

To God Alone Be The Glory

God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood
(Romans 3:25a).

I hope you like riddles, because this morning's sermon will unravel an extended riddle. Are you ready to hear the riddle? What do these four things have in common? 1) October 9, 2019, 2) the Ark of the Covenant, 3) our sermon text, 4) the pronouncement of forgiveness we often hear on Sundays. What do these four things have in common? Let's look at each item separately.

October 9, 2019 Today is October 6. So October 9 will be Wednesday. What's so special about October 9, 2019? "Well, the calendar says that's going to be Yom Kippur. Isn't that a Jewish Holiday?" Yes, although I wish you'd pronounce it, "Yohm kiPOOR."

I wanted to know what Yom Kippur was all about, and I prefer to interview people rather than checking Wikipedia. So I called Rabbi Boraz, who was happy to explain the holiday to me. He said: the main feature of Yom Kippur is a 24-hour fast—no food for a whole day. If you are a child or are quite sick, you may eat. Fasting is intended to give people time for repentance, which the Rabbi defined as "turning back toward God." The fast starts at sundown the night before: this year it will start on Tuesday night. The people come to synagogue. They follow a liturgy that guides worshipers to account for their sins ...and also, I was told, to take notice of the good things they've done during the previous year. The next day, the morning

of Yom Kippur, the people come back to synagogue for a liturgy which lasts from 9 AM to 1 PM. They recount their sins as a community: perhaps they have not given enough money to charity, or they have cast aspersions on others. From 1 PM till late afternoon, they take a break and go home. Now they have time to ask forgiveness for sins committed against individuals, and to make restitution. In the late afternoon, the people gather again at synagogue, and they read from the Scriptures, especially Isaiah 58:14-59:14. There is a noticeable shift in the liturgy to the idea of 'making this world a better place.' Each congregant, for instance, may be encouraged to bring a bag of food for the local food shelf.

So Yom Kippur is still considered a day to think about repentance and forgiveness. Sounds like a good day. But why do they call it Yom Kippur? Well, "Yom" is the Hebrew word for "Day of," and "Kippur" is the word for "Atonement."

Atonement. You've heard of that before, right? If this were catechism class, I would write the word on the white board and take it apart. "A" "tone" "ment." Does that do anything for you? No? What if we divide the word in a different spot? What about "At - one - ment"? Hey, we can do something with that. 'Atonement' is what God does for us through Jesus: he sets us at-one with him. And if we are at one with God we have at-one-ment. Atonement.

Sounds like a peaceful word, doesn't it? ...like two people were not in agreement about something, maybe even angry at each other; and now they've been set at-one. But it's not about reconciling just people! God

was angry over our sins. As God, he set the standard of right and wrong, and he demanded that we measure up to his standard. At first we didn't understand how tough his standards are, and we didn't even come close to measuring up. It's one thing to **say** God is first in your life, but to actually (fear) regard his words more highly than anyone else's words, to (love) hold him more dear than anyone else, to (trust) rely on him more than rely on anything else? We don't measure up. And that's only the First of the Ten Commandments. How many times have we been told what God expects from us? And yet we haven't become perfect. We still get rebellious. We don't like God reminding us that he ought to put us in hell forever because of our sins. And if it weren't for Jesus, God would still be angry, because we keep falling into sin.

We needed some at-one-ment. So the Father sent his Son Jesus to earth. Someone had to pay for those sins. Jesus willingly stepped forward to take all the punishment we were owed. Jesus' death satisfied God's justice. And so Jesus could say to us, "I've patched things up between you and God. He's no longer angry at you. He's not going to punish you. Come with me into God's throne room. It's time for you two to be together, to be at one. I have brought about at-one-ment, atonement."

Yom Kippur is not a recently developed Jewish holiday. It dates all the way back to the time of Moses, over 3,400 years ago. When the Lord rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, it wasn't yet the time to send Jesus. So through Moses the Lord established a religious system to symbolize what would happen when Jesus finally came.

The Lord had Israel set up the tabernacle—a big tent for worship, surrounded by a courtyard of curtains. There were two rooms inside the tent (simple floor plan on screen): a larger room for the priests called the Holy Place (blue), and a smaller room called the Most Holy Place (red). The two rooms in the tabernacle were divided by a curtain (purple). No one was allowed in the Most Holy Place (red)—that was God's room. And only priests could go into the Holy Place (blue). All the regular people had to stay outside.

"Why was God so mean to keep the people separated from him?" No, no, you misunderstand. In Isaiah 59:2 the Lord says, "*Your sins have separated you from me.*" See, sin must be punished or else God would be unfair. The punishment for sin is death. So the Lord had the people sacrifice animals. Through these sacrifices God allowed the unholy people to come near him. Do you get it? If you are separated from the Lord by sin (which leads to death), and an animal dies in your place, then you can come near to the Lord. But even then, the people had to stay at a distance. Once the Tabernacle was set up, the people were never supposed to see **the Ark of the Covenant** again.

