Jesus as Champion, Sacrifice, Lover, and Tree of Life: The Christian Meeting of History and Metaphor

Gail Ramshaw
September 2013

Greetings to you all. On this early evening at PLU, I welcome you to a continuation of this full day of presentations and conversations. I am honored to join you all at this conference, and delighted to be among a gang of thinking Lutherans.

Since my childhood days, I have been interested in the words that Christian churches use when proclaiming the faith, and this evening, I will describe the two different yet complementary sources of Christian speech, history and metaphor. I hope that my address will prove in some way useful to each one of you.

Christianity through history

Christianity has generally described itself as a historical religion. By this it is meant that its foundational events genuinely occurred at a specific time and place on this earth, and that those events were recorded by their participants or by writers accurately informed by them. Many of the characters caught up in the Christian story were actual historical persons whose activities can be certified by outside objective sources, not merely by enthusiastic believers. There was, really, a Pontius Pilate, and there is no doubt among even secular historians that there was in the first century a Galilean Jewish itinerant healer and preacher named Jesus of Nazareth. In the past, Christian teachers have found surety in the historical aspect of their religion, asserting that since Jesus did indeed live and die, Christianity had more claim to truth than did, for example, those religions in which the primary stories grew out of the human imagination, rather than out of the pages of news reports.

So, granting that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical person, the question is asked throughout the centuries since his lifetime: Who, precisely, was he? Since, as even Luke 1:1 says, "many had undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us," there arose an unknown number of conflicting first-and-second-century records of Jesus' actions and sayings. In the second century, a theologian named Tatian – a student of Justin Martyr – attempted to provide an easy answer to the question "Who was Jesus," by compiling from the four most-well-known and widely-disseminated gospels a single authoritative narrative of Jesus' life. His proposal was rejected by the church authorities at the time, who argued that these four accounts not only corresponded with the four corners of the earth, but gave four complementary accounts of who Jesus was, and that this theological complexity was more truthful than would be a single narrative. This decision strikes us as a surprisingly postmodern judgment in its acknowledgement of the veracity of varied viewpoints.

In our time, especially in first-world universities like PLU, the question "Who was Jesus" is addressed by scholars of critical biblical studies. Begun in earnest in 1753 with the work of Jean Astruc and his presentation of the documentary hypothesis of Scripture, historical critical studies attempts to test early accounts of Jesus against what is known about his time and place through outside sources and by means of rational examination. Comparing the gospels in this way led for example to the 1906 work of Lutheran theologian Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, as well as to the proposals of the late twentieth-century Jesus Seminar. A

film to watch in this regard is *Jesus of Montreal*, in which the commentary that is provided for an inventive passion play relies on contemporary critical studies for its description of Roman executions.

University theology courses may require students to read critical studies that find the canonical gospels to be reasonably reliable, or, alternatively, studies that reject the veracity of nearly all accounts of Jesus. At their most extreme, scholars can finally suggest that since the Bible itself is seriously untrustworthy, you do better to lay aside the Bible altogether and to read instead critical biblical studies. Generally, we must admit, it is apparent that when believers search for the historical Jesus, they are able to find in the gospels and history a man they admire, and when nonbelievers conduct the same search, they find a person somehow quite distasteful. Oftentimes, we find what we are looking for. Meanwhile, the search for who Jesus was continues. Lutheran scholars join in this search, but not in any denominationally distinctive way.

There is a second radically different method that is being used to determine who Jesus was. Largely in reaction against nineteenth-century biblical studies, a fierce literalism in Bible interpretation arose. This method rejects the critical stance, and to the question, Who was Jesus, literalism gives its own unequivocal answer: Jesus was precisely who the biblical gospels say he was. This answer to the quest for the historical Jesus asserts that the Bible is literally truthful because, written under the direction of God's Spirit, it is factually accurate. Although there are indeed scriptural conflicts, believers can no more resolve such biblical discrepancies than they can understand the mystery of the triune God. Christian faith includes not only faith in God's salvation, but also in the reliability of the Bible. Bibles are printed with the words of Jesus in red, with no apologies that these words are translations into English from words presumably spoken in Aramaic and then recorded in Greek. Even the Book of Revelation includes some sayings of Jesus highlighted in red.

