffering and death of Christ for sermons in Lent, at least two fundamental theological questions arise: Why did Jesus Christ have to die and suffer? How do his suffering and death relate to our salvation? In answering these questions, Moltmann’s chapters are helpful in deepening our theological understanding. Let me first summarize his responses to these questions and then invite you to reflect on them.

Why Did Jesus Christ Have To Suffer and Die?

For Moltmann, Jesus’ suffering and death demonstrate that he is a victim of injustice in human history for the following reasons: First, Jesus was a victim of human politics under the Roman despotic rule over Israel. Although he did not call for a revolt against Rome, his proclamation of the kingdom of God and Messianic ministry were perceived as a public threat by the Romans who ruled Israel with unjust despotism (164). Jewish religious leaders also realized the danger of his ministry to the status quo. Jesus’ title, hung on his cross, “King of the Jews,” reflects this political accusation by the powerful.

Second, Jesus died as a victim of an unjust social structure. He suffered the fate of a slave in his society. He was one of the slaves, the oppressed, and the powerless masses. He was among the poorest of the poor in his time. As a slave, his life was considered disposable by the ruling class. They tortured, abused, and crucified him, ignored his human rights, and denied him a legitimate legal process.

Last, Jesus’ death exemplifies cosmic destruction. His death was the sign of a tragedy in creation. Under Roman imperialism, all living things in the colony—nature and humans—were objects of exploitation. They were ruined and destroyed. As a member of a Roman colony, Jesus’ life was subject to, and possessed and dominated by the oppressors. In the eyes of the Roman imperialists, his life was not valuable. All creatures in the land of Israel, animals as well as human beings, were under the fate of destruction. In this colonial situation, Jesus’ death was not merely his private personal destiny. Rather, as Moltmann says, “Jesus died the death of all living things. . . . He died in solidarity with the whole sighing creation, human and non-human” (169). Therefore, for Moltmann, Jesus had to suffer and die as a victim of political, social, and cosmic evil.

While the traditional concept of sin, as Augustine understood it, is limited to individual moral and psychological misbehavior, Moltmann helps us define human sin more broadly in relation to the political, social, and cosmic evil powers. As he explains, sin means not only our personal moral misbehavior or individual crimes, but also social, political, and cosmic acts of violence that bring all living things into death. In other words, sin is “Godlessness and an act of violence” (209). When we look squarely at our reality, we recognize injustices in economic and political systems, the scientific and technological exploitation of nature, and the system of nuclear deterrence, which victimizes the poor and the weak, animals and vegetable species, and the whole world, particularly in developing countries. In their suffering and deaths, we witness the same evil powers, the sins that crucified Jesus two thousand years ago.

The Salvific Meaning of Christ’s Suffering and Death

How, then, can the suffering and death of Christ, which is the result of human sin, have a redemptive meaning? The traditional theological answer to this question is based on the Pauline faith statement: “While we still were 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” (Rom. 5:8-9).[[3]](#footnote-3) These verses have led the Christian church to interpret the suffering and death of Jesus as a vicarious sacrifice for our sins, which has emphasized that our sins have been forgiven by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. This interpretation raises the following theological question, however: What does justification by the blood of Jesus Christ mean?” According to Moltmann, this question can be answered only when the historical fact of Jesus’ suffering and death are interpreted in light of the eschatological event of his resurrection. More precisely, without the resurrection, Jesus’ death has no theological meaning; without the cross, there is no resurrection of Christ. When we view the crucifixion from the perspective of the resurrection of Christ, the death of Christ is not the end. Rather, “Golgotha is the anticipation of the end of this world and the beginning of a world that is new” (155). Mark depicts this eschatological meaning in an apocalyptic sense: “. . . darkness descends on the earth, the veil in the temple is torn in two” (Mk 15:45-56). Here, the horrible scene of Jesus’ death is expressed not merely as his personal tragedy, but as the end of the world. Yet through his death, the community of Christ was born, the true “beginning” of the new creation in the midst of this transitory world (Mk 16:1-8; II Cor. 5:17).

When Paul says that “we have been justified by his blood,” he means that those who have faith in Christ no longer remain in the old order of this world, but are called to be members of the new community, which is the agent for the transformation of the old world. The new creation has “already” begun with the death and resurrection of Christ, but is “not yet” accomplished in this world until God restores sovereign power through the Second Coming of Christ. In this “proleptic” eschatological perspective, justification through the blood of Jesus Christ has a theological meaning as the initial stage in the process of forming the Christian faith. That is, Christian salvation is “a process which begins in the individual heart and leads to the just new world. It begins with the forgiveness of sins through the vicarious death of Christ and ends with “wiping away of all tears” in the last day. This ultimate goal is “already anticipated here and now in faith and in fellowship, in consolation, and in hope” (183).

Moltmann explains the process of Christian salvation in three stages: justification, sanctification, and glorification. Justification through the blood of Christ (or the forgiveness of sins) is not the goal and end of Christian history. It is the initial stage that leads to the new creation of the world. Anyone who experiences God’s forgiving love in the suffering and death of Christ begins to “weep over the injustice of this world and waits for the wiping away of the tears which only this forgiveness of sins can and must complete (193).” Justifying faith leads the believer to the next stage of sanctification. The life of sanctification is to live as “a stranger in the world of Pontius Pilate” (210). It is, in other words, to participate in the suffering and death of Christ by fighting the injustice and suffering of this world in faith and hope. The ultimate stage of salvation is glorification, the holistic and cosmic restoration of the “grace and beauty” of God’s creation (211).

