

**The Scapegoats Among Us**  
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As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the masses are chanting “Hosanna, Hosanna,” meaning save us, save us. In churches across the world, followers of Jesus are crying out this same Hosanna, Hosanna today. If you asked a room full of Christians, “What is salvation,” you would get a room full of different answers because salvation is complex and nuanced. But a theme you might find is that salvation is about restoring wholeness within each of us, in our relationship with God, in our relationship with one another, and in our relationship with creation. This desire for wholeness suggests the presence of brokenness. We cannot turn on the TV without hearing of violence whether in our city, in our country, and in our world. For many in our world, our Hosanna plea is to be saved from the brokenness of violence.

About 50 years ago, French anthropologist Rene Girard began reading through historical and fictional literature to discover themes in human existence. What Girard uncovered is a common thread that humans’ desires for objects, resources, and power inevitably place them in conflict. The solution for solving these conflicts becomes endless cycles of violence, which theologian and nonviolent activist Walter Wink calls the myth of redemptive violence. Violence, as I use the term today, is understood as all the different ways we inflict hurt on others or ourselves physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Girard argues that in instances where conflict amongst a group becomes too intense, the group will often find a scapegoat (an individual or group) on which to blame unrest, hurt, anger, and fear. Through inflicting a form of violence on the scapegoat, the group tension dissipates for a time and oftentimes unifies the group because they have a common goal, but since the source of the tension was not dealt with, it remains just under the surface. And the cycle continues. Girard uncovered such a universal truth of human interaction that you once you see it, you will begin to see it in most stories, including your own.

For Wink, violence has been the driving force in human history and is at the heart of human relationships both at the individual and collective level. He first discovered the pervasive nature of the myth of redemptive violence while watching cartoons with his children. When we watch Batman, X-Men, Star Wars or the newest Western movie, we find a common story. We have a hero, good character, and a villain who fight one another. The villain hurts the hero, and the hero retaliates. Back and forth, back and forth, until the hero enacts a final act of violence to stop the villain, at least until the next episode or the sequel. What do we glean from these stories? We see the heroes attempting to make things right through violence. We see violence is often an endless cycle. Finally, we see that the hero's violence remains hidden in a sense, causing the hero to never learn from his/her violence. For example when Batman uses violence against a villain, it will be called what, "justice." On the other hand, a villain's violence against the hero will be called "violence" or "crime." Wink says when children ingest these narratives from a young age, "they may never outgrow the need to locate all evil outside themselves. Even as adults they tend to scapegoat others."<sup>1</sup> So the myth of redemptive violence leads humans to create us vs. them categories where it becomes easier to blame fear and anger on the scapegoat rather than seeking the source of the pain.

The myth has a salvific allure, doesn't it? We will be saved from our fears, our perceived threats, our actual threats, etc. by this act of justice. While it may work for a time, violence just incites violence, and so the cycle continues.

The day I was born, just after 1am at East Alabama Medical Center in Opelika Alabama, I had to make a choice, or maybe the choice was already made for me. It is a choice that everyone who lives within the borders of Alabama has to make, what football team will I pledge my undying allegiance to? Auburn or Alabama? Which myth would guide the way I saw and interacted with my fellow Alabamians? The way of War Eagle or the way of Roll tide.

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<sup>1</sup> Wink, 53.

Considering that my parents both attended Auburn, that Auburn games were often on the television, and that I was always sporting Auburn duds, my choice was a narrow one with little chance of variance against the dominant narrative of my family. I was taught to say “War Eagle” to strangers wearing Auburn apparel as a ritual of solidarity just as Alabama fans are taught a phrase, so difficult for me to say, “Roll Tide” to the same end. It felt good to find solidarity in the War Eagle, and it even felt good to say it to Alabama fans.

Now this rivalry is intense, like preposterously intense. I have tried to explain this to Katie, but this phenomena was best experienced. A few years ago, Katie and I were back in Alabama for the week of Thanksgiving. Being that I hadn’t been in Alabama anytime near the game in years, I proudly put on my Auburn t-shirt for a quick trip to the grocery store. As we strolled through the parking lot, a woman that I had never met, decked out in Alabama gear, locked eyes with me with a disturbingly angry glare and screamed “Roll Tide.” Being out of practice in these rituals, I laughed, taken slightly aback, and then a wry smile spread across my face as I said “War Eagle.” As Katie and I entered the store, she said “What just happened?” and I replied, “Isn’t this great? It’s good to be home.”