Such literalism in biblical study is the preferred method in American popular religion. The severe antagonism between the critical studies scholars and the literalist believers is perhaps the consequence of two such mutually contradictory answers to the same question, voiced around the same supper table. The astonishingly enthusiastic response to the film *The Passion of the Christ* demonstrated many people's desire to implant in their mind the facts of Jesus' crucifixion. Some of us remember how many people responded to this film by saying, Now I know exactly what happened to Jesus. Albeit that some of the film was based on the visions of the nineteenth-century mystic Anne Catherine Emmerich, the graphic scenes in the movie successfully fed the American hunger for the literal facts surrounding the death of Jesus. Some Lutherans in this country and around the world are committed to such literalist interpretation of the gospels. What confuses me, however, is how many pastors, despite their seminary training in critical studies, preach as if the gospels narratives are factual. I have several theories to explain this odd tendency, but I will not go into them now. My speculations notwithstanding, the situation remains, that literalist presentations of who Jesus was abound in the land.

Christianity via metaphor

There is, however, an alternative question to Who was Jesus? That question is, Why is Christ? Even were we able to reconstruct precisely the hour-by-hour biography of Jesus, what would it matter? Why should we here and now know about Jesus then? What is the relationship between these two? What problem do we genuinely have that Jesus somehow addresses? Jesus, Yeshua, is a given name, a fact: Christ, on the other hand, is a title, a metaphor that opens us to

religious meaning. “Why is Christ” has been since the first century the primary theological concern. Titled Christology, this field of inquiry investigates not so much what Jesus Christ did, but why he is important to our lives. If our problem is that we are alienated from God, how does Christ reunite us to the divine? Perhaps, rather, the problem is that we are alienated from community, or that each of us is bifurcated within one’s self, or that we are being destroyed by our estrangement from nature. What’s the issue into which Christ is introduced? Formal theological language says it this way: what is an authentic and convincing theory of atonement that governs one’s Christology?

From the first century on, it has been primarily neither the facts of the historical Jesus nor the veracity of the biblical record that the churches have offered in answer to the question of the meaning of Christ. It has been, rather, metaphor. Think of the art painted in the second-to-fourth centuries in the catacombs and of the figures sculpted on the front frieze of Christian sarcophagi, images that both expressed and formed Christian faith. Jesus is repeatedly depicted as a shepherd boy with his flock of sheep, as Orpheus with animals. I once encountered a university student who thought that Jesus worked professionally as a shepherd, and granting the art in many churches, one can imagine how he got that notion. The catacombs also show Jesus as a lamb and as the sun riding across the sky.

But mostly commonly it is certain stories from the Old Testament that are offered as answers to the question, Why are we gathered around Christ. We see Abraham with his son Isaac lying on an altar; the three Hebrew boys in the furnace of blazing fire; and Daniel safe in the lions’ den. Here are metaphors that address the inquiry, why is Christ. Most common are depictions of Jonah coughed up out of the mouth of the serpent-like sea monster. We can only assume that the early Christians are learning from Matthew 12:40 to see the story of Jonah as a metaphor for Christ and for their own salvation from death. The ancient issue was not whether or not the Jonah story was factual. Rather, Jonah functioned as a metaphor for Christ. Think of Origen ridiculing Christians who thought that the story of the six-day creation is factual: rather, wrote this third-century biblical theologian, the story is a metaphor, describing the being of God.

One can think of metaphor as the opposite of fact. Fact accurately records what happened, while metaphor suggests a picture that appears to be demonstrably wrong, yet upon reflection sheds brilliant light on what is being considered. Although facts can be vociferously debated, metaphors present wide avenues on which the argument can take place. Let me spend the remainder of my address outlining four significant metaphors of Christ proposed by the churches, found in the theological and mystical traditions, and sung in current hymnody: champion, sacrifice, lover, and tree of life. As you might guess, I often have an interesting time during worship, identifying the theory of the atonement that is hidden inside the hymns, and if there is no such theory, I look for whatever is there instead. Perhaps there is something spiritually helpful: perhaps, as is the case with many popular praise-songs, there is really nothing there at all.

