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29<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Oct 21, 2018

When a serious illness or tragedy strikes you or someone you love, what word bubbles up from deep within? For many of us, the word is WHY? or WHY ME? or something similar. Undoubtedly that happened to Jesus' first followers when he was crucified. So they looked to their Hebrew Scriptures and practice and everyday experience for insight. From their scriptures they found themes of sacrifice and atonement, even a suffering servant. Certainly from living in the Roman Empire they knew of ransom.

Our readings today offer us examples of these sources and expressions. The first reading comes from Second Isaiah, the unknown prophet who lived with the people in exile in Babylon more than 500 years before Jesus. The prophet's description of the unknown suffering servant evidently was key as Jesus' early followers tried to make sense of his horrible death. Still today when Christians hear the suffering servant passages they think of Jesus.

Today's brief reading from the letter to the Hebrews does not mention the themes of atonement or retribution, but other passages in the coming weeks do.

In the gospel Mark puts on Jesus' lips the concept of ransom.

There are, of course, other explanations of Jesus' life and death that better fit Jesus' own teaching about the God he called ABBA. More on that later.

For now, let's listen to God's word—as always, expressed in human words.

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Undoubtedly some--perhaps many--of you know what I am about to say. Especially on this topic, repetition is a good thing! Though most of us probably have been taught that Jesus came to suffer and die for our sins, there is another view in the Scriptures and tradition and theology. A view often not emphasized in western Christianity, another view on why God became flesh. Rather than understanding Jesus as a response to original sin and all sin, this view considers Jesus to be God's first thought—not an afterthought. Jesus is Plan A, not Plan B. God creates all that is in order to share divine life and love with this creation, indeed to become one of us! Just read the opening lines of John's gospel (and don't impose Plan B images).

And maybe re-read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, especially the section on love of enemies. Jesus says his God sends rain on the just AND the unjust. This God could not want—demand—the Son's suffering and death. Jesus' God is a God of compassion, forgiveness, tenderness, and love.

In their horror and fear, perhaps Jesus' disciples and later followers could not sustain his vision, but slipped back into the dominant religion of "violence saves" as they told stories, wrote the scriptures, and developed theologies.

We know that Jesus was crucified, but we don't know why. Perhaps it was because of his message, but maybe not. Oppressors often just kill people in the attempt to terrorize and dominate. It still happens today, for example the beheadings by ISIS.

Jesus' God is a God of life and love, of mercy and nonviolence. As Jon Sobrino states, "It is the love of Jesus (and of God) that saves, not bloodshed. The love of Jesus saves human beings, especially victims; love that stays through to the end, even if it leads to a cross. That is what we call redemption. I think everyone can understand that, with no need for a sacrificial interpretation."

Who is your God?