

The Son of Man must be killed *by humans*

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Nuechterlein's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

In [my lectionary columns and posts for the first two weeks in Lent](#), I am suggesting the Lenten theme of *covenant*. God's plan of salvation is founded on a faithful relationship extended over time and space.

Over the past 20-plus years in my own faith journey, the Bible's anthropology has taken primacy for me over its theology, providing a crucial reason for the importance of covenant to salvation. René Girard's work proposes that what has "saved" us as a species—thus far—are the false gods of our own unconscious creation. As we evolved into a new species, the greatest threat to our survival was our own intra-species violence, Thomas Hobbes' famous scenario of all-against-all. What saved us, however, was not Hobbes's social contract to establish a monarchy, but a "natural" mechanism of turning all-against-all rancor into all-against-one collective violence—a violence which ultimately is only effective if it's experienced as commanded from above, from a higher authority.

Hobbes, already in the early modern period of the turn to secularism, skipped a step. The higher authority which commands the "good" violence to contain the "bad" violence is not the king but the ones from whom the king's authority derives: the gods. In short, it requires anthropology to reveal to us that the default theology at the origins of our evolution is a projection of our own solution to violence as an authority transcendent to any individual.

If there is a true God, then, the evolved anthropology of *Homo sapiens* makes covenant essential. It takes centuries, even millennia, for those in covenant with God to see and hear who God truly is from behind millennia of evolved false projections

of gods. Even as the revelation in Jesus the Messiah proclaims to us that God is love, we will continue to hear gods of wrath commanding us to undertake sacred violence against our scapegoats.

This week's Gospel reading gives us a case in point. Jesus as the Messiah of the one true God will derive his authority as the Human One not by inflicting violence but by suffering it. He is establishing nothing less than a new way of being human, one based on losing life rather than holding onto it. The way of God's reigning authority inverts and subverts our way. In so doing, it reveals that the wrath of collective violence is human, not divine—"the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

Only the raising to life is revealed as on the divine side of the equation. Elsewhere, Luke makes sure we get the point: each of the first five recorded sermons in Acts explicitly states that humans killed Jesus and God raised him to life.

Yet how far has Christian tradition relapsed into the default theology of our origins by interpreting the atoning power of the cross as Christ satisfying a wrathful god who demands sacred violence? This is why covenant is so important. We are blessed by the grace of a covenant God who patiently and faithfully stays in relationship with us while we continue to discover who God truly is.

(Girard's work is most commonly used to present alternatives to popular atonement theologies; read more [here](#).)