Moltmann introduces the lives of three contemporary martyrs as examples of the life of sanctification: 1) Paul Schneider, a Reformed pastor in the Protestant church of the Rhineland during Hitler’s reign; 2) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian and pastor of the Confessing Church under Nazi Germany; and 3) Oscar Romero, a Bishop in El Salvador under militarism. Moltmann interprets Schneider’s martyrdom as “suffering for faith’s sake.” His death for Christ’s sake corresponds to traditional images of religious martyrdom in Church history. Bonhoeffer’s sufferings and death were due to his resistance to the unjust and lawless power of the state. At this point, his martyrdom was political. He fought the evil power of human politics for the sake of God’s politics in his particular historical context. Romero’s martyrdom was caused by his participation in the sufferings of oppressed people. He was an advocate for the poor, the sick, and the weak in his society and struggled for their rights and benefits. His church was a place for the oppressed, and eventually became a threat to the oppressors, who then assassinated him.

According to Moltmann, these three martyrs illustrate God’s continuing incarnation in human history. They were “christs” for those oppressed under “Godlessness and violence.” Moltmann concludes that anyone who “participates in ‘Christ’s sufferings’ participates in the end-time sufferings of the world. The martyrs anticipate this end for their own time, and in so doing they become apocalyptic witnesses to the coming truth against the ruling lie, to coming justice and righteousness against the prevailing injustice, and to coming life against the tyranny of death” (204).

Preaching the Suffering and Death of Christ

What kind of sermons have you heard during the season of Lent and Holy Week? Are there any you still remember? How were the suffering and death of Jesus interpreted in those sermons? What is your own understanding of the suffering and death of Christ?

Most preachers emphasize the vicarious death of Christ for our sin. The focus of their sermons is that when we believe in Christ, we will be saved. Contemporary listeners, however, seek to deepen their understanding of the following questions: What does faith in Christ mean? What does salvation in Christ mean? If Jesus Christ died for our sins, why do we still live in the sinful world? Why do innocent people still suffer? Moltmann’s eschatological view—a retrospective approach that moves from the resurrection of Jesus Christ back to his suffering and death—provides a helpful theological lens for answering these questions.

The preparation of sermons for Lent requires of the preacher pastoral sensitivity to different situations of the listeners. For those who belong to the ruling class, Christ’s death means God’s intrusion in human history and is a warning that “the kingdom of God is near.” For ordinary Christians, the remembrance of Christ’s death renews their baptismal covenant of discipleship—to live life as Jesus did. For those who are suffering innocently from terminal diseases, unexpected misfortunes, or injustice of social structures and political powers, the message of Lent consoles them with hope in the promise of God. There is a tendency to understand Jesus’ death as “the God-forsakenness of the Son of God” (166). When we remember the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son (“I am in the Father and Father is in me”), Jesus’ suffering is instead understood as divine suffering, the pain of God. That is, when Jesus suffered on the cross, God did not forsake him, but was beside him and suffered with him. This means that when we suffer innocently from unjust acts of violence, God is with us and suffers with us.

Moltmann’s eschatological understanding of Christian salvation guides us to deepen our understanding of the suffering and death of Christ as the source of faith and hope: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). For believers, death is not the end. Just as God raised the crucified Christ from the dead, so our innocent sufferings and hardships are not in vain because the resurrection of Christ guarantees the fulfillment of the sovereignty of God over the world.

If you want to learn more about classical theories of atonement (the forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus Christ) and other contemporary understandings of atonement, in addition to Moltmann’s eschatological view, Andrew Sung Park’s *Triune Atonement* and Pamela McCarroll’s *Waiting at the Foot of the Cross* are good resources. Moreover, Reginald Brantley’s essay, “Suffering and endurance” published in *Living Pulpit*, gives an insight into how we can cope with our sufferings. He writes:

If we are created in the image of God, then our capacity for suffering and our capacity to learn through suffering must be characteristics we inherited from God. God put that capacity in *us*. Doesn’t that mean that God had that same capacity within God’s self? Did God learn suffering through Jesus at Calvary? Maybe that’s part of Barth’s understanding of the *humanity* of God. Barth asserts that God through Jesus of Nazareth expresses God’s freedom to love through God’s capacity to bend downward to us.[[4]](#footnote-4) God is together with us (God is our partner), Barth says,[[5]](#footnote-5) and that must mean, in part, that God intends to see us through to spiritual, and indeed, human maturity. We learn and grow and are molded through suffering that produces endurance which produces character which produces a hope that never dies and which connects us to God’s love. If we recognize the humanity of God through the Holy Spirit breathing and expressing God’s self through the universal church, the Body of Christ, *i.e*., through *us*, then part of what we recognize must be God’s capacity, not to mete out arbitrary sufferings (which equals arbitrary justice, which is injustice), but God’s capacity to suffer. As James Cone states so eloquently, God is struggling with us![[6]](#footnote-6) Then God’s capacity and ability *to endure*, is in turn poured into our lives by the Holy Spirit. This all happens because God loves us (!) and wants us to reflect God back to God through the actualization of our capacity to grow. Endurance is growth . . . humans were created in the image of God. We have the capacity to suffer and to endure, we have the capacity for action over passivity, we have the capacity to choose love over hate and we have the capacity to choose justice over injustice.

E. Gaines’ novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, and the movies, “Silence” and “Dead Man Walking” are also helpful resources enabling us to think imaginatively about the meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ in relation to our contemporary lives.

1. Eastern Orthodox churches observe a forty-day Lent from the Monday before Ash Wednesday to the Saturday before Holy Week (Sundays are counted in the forty days). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Marion Soards, et al, *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B., Vol. I, pp. 14-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf., Rom. 4:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Zurich: John Knox Press, English translation 1960), 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, revised edition, 1997), 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)