Christ as champion at Easter

According to one of the earliest articulated theories of the atonement, the primary issue of human life is how to confront death. For the Christian, Christ conquers death by rising from the grave. Everybody dies: what is unique about Jesus is his resurrection from the dead. This unique event was not the resuscitation of his corpse, but rather it signified God's creation of a wholly transformed existence, and so it certified Christ's conquest over sin, death, and the devil. Remember that early theologians imagined that God had created a paradise in which there was no death: even lions were vegetarians. Humans were originally immortal. Sin and death came about through the devil's work in Adam, and it was Christ, the second Adam, who renewed creation by beginning all things new. Through Satan, the entire creation had become estranged from God, and when Christ conquered death by rising to new life, his victory made possible new life for all who believed. Christ reopened the path to immortality. This theory stresses our enslavement to sin and death and thus our absolute need for Christ.

This proposal has been called both the cosmic theory of the atonement, since the entire creation was made new at Christ's resurrection, and also the conflict theory of the atonement, since in the resurrection Christ was victorious in the conflict with the power of evil. It is not surprising that in the Mediterranean world dominated by the Roman Empire, salvation was viewed as victory over the oppressor. As much as forty percent of the population were slaves, persons helpless to escape the oppressor's might. In the second century, the bishop Irenaeus spun out this theory of atonement, speaking with utter seriousness about the power of the devil, and proposing Christ as the champion who fought on our behalf and slew Satan. Christ was victorious in a conflict in which we as humans were helpless. The metaphor asks us to imagine a fight to the finish in the arena of the earth, in which in rising from the dead Christ becomes our champion. We thought he was down, but in the resurrection he rises again, offering us his immortality.

To correspond with this theory, the center of Christian life became Easter. Easter Eve was the preferred occasion for all baptisms. Augustine was baptized on Easter. In the early Middle Ages, one's Easter duty – that is, preparing for Easter and attending the eucharist at that

highpoint of the Christian year – was seen as the single absolute requirement for Christian practice. Still today countless people who call themselves Christian attend worship only on Easter Day. Theologians of the twentieth century taught that every Sunday is an Easter, a weekly celebration of Christ's resurrection. This depiction of Christ as the Easter champion has been popularized by C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Although the White Witch slays Aslan, thanks to the deeper magic from before the dawn of time Aslan comes back to life, and leading his victorious troops, he conquers the Witch and destroys all her nasty followers.

Much Lutheran tradition has perpetuated this theory. Indeed, from its origins Lutheranism has tended to nurture a pugnacious people. Current worship materials evidence the metaphor of Christ as the conquering champion to be alive and well. In *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the current worship book of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, an opening confession of sin includes the line, "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." That is, we need a champion to free us. Martin Luther articulated this theory of the atonement in his versification of Psalm 46. "A Mighty Fortress is our God" (*ELW* ##503-505) is the opening line of a hymn that describes the Christian life with battle imagery. The current English translation of this beloved hymn mentions sword, shield, oppressors' rod, the foe who arms himself to fight. Christ is the champion who conquers the devil, and believers now are given "the weapons of the Spirit" to carry on the fight against sin. We see this metaphor in also the Easter hymn "The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done" (*ELW* #366). "Now is the victor's triumph won," sing out the crowds on Easter morning.

The metaphor of conflict is powerful for many people. Singing these hymns in our time, we might imagine King Arthur's knights, protected by the armor of the Spirit, unhorsing and slaying the enemy who rushes toward them with a deadly lance of evil. One of the advantages of the image of Christ as champion is that we recognize that the language is not literal, but is metaphor, a proposal of meaning. So to the question Why is Christ? we answer: Because evil is powerful, death is terrifying, and we need a champion to fight for us.

