

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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## Perspective

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When you look at the stars you're looking back in time. I've been aware of this fact since I learned it sometime in my childhood, yet it still amazes me when I stop to think about it. When we gaze up at the night sky, the lights our eyes are perceiving left their source stars hundreds, thousands, sometimes even millions of years ago. Some of the faintest stars we can see may no longer be there, having burned out recently, but we won't see their snuffing out for decades yet.

Why does this fact amaze me every time I remember it? I think it has to do with scale and the limits of human perception. Here's another example. Did you know that when you open up a brand-new deck of cards and give it a few shuffles, that exact order of cards has likely never occurred before since the invention of the standard, 52 card deck? That fact doesn't seem right, does it? Given the millions, perhaps billions, of games of cards that have been played over the centuries, how could that be? Our perspective is limited, we struggle with scale.

52 factorial means that there are roughly...hang on now, I had to learn some new number words for this: Eighty unvigintillion (for what it's worth, a unvigintillion is a one with 66 zeroes after it) six hundred fifty-eight vigintillion one hundred seventy-five novemdecillion one hundred seventy octodecillion nine hundred forty-three septendecillion eight hundred seventy-eight sexdecillion five hundred seventy-one quindecillion six hundred sixty quattuordecillion six hundred thirty-six tredecillion eight hundred fifty-six duodecillion four hundred three undecillion seven hundred sixty-six decillion nine hundred seventy-five nonillion two hundred eighty-nine octillion five hundred five septillion four hundred forty sextillion eight hundred eighty-three quintillion two hundred seventy-seven quadrillion eight hundred twenty-four trillion possible permutations of cards.<sup>1</sup> We cannot comprehend numbers this

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<sup>1</sup> <https://math.tools/calculator/numbers/words/>

big. There have been attempts to do so, search the internet for “52 factorial example” for some fascinating results that try to help us understand this mind-boggling number.

Our struggles with scale and perspective are nothing new. Humanity is adept at locking into the easiest and generally most helpful (to us) perspective on things and tuning out the bigger things or the things that don't fit. My eyes are great at skipping past the person panhandling on the corner or ignoring how our systems of justice favor the wealthy and the white. Societal problems and broken systems seem too big for our limited perspective, so we'd rather gloss over them than address them. Our own actions, along with our willful ignoring of their consequences, has led to a sick and poisoned world.

The people of Israel in our reading from the Torah today are trapped by their perspective. God has been with them in tangible ways in the wilderness, responding to their needs by providing mana and quails, water, and safety. Their lack of trust in God results in death until they can shift their perspective. God gives Moses instructions on how to confront the Israelites with a wider perspective, one that acknowledges their sin and forces some of the mirror-work necessary for them to return to righteousness, to living as they were created to live.

You all know I am no fan of Substitutionary or Penal Atonement theory, the idea that Jesus became Incarnate in order to appease God's wrath towards humanity by dying on the cross. I find myself more aligned with the Scapegoat theory, most recently expanded on by René Girard, and I think our reading from John's gospel provides an argument for it. The Scapegoat theory argues that humans are prone to finding scapegoats and killing them (or trying to). This penchant can be found plenty in our scriptures: Cain and Abel, the story of Joseph, the book of Job, even many psalms describe it. When this happens, the community doing the scapegoating is typically seen as good, while the scapegoat is seen as guilty (at least at first, sometimes the victim will be “redeemed” later, *c.f.* Joseph).

Scapegoat Atonement theory argues that in the Incarnation, God becomes the ultimate scapegoat. In this understanding Jesus enters broken human systems, our broken world, to take on all of the abuse and derision, the suffering and pain, the loneliness and despair of the world's scapegoats. Why? To eliminate the need for any future scapegoats or sacrifices. Thus when we scapegoat others we participate in the scapegoating of Christ too. James Alison sums this up well: “Christianity is a priestly religion which

understands that it is God's overcoming of our violence by substituting himself for the victim of our typical sacrifices that opens up our being able to enjoy the fullness of creation as if death were not."<sup>2</sup> This theory understands that through the cross, God is interrupting our perpetual-seeming cycles of violence and inviting us to break them completely.

"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."<sup>3</sup> Just as God confronted the Israelites with their lack of trust and selfish brokenness in the wilderness by forcing them to gaze at the source of their suffering, the serpent. So too God forces **us** to confront the limits of our selfish perspectives by forcing us to gaze at the ugliness of the cross. And as we gaze at that cross, we are invited to consider all of the scapegoats we have sacrificed over the years.

The cross shows us the truth of our selves...of our world. The cross forces us to widen our perspective...to see more of the world God so loves. The cross forces us to see how we have scapegoated others, how we have hurt and oppressed others and largely shuttered our perspective to that reality. The cross shows us the truth of our brokenness...no wonder it often makes us uneasy, uncomfortable, or even angry.

The Son of Man **must** be lifted up. The Son of Man **must** confront our limited perspective. The Son of Man **must** be the great scapegoat. The Son of Man **must** show us the truth. The Son of Man **must** shed light on the darkness of our perspective. All of this must be done to show humanity a glimpse of God's greater perspective.

What is God's perspective? We can't really know apart from God has revealed. And what's revealed in our reading today is a perspective that is grounded in love for the world, the cosmos. It's a perspective that desires salvation for all. It's a perspective that sees all people as worthy of love and dignity. And since it's God's perspective, we know it to be dependable and true. So, look up my siblings in Christ. Look up from your limited perspective and see the cross. See the truth of our brokenness. See the invitation we have in Christ to a new Way. A Way walked in God's sight and with a small portion of God's perspective. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Alison, James. <http://jamesalison.com/some-thoughts-on-the-atonement/>

<sup>3</sup> John 3:14-15 (NRSVue)