Even though I haven’t lived in Alabama in over a decade, that narrative is laying dormant under the surface. The myth of Auburn vs. Alabama is so deeply woven into the fabric of my being that I often forget that this story was given to me. Each November in the Iron Bowl, two groups are seeking the desire of victory and dominance over the other, and while victory can be achieved, the cycle will continue next year. And if your team loses, you can watch the scapegoating happen like clockwork. “Ah, they cheated.” “The refs were terrible.” “They played dirty the whole game.” Yes, this was the story that was given to me and has become understood as natural and normal to me.

And so is the same with us, isn’t it? We are products of the stories been told to us from a very young age. As Americans, we have been told stories about race, women, immigrants, the poor, our country, our political affiliation, and ourselves. To the extent that we may not

even see certain forms of oppression and violence because they have been naturalized and deeply embedded in our understandings of normal. Yet, as Christians, we are called to search ourselves for the evil that has become engrained in our thinking and our feelings about others. We are called to see past these dominant narratives; to step outside of the stories handed to us; to be able to see the oppression of others; listen to the marginalized in times that we fail to see; and fight for justice, truth, in love. This is the story that Christ invites us into.

While it may feel normal to approach scripture with the lens of the myth of redemptive violence, Rene Girard and proponents of this scapegoat theory invite taking another viewpoint. Although many Ancient Near East creation stories begin with violence, Yahweh creates with goodness and love. While many ancient stories are told from the perspective of the powerful, the Exodus is revolutionary in highlighting the oppressed Israelites' relationship with Yahweh. The Old Testament continually highlights the humanity of oppressed groups like the widow, the stranger, the poor. If you look at scripture and history, I argue that our first scapegoat is Eve as she is blamed for the sin of eating from the tree, which would suggest that WE institutionalized scapegoating sacrifice rather than Yahweh. And then again in the case of Jesus, Mark Heim writes "Jesus does not volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteers to get into ours."<sup>2</sup>

As we approach Matthew's account of the crucifixion, please be on the lookout for ways the text shines light on violence, non-violence and highlights scapegoating.

**Matthew 26:47-56, 27:1-4, 24-54 (NRSV)**

<sup>47</sup> While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. <sup>48</sup> Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him." <sup>49</sup> At once he came up to Jesus and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed

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<sup>2</sup> Heim, 23.

him. <sup>50</sup> Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you are here to do." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. <sup>51</sup> Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. <sup>52</sup> Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. <sup>53</sup> Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? <sup>54</sup> But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" <sup>55</sup> At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. <sup>56</sup> But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. <sup>2</sup> They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

<sup>3</sup> When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. <sup>4</sup> He said, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself.

<sup>24</sup> So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." <sup>25</sup> Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" <sup>26</sup> So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

<sup>27</sup> Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. <sup>28</sup> They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, <sup>29</sup> and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" <sup>30</sup> They spat on him, and took the reed and

struck him on the head. <sup>31</sup> After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

<sup>32</sup> As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. <sup>33</sup> And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), <sup>34</sup> they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. <sup>35</sup> And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; <sup>36</sup> then they sat down there and kept watch over him. <sup>37</sup> Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

<sup>38</sup> Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>39</sup> Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads <sup>40</sup> and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." <sup>41</sup> In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, <sup>42</sup> "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. <sup>43</sup> He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" <sup>44</sup> The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

<sup>45</sup> From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. <sup>46</sup> And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" <sup>47</sup> When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." <sup>48</sup> At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. <sup>49</sup> But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." <sup>50</sup> Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. <sup>51</sup> At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. <sup>52</sup> The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints

who had fallen asleep were raised. <sup>53</sup> After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. <sup>54</sup> Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Who do you identify with in the story? I empathize with Judas who plays right into the violence, and then sees his own role in giving up the innocent scapegoat. I can see myself as Peter, maybe too afraid of the consequences of standing up to the powers that be and the violence they may inflict on him. I imagine the women disciples, maybe feeling defeated because their voice will not be heard. I see myself in religious leaders frightened of losing their power and the control of the people. I think of Pilate who desperately wants to keep law and order, but at what cost? And I see myself in the masses who needed a place to pour out their fear, their anger at being poor, their sadness, their frustration at not feeling heard all the while unaware that they were seeking Hosanna in the violence they needed saving from. Or do we see ourselves in Jesus, the one being oppressed? As Jesus is beaten, mocked, and killed, the cross unmasks the scapegoat system for what it is, sin against God's creation. It unveils the once hidden mechanism of scapegoating. Where the blame once fell on the oppressed, now the violence of systems is uncovered. We are faced with seeing that we too, all of us, can be enticed into the mob as a way to place blame outside ourselves. Theologian Tony Jones sees the cross as a mirror that reveals our location to the oppressed.