Christ as sacrifice on Good Friday

According to what has become perhaps the most pervasive theory of the atonement, the key of the meaning of Christ is found in his death. Your own professor Marit Trelstad collected

the thoughts of eighteen scholars besides herself who are working to interpret the centrality of the cross of Christ in salvation. In the proposal fully articulated by the theologian Anselm in the eleventh century, the primary human problem is our sinfulness. God is the Judge, and before the divine tribunal, all humans are hopelessly guilty. God requires moral conduct, and not only can we not achieve this goal, we are too sinful to affect some kind of vindication. We are not only objectively sinful, but we ought to be emotionally distraught over our repeated failings. Somehow God needs to have the divine judgment satisfied. On the cross, Christ pays our debt by suffering so that we experience forgiveness. I used to explain to university students that it would not be fair for me as professor to ignore the actual work each student had done and instead award everyone an A in the course. This would be not just. This theory of atonement has been termed the juridical theory of atonement: it proclaims that God is just, and someone must pay for sin. A more common title for this idea is the substitutionary theory of the atonement: Christ is the one who by sacrificing himself substitutes for humanity and dies for others.

Ancient religious practice was filled with sacrifices, of the first-born son, of captives, of animals, of the first fruits of the harvest. Cities of the Roman Empire were lined with temples and altars to numerous deities who expected devotees to sacrifice as an essential component in their supplication. This ancient worldview, one shared by most biblical writers, assumed that sacrifices were indeed efficacious, and thus the idea of sacrificing in order to sustain one's life and livelihood made sense. It is also not surprising that in the medieval world of feudalism, a world marked by a hierarchy of submission to authority, such a juridical proposal seemed natural. The economic system in which lords owned the land and serfs owed their crops to these owners meant that paying off one's endless debts was a contemporary reality that governed people's lives. Thus salvation by Christ corresponded with their worldview: since human debt was so immense, only Christ's sacrificial death was sufficient to atone for sin and to pacify the heavenly judge.

To correspond with this theory, the center of Christian life became Good Friday. The crucifix, sometimes displaying a gruesome bloody corpus, became the dominant symbol of the faith. The imagery of the Stations of the Cross, eventually posted in every single Roman Catholic church on earth, did not include any depiction of the resurrection. Pleading for forgiveness was the central ritual of believers, and penance was one's participation in Christ's sufferings on Good Friday. In daily life, one ought not attempt to avoid suffering – indeed, through much of human history such was often a useless endeavor – but rather one was to offer such misery up to God, and so join with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

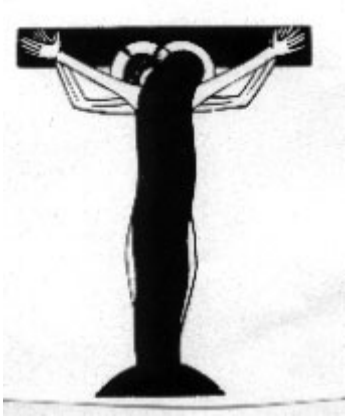
In medieval times, when the Sunday liturgy and its clergy were so distanced from the laity, the time spent in worship was to be dedicated to meditation on one's sins. A bell rang to focus everyone's attention on the highlight of the liturgy: the priest's elevation of the consecrated wafer, which was the dead body of Christ. In the early twentieth century, my mother's Lutheran church in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, held Holy Communion twice a year, and once was on Good Friday. Flannery O'Connor, the Roman Catholic short-story author, wrote to a correspondent in 1959, "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross." (*Letters*, p. 354). When I was confirmed in 1960, I was instructed to repeat before the quarterly communion services those catechism questions and answers that began with this exchange: "Do you believer that you are a sinner? Yes, I believe that I am a sinner." But thanks to Christ's sacrifice on Good Friday, I am forgiven. Some Christians speak of the ABCs of their faith: Admit that you are sinner; believe that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty of your sin; confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Watch

the splendid film *The Apostle* for the closing sermon, in which the Holiness Pentecostal preacher describes God as for us nailing his dear son to the cross.