Remember the Ark? It was the chief the symbol of God's presence among Israel. Sin may have kept the people separate from the Lord, but at least he was merciful enough to live right there in their midst at the tabernacle in the Most Holy Place. The Ark was a wooden box, 40" x 27" x 27", made from acacia wood, and overlaid with pure gold. Inside the Ark were the two stone tablets with the Commandments written by God's own finger. But the best part of the Ark was the cover that was put on its top. The "mercy

seat,” they called it. In Hebrew it is called the *kapporeth*. It was solid gold, 40” x 27”. There were two cherubim on the *kapporeth*, one on each end. These angels were also made of gold. Their beautiful wings were leaning forward, touching tips. And the Lord said to Moses, “There. That’s the place I will meet you and talk with you face to face.”

What a beautiful name! Mercy seat! ...as if God would come down and sit on the Ark right there under the wings of those angels, and in his mercy talk to Moses and tell him all the things he should relate to the people. Moses was on good terms with the Lord (see Exodus 32). He got to talk with God at the mercy seat, the *kapporeth*.

Wait a minute: *kapporeth* and *kippur* sound a lot alike, don’t they? As a matter of fact, they are related. A *kippur* is a cover, like a lid on a jar, or like the cover on the ark, but if you want to make a *kippur* sound like a special cover, in Hebrew you call it a *kapporeth*.

That takes us back to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Lord wanted his separated people to know that they could gain access to him. So once a year the Lord allowed the High Priest to come into his presence in the Most Holy Place and make atonement for all the sins of the whole nation.

Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement. What a special day this was for God’s people before Christ came! To do without food on Yom Kippur was a sign that you were willing to do without sin. So the people fasted. This was the only time all year God required fasting. The High Priest took off his exquisitely beautiful priestly robe, bathed himself, put on a white garment (a symbol of

what the day was about: holiness). Then he took a sensor full of hot coals and put incense on the coals to make lots of smoke. Then he reached around behind the curtain and placed the censor there to fill up the Most Holy Place with smoke. (The smoke was another kind of *kippur*, another covering).

Then the High Priest went outside the tent and sacrificed a bull. He brought a bowl full of the bull’s blood into the Most Holy Place to show that the bull had really been killed, as if the High Priest were saying by his actions, “This bull has taken the punishment for my sins on himself.” The High Priest would stand before the mercy seat, the *kapporeth*, the special atonement cover, dip his finger into the blood, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat, making a *kippur*, a covering of blood. The blood reminded the Lord that that the his anger could subside because his justice was satisfied. The wages of sin had been paid. Atonement had been made for the High Priest.

Next the High Priest went out, sacrificed a male goat, brought the blood before the mercy seat (the atonement cover), and sprinkled another covering, another *kippur* of blood on the mercy seat, this time for the sins of the people.

None of the people got to see this part of the ceremony inside the Most Holy Place. So the Lord had the priest do something else that the people could see in order to help them realize that the Lord was forgiving their sins. A second goat was brought forward. The High Priest would lay his hands on the head of this goat, and confess all the sins of the people, as if the High Priest was transferring all those sins onto the goat. A man would then lead

the goat out of the camp far into the desert and leave the goat there. As the people watched they could see that the goat was symbolically taking their sins away. This goat was called the Scapegoat because by it the people escaped punishment and got atonement instead.

Now if you're sharp, you probably noticed that atonement means more than just to "set at one." It starts out as *kippur*, a cover. So to make atonement, make a *kippur*, is to make a covering. When the covering of blood was made, God's justice was satisfied because the sin had been paid for by death. Sin didn't anger the Lord any longer, so he and the people were at-one. At-one-ment had been reached.

So far you've got the first two parts of the riddle solved. October 9 will be Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And the Ark of the Covenant had an atonement cover on it. Every year on the Great Day of Atonement, the high priest made atonement for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. But what does that have to do with the third item on the list: **our sermon text**? Let's hear it again: *God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*

Do you see the connection? Just before his death, Jesus stood before the High Priest, who accused Jesus of all kinds of sins. The High Priest might as well have laid his hands on Jesus' head and confessed the sins of all the people. After Jesus was convicted in all five of his hearings, someone led him outside the camp (that is, outside the city) like the Scapegoat. There he allowed himself to be killed like the other goat, in the place of the

people, in place of us. When Jesus died, he went to heaven where he presented his blood before the heavenly mercy seat, where the Father sits. There Jesus made atonement, made a covering for our sins. But this time God's anger over our sins was forever assuaged, forever satisfied. No more fasting required. No more sacrifices required. The Great Day of Atonement never needs to be repeated since Jesus' death. That's why we don't typically celebrate Yom Kippur in our Christian Church Year—Christmas yes, Good Friday yes, Easter yes, Ascension yes, but not Yom Kippur. God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice for our atonement, which we receive as our very own through faith in his blood. Jesus' blood satisfied God's justice.

Did you figure out the connection between all this and **the pronouncement of forgiveness** that we often hear on Sundays? "God our heavenly Father has been merciful to us and has given his only Son to be the atonement sacrifice for our sins," ... the sacrifice which sets us 'at one' with the Father.

So the riddle has been solved. What do the four things have in common? Atonement. Jesus provided a cover of blood for sin—atonement. His death satisfied God's justice by paying for sin—atonement. God and sinners were set at one—atonement. Whenever you hear about Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, I hope you will think of your Savior. Then Yom Kippur can be a day to celebrate the atonement you have in Jesus. **A BLESSED YOM KIPPUR TO YOU** this Wednesday!