James Cone says that to understand the cross we must see who is being put on the cross in our modern context to gauge our reference point to the oppressed. In his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, he shows that the clearest example in modern America is the lynching of African Americans post Reconstruction. During this time, between 3,000-5,000 African Americans were lynched in crimes of mob violence. So deeply embedded was this scapegoating story we were given, Cone notes that during the time of the lynchings no major white American theologian makes the connection between the lynchings and the cross. Oh, the power of the scapegoat mechanism to hide our own violence from us. Have you ever made that exact

connection? I did not on my own, but I assure you that those on the other side of the cross made the connection. Once you see it, it is clear and it is powerful. Jesus' death on the lynching tree uncovers scapegoating born out of fear over a rapidly changing society in the post Reconstruction South, anger over deep poverty, and a fear of losing power and control. When we imagine Jesus brutally murdered on the lynching tree, we see a cruel form of social control, and we can see the fear that must have plagued our African American brothers and sisters. The sin of scapegoating is brutal for everyone involved because it dehumanizes the oppressed and takes away the humanity of the oppressors. We all cry Hosanna, save us.

As followers of Jesus, we are invited again and again to ask the question who is being put on the cross? Who is facing the scapegoat mechanism in our society? Over the past couple of months, many of us have been reading Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* where she lays out example after example of African Americans being institutionally scapegoated from the beginning of our country until now. In particular, she highlights the mass incarceration of African Americans, which she calls the new Jim Crow. Through describing the War on Drugs, she highlights that African Americans are being imprisoned at alarming rates in a system with disproportionately long sentences for low level drug offenses. While studies show that whites and African Americans use and sell drugs at similar rates, "black men have been admitted to state prison on drug charges at a rate that is more than thirteen times higher than white men."<sup>3</sup> This is one of America's modern hidden scapegoat mechanisms where fears over safety, a desire for order, and concern over a rapidly changing society are being displaced on a particular group of people with devastating effects. The violence against the incarcerated is immense as the prison system rips people from their families and the laws are in place to make it extremely difficult to reintegrate into society. While our tendency is to point blame on a political party, the truth is the New Jim Crow comes from both major parties. Where is Jesus in all this? Sitting in a cell at Orleans Parish Prison or Angola

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander, 99-100.

unmasking that violence doesn't solve violence and rehumanizing the most dehumanized among us. Hosanna, save us all.

Jesus is always on a mission to rehumanize both the oppressed and the oppressor. Do you know what finally sends the chief priests and elders over the edge as they conspire to kill Jesus? Well, the chapter before is Matthew 25. Right, how good is that? "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

Jesus had just invited them to the work of being fully human. That is why our work of education and action regarding the criminal justice is so important. This is why our commitment to education and action around the Matthew 25 passage is so transformative because this work is central to the good news. Hosanna, save us all.

Who are the scapegoats among us? Who do we dehumanize with labels rather than getting to know them? And how do we begin to rehumanize one another? I think there is a deep power in hearing the stories of those who have been oppressed. Over the past couple of months, we have had opportunities to hear the stories of "The Graduates," who shared their experience in the criminal justice system. This past Wednesday, we heard the story of an undocumented immigrant who shared her experience fleeing her home country, and her fear of being deported from this one. These stories both show us the humanity of those who may have different life circumstances while also shedding light on how policies and stereotypes have the power to dehumanize.

In today's reading in Philippians, we have possibly the oldest Christian hymn describing how we are to imitate the mind of Christ. In verse 7, Paul writes that Jesus emptied himself, but the Greek word, kenosis, carries much more nuance. Kenosis means to empty, to set down one's position or power. To take it a step further, kenosis means to make space, and I really resonate with this. Elizabeth and I

were talking the other day about the movie *Selma*, and she mentioned how striking it was to see the marchers in suits and dresses walking with dignity toward the waiting violence. As I recently listened to an interview with John Lewis, who was brutally beaten that day, I was reminded of other rehumanizing tactics of this non violent resistance. Lewis says they were trained to always keep eye contact with their attackers to make known their humanity. While we are continually divided by labels, systems of oppression, and stories of violence that were given to us, I envision a table where we are always making space for another person. Or maybe someone else is making space for us. Either way, we sit, and laugh, and cry, and eat while looking one another in the eye. We embrace difference, but we trust that people are more than the labels we give and the world gives. It is not always easy to make space for another because the table gets crowded, we begin to worry if there will be enough food, and sometimes the conversation goes where we don't want it to go. But we keep making room and keep looking others in the eyes and listening to new stories and gaining new imagination about God's love for all humans. This is the hope on the other side of the cross. This is the light of a new way.

May we be justice seekers and space makers. May we unveil hidden ways of violence and undo them within ourselves and others. May we help others make space to look each other in the eye in the great rehumanization before us. Hosanna, save us all. Amen.

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