Lutherans continue to express their faith in terms of the juridical theory of atonement. The second optional confession of sin in the *ELW* worship book includes the line, "Forgive us our sins, known and unknown, things we have done and things we have failed to do." Indeed, there are Lutherans uncomfortable with the idea that one could commune without first participating in the ritual of confession of sin. This substitutionary theory of salvation is expressed for example in the hymn "Ah, Holy Jesus" (*ELW* #349). Stanza two begins, "Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?" The Son has suffered "for our atonement," sings stanza three. The Reformation hymn "Salvation unto Us Has Come" (*ELW* # 590) repeats this imagery: "since Christ has full atonement made" in his death, believers are offered forgiveness and thus new life. Many Lutherans would join with most Christians to say that they are saved through the death of Christ.

Carl Gustav Jung was fascinated by those images that recur in nearly every single human culture and language. These archetypes have astonishing power to shape the imagination and thus to direct human life. We can think of sacrifice as one such archetype. We get it. Women sacrifice their wellbeing and even their life to bear children. Men sacrifice their freedom and even their life to protect their tribe against invaders. There is the food chain: animals are sacrificed so that other animals, including us, can eat. Thus the metaphor of Christ as sacrifice corresponds with human experience, despite the contemporary disquietude many Christians experience when contemplating this theory of the atonement. So why couldn't God simply forgive us? And how is it that on exam day you can substitute for me, so that I slither through graduation under your A? How much is this metaphor appropriate for contemporary faith?

Christ as lover on Maundy Thursday



Even some medieval believers were repelled by Anselm's juridical theory. Was God really that harsh and unbending? According to the twelfth-century theory of the atonement of Abelard, God was less judgmental and more loving. An individual wants and needs love, and this suggestion, sometimes called the individualist theory of atonement, proposed that Christ's life of love was what saved us. Christ was the exemplar of love, and believers were to copy his life of love to live as beloved children of God. Neither Christ's death nor his resurrection was as central to faith as was his life of love. The Spirit of Christ brings to fruition a new consciousness in the believer, who now can live under Christ the lover as lover to others.

There are folk who know nothing about theories of the atonement but who have heard of Abelard, the learned and creative theologian who was made especially memorable by his love life with Heloise. Abelard was a man who loved and who suffered much because of that love, and it may be that the experiences of loving and being loved are the most fundamental to human life. Infused with the spirit of Christ, we too can learn love and can become loving to others. In the nineteenth century, some theologians and churches, notably the Protestant Friedrich Schleiermacher, found the metaphor of Christ as the Loving Exemplar as the most persuasive for believers. That believers are to love another made sense in a world in which individuals were claiming more and more personal power to shape their own lives.

To correspond with this theory, the center of Christian life can be seen as Maundy Thursday. On that night, writes the gospel of John, as a climax of his life of loving, Jesus gathered his disciples together, called them friends, washed their feet as would a servant, beaconed them into lives of extraordinary love, and then prayed for them to be a faithful and loving community. The beloved disciple was reclining next to Jesus at table. One of the most-reproduced depictions of Jesus is Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper, at which a feminized Jesus is the gentle host at a gracious meal, his hands opened in welcome on the table. Particularly in the twentieth century, the eucharist has been described as a meal of loving communion. Believers are gathered around the love of God and so united with one another in affection and service. Increasingly, the practice of churches is to forego catechesis or membership status, and to welcome everyone at the table, since we are called to love another.

It was especially the cloistered nuns of the medieval church who expressed the imagery of Christ as lover. The poetry of the thirteenth-century mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg is marked by over-the-top expressions of her uniting with her lover Christ. "She is silent but longs above everything to praise Him. And He, with great desire, shows her His divine heart. He, the great God, and she, the humble maid, embrace and are one as water with wine." (*Flowing Light of the Godhead*, par. 4) For your enjoyment be sure to read the fifteenth-century memoirs dictated by Margery Kempe, who negotiated freedom from her husband's bed, this after bearing fourteen children and inheriting money from her father, for Margery claimed that she was married to Jesus. We know love, and so can know Christ. Perhaps the metaphor of Christ as Lover is responsible for the interest since the second century in Mary Magdalene as Jesus' lover. Some critics have described many popular praise-songs with the label "Jesus is my boyfriend."

