Carl's Question, Take 3 Ken Wilson Easter 2017

Carl Safina is most spiritually astute atheist I know. *Beyond Words: How Animals Think & Feel* amazing. Met Carl in 2006. We hit it off, did some bridging events involving faith leaders and scientists. By email, Carl told me this story about losing his faith.

My uncles had a boat and occasionally invited my dad. But an invite to him was not an automatic to include me…When I was about 9, I did get one of the very rare invitations. I'd been fishing and on the boat before, so I knew it was the most exciting thing imaginable. When my father said I could go, I was leaping for joy. One problem: it was this Sunday. Sunday! I was in Catholic school and knew missing mass on Sunday was a mortal sin, period. You died before confession (any time in the next 5 days), and you were in the middle of a hundred burning Christmas trees‹forever.

But by then I could think a bit. So, I went to talk to the priest. Gotta be some wiggle room. Could I go on Saturday? No. Twice on Monday? No. Every day whole next week? No. TWICE on Saturday...No. He said, "I'm sorry, but you have to go to mass on Sunday." I could not believe creator of universe would demand I sit in church again, and only on that one day while missing time with my father and uncles, doing the most exciting thing possible‹being out on His glorious ocean…. But the thing is II stayed home and went to mass. And the church lost me that day. Because, as I thought, 'this just can't, it just cannot, be right. It can't be what God wants…what he cares most about. These people... are capable... of getting it wrong." And as far as the Catholic church and me; that was that. I went to church off and on for a few more years. But every time, I could see the wizard behind the curtain; the gloss was off. I don't remember going to confession any more, or worrying about missing a Sunday. And by the time I was about 12, I was pretty much gone… God might be, but he could not possibly be that rigid or small.

It was gonna hafta be between him and me. And eventually, early 20s, my praying could no longer drown out all those suffering innocents. (I do thank the church, though, for telling me I should care about those suffering innocents. I think I would have gotten there from any of several directions, but the church was first to get me there.)

<u>Later I get this email from Carl</u>: *When you get a moment, explain how Jesus died 'for our sins.' I've never gotten that…. Keep it short or I won't understand (Aug 15, 2009)*

<u>He couldn't have known it but this is the question that had</u> plagued me for 35 years following Jesus…[you can follow Jesus with basic questions unanswered]. My response lame. I tried again in a 2012 and got closer, but only circled around it. This is Take 3.

Carl's question is provoked by a line in 1 Cor. 15, written by Paul, earliest written summary of gospel: *For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*

"Christ died" uncontested historical fact: *"our sins"* an existential fact most can recognize. Sandwiched between them is "for." Carl's question: What does it mean to say, "Christ died *for* our sins"?

Gk. *huper* [who-pear]. Definition is fluid—many possibilities*: in behalf of, for sake of; over, beyond, more than (in Eng. "hyper").*

The "for" only makes sense in a larger back-story. Like "I'm here for you" means different things if speaker is your best friend or Immigration-Customs Enforcement Officer at your door.

Paul alludes to back-story with ***"in accordance with the Scrip-tures."*** Can pull a lot of back-stories out of Hebrew Scriptures. What's the one that makes sense of ***"Christ died for our sins"***?
I don't want to lose you with technical theological jargon but the back-story to this question is called "atonement theory"

Different atonement theories have held sway at different times.
In 2nd century the back-story went: "When we sinned we became the property of the devil who held us captive. Christ died in order to pay the devil ransom to set us free." That made sense in a world where most people were owned by other people. But now?

Replaced a thousand years later with what is still most influential atonement theory: "Christ's death didn't pay off the devil. It paid off God the Father who was so filled with just wrath because of our sins that he required the bloody sacrifice of His son, Jesus." Maybe this made sense in a violent world where strongmen kept the peace by threatening more violence. But a God who kills his Son to pacify his wrath seems creepy to me. Besides, I can forgive people who sin against me without requiring a bloody sacrifice. Is it too much to ask God to be more loving than I am?

What back-story makes better sense of "Christ died for our sins"
[One found in the Hebrew Scriptures that Paul knew]

Answer hidden in plain sight in Carl's email. I missed until now.l Remember, he wrote: *"And eventually, early 20s, my praying could no longer drown out **all those suffering innocents**. (I do thank the church, though, for telling me I should care about those suffering innocents. I think I would have gotten there from any of several directions, but the church was first to get me there.)"*

"The suffering innocents"…Care for suffering innocents became his life's work. We're **unnaturally detached** from Nature, so we do things to needlessly increase the suffering of other creatures. All his books are about **reconnecting us so we care.**

Concern for "suffering innocents" is back-story to *"Christ died for our sins."* **Crime of humanity** exposed in Hebrew Scriptures is **scapegoating**—in which suffering innocents thought-to-be guilty are mistreated to give anxious communities a false sense of peace.

As Rene Girard, student of ancient myth points out, ancient world awash with stories of guilty people killed by their communities to restore peace & harmony: Oedipus, Romulus & Remus, stories of a plague only stopped when the community expelled its Jews, etc.

In all these myths, storytellers assume the guilt of the expelled. But in Hebrew Scriptures, these figures are innocent, not guilty. Abel is innocent. Joseph, left for dead in a well by his brothers, is innocent. Hagar sent into wilderness by jealous Sarah is innocent. Job is innocent though his friends assumed his guilt.

Our worst, our distinctly human crime: We resolve our internal group conflicts (In families, on job, in society) by targeting a vulnerable member. We accuse that person/small group of faults we are blind to in ourselves. Scapegoats de Jure include Muslims, Immigrants, Global Financiers [code for 'the Jews'] Black Lives Matter, "dishonest" Press—always some "other" causing our problems. We stigmatize, isolate, silence, oppress them….and it brings peace for a time. **We turn to this mechanism again & again**, forever blind to the innocence of our victims.

Scapegoating is "that thing we do." Only way to undo it is to unmask it. This is purpose in history of God's dealings with Israel.

After *"Christ died for our sins in accordance with Scripture"* Paul says risen Christ appeared to Cephas/Peter and last of all to him.

Both founding members of Scapegoaters Anonymous. His case was obvious: "*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."*

But Peter belonged to Scapegoaters Anonymous too—as silent bystander, warming his hands by fire, denying connection to Jesus when the scapegoating mechanism targeted him.

If this is the back-story, then "*Jesus died for our sins"* means he died **on account of our scapegoating ways**—part of God's long effort to unmask the scapegoat mechanism for what it is.

The resurrection isn't just about Jesus beating death. It is God's declaration of the innocence of all who are scapegoated

What did the Risen Jesus say to Paul on road to Damascus: ***"Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?"*** Saul never laid a hand on Jesus. He was after fellow Jews who took Jesus as their rabbi. But Jesus takes the suffering of **fellow innocent victims** personally!

God stands with the scapegoated! He stands with the innocent victims thought to be guilty by the **anxious/amoral** mob.

To follow Jesus is to be **attuned**, as Carl is, to the suffering of innocent victims.

To follow Jesus is to wake up—to see scapegoating for what it is and to stand with whoever it is this mechanism is targeting.

To be immersed in Spirit of Jesus is to be immersed in Spirit he named *Paraclete* which means defender of the accused. Everyone plagued by accusing thoughts, come to this water and dive in!

This is a vision of a God we can be **unguarded** with. We can let this God get close—comfort, calm, and guide us.

Did I mention Carl's first book is titled, *Song for the Blue Ocean?*
To me the Blue Ocean is a symbol of the wide world God loves—connected by Ocean that none of us can claim to own. This understanding of the gospel is our Song for the Blue Ocean.

Reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15: 3-9)

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with scriptures and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.