The *ELW* includes its share of texts in which Christ is lover. The gospel reading for Maundy Thursday is from John 13, the narrative of the foot washing, with Christ's command that we love another. A prayer appointed for Maundy Thursday (*ELW* p. 30) reads, "Holy God, source of all love, Jesus gave us a new commandment, to love one another as he loves us. Write this commandment in our hearts." A hymn composed in the twentieth century for Maundy Thursday by Brian Wren begins thus: "Great God, your love has called us here, as we, by love, for love were made. . . .We come with all our heart and mind your call to hear, your love to find." The word "love" occurs seven times in this one hymn (*ELW* #358). A hymn from Ghana that can be sung during the foot washing on Maundy Thursday is "Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you" (*ELW* #708). The hymn text recalls Jesus kneeling at the feet of his friends, and accompanies worshipers who now show love to one another in this symbolic way.

Certainly the individualist emphasis of this theory of Christ as lover resonates with contemporary Americans. The well-being of the individual psyche is a substantial part of the expectation of religion, and countless sermons proclaim that my feeling good about myself, my

needing to know the love of at least God, is a primary goal of the Christian faith. My guess is that although this individualist emphasis on love would mystify many of the church fathers, the mystical mothers of the twelfth-through-fourteenth centuries did indeed exult in the experiences of Christ the Lover. I wonder if it would be wise to date the Reformation as beginning not in the sixteenth-century scholar's study, but in the fourteenth-century nun's cell, as woman after woman escaped the strictures of the clergy-dominated church to be embraced by Christ, her very own dear lover.

Christ as tree of life at Christmas

During my lifetime, a fourth theory of the atonement has become increasingly popular. According to what we might call the ecological theory of the atonement, Christ is the divine incarnation who brings life into a dying earth and to all who suffer in it. The most severe crisis that must be faced is not one's own unhappiness, but rather the devastation of the earth, which will mean death not only to meager little me, but to entire species, including our own. Christians believe that over the eons God continues to guide an evolving creation, and we believe that God calls us all to join in this process of continuous creation. Christian faith rejects deism, according to which God is on permanent retirement from the earth. Rather, in the life of Jesus, God took on flesh and came to inhabit the earth. God loves not only the human species, but the whole earth. Our religious practice is exemplified as we accept our responsibilities to honor, preserve, and maintain life, the life God instilled in the earth. In this spirituality, one's personal existence in some form after death moves off center stage. What we contemplate instead is the possibility of

the death of the earth, and this calls for Christians to focus on the earth God made, finding in the incarnation of Christ testimony that God inhabits the earth and blesses it.

Nearly two-hundred years ago Ralph Waldo Emerson resigned from the Protestant ministry because he no longer saw any validity in the sacraments, and in his famous address at Harvard Divinity School he urged that rather than bore oneself by attending worship, one should instead take a walk in the woods. But in our time there are Christians who both attend worship and hike in the wilderness, seeing in both the Bible and in the forest manifestations of the salvific grace of God. Examples of such Green Christianity are sprouting up here and there. What in the past were pilgrimages to religious sites are now being replaced with Christian hiking and camping retreats in the wilderness. One edition of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is titled *The Green Bible*, and it includes notes appropriate for this spirituality. Hymns, prayers, scriptural suggestions, and entire service orders are dedicated to praise and care for the creation itself.

Particularly in the writings of the twelfth-century scholar, mystic and abbess Hildegard of Bingen we read early examples of a Christian finding God in nature. Her writings about herbal medicine indicate her honoring God's grace made available in nature. In our time, theologian Sallie McFague has developed the language of not only the consecrated bread of the eucharist, but the very earth itself as the body of God. God is not far away, outside of all we know, but is in the earth itself as Savior of the dispossessed and the Healer of all ills. For McFague, the classic doctrine of the final resurrection of the body which began in the resurrection of Christ signals God's care for the physical world, and it calls Christians to heed the needs of that world, as God did in the incarnation of Christ (*The Body of God*, pp. 159-95).

To correspond with this atonement theory, the central celebration of the Christian life moves to Christmas. At Christ's birth, God entered into the earth in a unique way, and our celebration of that incarnation is the primary vehicle that carries us into a more profound existence. Many churches join with countless homes and locations to set up indoors a great evergreen tree of life: for what do you think a Christmas tree is, but the metaphor of green life holding out the promise of a renewed earth? Easter was originally the annual festival service at which an immense candle symbolized Christ, but now in many churches it is the Christmas Eve service during which all believers hold up their candles, as they share in Christ's light shining from the stable during the darkness of a December night. Scholars of ritual are not surprised by the phenomenon that in the northern hemisphere, humans will respond to winter's cold and darkness by partying big-time on the solstice, the very day that the warmth and light of spring is promised. Recently Christian theologians have described the origins and to some extent the meaning of Christmas as being congruent with the winter solstice. In the northern hemisphere, the very earth is dark, and the community gathers to praise God for the promise of new life through Christ.

During the twentieth century, many churches revived the practice of offering a full intercessory prayer at each Sunday service. In this long prayer, the assembly prays for the church, for government, and for all in any need, as well as its own petitions for local concerns. However, the *ELW* has added a petition into the expected outline: after the petition for the church universal comes each Sunday a prayer for the well-being of creation, followed by the remainder of the old listing of concerns. This is one example of ecological concerns being laid before God by those who find all salvation as affected by Christ. One of the thanksgivings at the baptismal font includes the line "By the gift of water you nourish and sustain us and all living things"

(*ELW* p. 71): thus not only the water in the font, but also the water of Puget Sound saves us from death.

The *ELW* includes a section of hymns labeled "praise and thanksgiving" and eleven hymns labeled "creation," many of which describe and praise nature. One concern I have about these hymns, however, is that they tend to be characterized by nineteenth-century Romanticism, in which nature is all sunshine and flowers. In these hymns, birds are not marking their territory each morning, but rather they are praising God with their song. Well, perhaps. Many of these hymn include no theory of atonement at all, as if there is nothing in the earth that needs salvation. Being saved means that we are called to imagine and perpetuate paradise on earth.

Such traditional hymn-singing notwithstanding, Green Christianity calls for more honest attention to God's evolving creation. We need to learn to praise God not only for sunsets, but also for hurricanes; not only for chirping birds, but for the snakes that eat the birds. A Green Christianity will recognize that just as in Christ new life comes out of death, so also in God's creation death and life each play their God-given role. The cross typifies creation, and in Christ God promises to save the earth.

It interests me that precisely parallel to the interest in an ecological theory of the atonement has come the popularity of the metaphor of Christ as the Tree of Life. Admittedly, sermons from the third century on praised the cross as not a horrific method of execution, but rather as a cosmic tree that holds up the sky, uniting earth and heaven. Like the tree in Revelation 22, Christian art has depicted the cross as adorned with twelve different fruits and leaves that heal the nations. In about the year 600, the poet we call Fortunatus penned "Sing, My Tongue," a hymn still sung today, in which the cross is for all "the noblest tree: none in foliage, none in blossom, none in fruit your equal be" (*ELW* #355-356). Some medieval churches display such a tree, most magnificently in the mosaic in the apse of San Clemente church in Rome.

But recently we see this Tree of Life in more and more churches, on banners, on wall art, in stained glass windows, as enhancements to the crucifix. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, five congregations are named Tree of Life Lutheran Church. Several stunning hymns in the *ELW* celebrate this saving tree: in Susan Palo Cherwin's "O Blessed Spring" (*ELW* #447), the cross is the tree of life; in Marty Haugen's Lenten hymn "Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (*ELW* #334), the tree typifies the mystery of salvation. Kiraly Imre von Precselyi's "There in God's Garden" (*ELW* #342) develops the metaphor of the tree of life in such profound imagery that the *ELW* suggests that this hymn be sung at worship every year on Good Friday. There is also Brian Wren's Easter hymn "Christ is Risen! Shout Hosanna," in which the spreading tree with healing leaves is a metaphor for the Risen Christ (*ELW* #383). All these archetypal trees can link Christianity with a nature spirituality, with much paganism, and with several of the world's traditional religions, in all of which we see in the metaphor of the Tree of Life connecting each of us, all of us, to the earth itself.

Celebrating Christ, through history, via metaphor

During medieval times, there spread throughout Christianity the practice of keeping Holy Week by focusing on what happened to Jesus back then. This method of worship stresses history. On Palm Sunday, Christians joined with the crowd in Jerusalem who welcomed Jesus into the city with a celebratory procession. On Maundy Thursday, worshipers held a particularly solemn service of Holy Communion, since on that day Jesus instituted the meal. On Good Friday, they assembled from noon until three o'clock to hear sermons based on the seven sayings that the Bible puts in Jesus' mouth while on the cross. On Easter Day, everyone gathered, perhaps even

like the women at dawn, to celebrate Jesus' empty tomb. This style of worship experiences salvation by commemorating the actions of Jesus of Nazareth. Who was Jesus? – the man who entered Jerusalem, hosted a last supper, died on the cross, and rose on the third day.

However, since the twentieth century, some Christians around the world are reviving a more ancient method of keeping Holy Week. These services rely not on historical reenactment, but rather on biblical metaphor to proclaim the meaning of Christ. On Maundy Thursday, worshipers wash one another's feet, participating in the metaphor that John's Gospel provides (*ELW* pp. 258-61). On Good Friday, worshipers praise the cross as the tree of life, singing out the classic hymn by Fortunatus. The presider calls out, "Behold the life-giving cross, on which was hung the Savior of the whole world." (*ELW* pp. 263-65) And then at the great Easter Vigil (*ELW* pp. 266-70), Christians light the great candle as a metaphor for Christ. During the service of reading, worshipers breathe a sigh of relief as with Isaac they are saved from sacrifice; they dance with Miriam and the Israelite women on the safe side of the sea; they follow the adventures of Jonah in the sea; and they delight in the narrative of the three men in the furnace of blazing fire. All of these stories present metaphors for what cannot be literally described: the resurrection of Christ.

It is important to recognize that whichever is one's theory of the atonement, however one remembers the person of Jesus, whichever metaphors are used to describe the work of Christ, these open up to the doctrine of the Trinity. If Christ is our champion, then the Trinity is a God who on the cross conquered evil and whose Spirit ensures our victory through death. If Christ is a sacrifice, then the Trinity is a God who judges and for the sake of Christ forgives sin and whose Spirit empowers us to holy living. If Christ is our Lover, then the persons of the Trinity enjoy a dance of interrelated love, out of which the Spirit enables us to love as did Christ. If Christ is the Tree of Life, then the Trinity is not far away, beyond the solar systems, but is the Spirit of life within the earth in which God became incarnate in Christ, and within which we struggle and thrive.

In conclusion

I have focused on four metaphors for Christ: champion, sacrifice, lover, and tree of life. But Christian imagination offers many others. Here are the opening lines of some hymns in the *ELW*: Come Now, O Prince of Peace (247); The King shall Come (260); Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming (272); Come, Beloved of the Maker (306); O Morning Star (308); Seed That in Earth is Dying (330); Jesus Is a Rock in a Weary Land (333); Lamb of God, Pure and Sinless (357); Bread of Life, Our Host and Meal (464); O Radiant Light, O Sun Divine (562); O Christ, the Healer, We Have Come (610); Rock of Ages (623); The Church's One Foundation (654); Jesus Savior, Pilot Me (755); Jesus, Priceless Treasure (775); The Lord's My Shepherd (778); Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song (808); Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life (816). And these are only the titles. Each of these metaphors implies a theory of the atonement, that is, a way to connect Christ to human life; each of these metaphors suggests a theology of the triune God, that is, a way to situate Jesus in God. So I wish for all of you intellectual interest in critical biblical studies, understanding of a piety of literalism, but mostly delight in the many metaphors that Christians have offered as openings from the heart of Jesus Christ into the needs of the world.