

Power in the Blood

Some of you, I am quite sure, are wondering, “Why did he choose that passage?” or perhaps “Why did he pull out those old songs? I thought we got rid of all those old “Blood” hymns?” There really are several reasons I chose this passage and these songs and it’s not just to aggravate Mary Lu, although that is a nice bonus. I’ve actually been looking for an excuse to preach on the topic of the imagery of blood in our faith based on several conversations with some of you over the last year and a half as well as some ongoing conversation with Connie on the subject and some other reasons that I’ll get to shortly. Since I was in Green Lake last Sunday and will be in St. Louis next Sunday, I figured I had all three weeks worth of lectionary verses to choose from this Sunday and when I noticed this passage in Hebrews as the Epistle reading for next Sunday, I just couldn’t resist.

Blood is indeed a powerful image in our scriptures, our liturgies, our hymnody and our popular culture. I’m fascinated by the ways that different groups of Christians use or reject the use of the image of blood in worship. I can’t remember now how long it was after we were married (or maybe while it was while we were still dating) but one Sunday after church, my sweet little Roman Catholic wife said to me, “What is it with you Baptists and songs about blood?” The lyrics of some of my favorite old hymns made Connie slightly sick. This came up again and again over the years, especially once I started working for A.D. Players and then Taproot Theatre, two theatres that have done what we call in the biz, “boffo box office” with the musical “Smoke on the Mountain” and its infamous “Blood Medley”: “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus”, “Are You Washed in the Blood?”, “There is Power in the Blood”, and “There is a Fountain”, which we sang just a little while ago. Some of the lyrics, taken literally rather than metaphorically, would indeed cause one’s gorge to rise. Of course, as I have often pointed out to Connie, it doesn’t do to demur at such lyrics when one grew up going to a church that featured a statue of Jesus smiling beatifically while holding his own bleeding and presumably beating heart in his hands.

So Catholics don’t mind looking at it but don’t want to sing about it, while Baptists will cheerfully sing the most gory lyrics but don’t want any dripping bodies on their crosses, thank you very much. Well, at least some Baptists sing those songs cheerfully. We’ll call them “old school evangelicals” as opposed to “modern enlightened” Baptists with a more delicate sensibility. All of us, though, seem both fascinated and repulsed by blood. Maybe that’s so because we’re farther removed from the farm, where blood and slaughter are just a normal part of life. You can certainly see the fascination with blood in the sensationalization of the shedding of blood in modern media. Electronic news outlets seem to delight in stories of violence that end up in bloodshed, using them prominently in newscasts or websites. There’s a common saying in TV news (and those of you who know folks in that industry can back me up on this): “If it bleeds, it leads.” Hollywood does good business every year with “splatter flicks”; horror movies that show an inordinate amount of gore. On the other hand, you can see our repulsion from blood in the guidelines for the Motion Picture Association of America rating system, which one article characterizes as, “Violence which includes bloodshed will usually receive an R rating, while bloodless violence will be rated PG-13.”

But whether we grew up Catholic or Protestant, “old school evangelical” or “modern enlightened liberal”, we really can’t escape the fact that our scriptures are chock full of references to blood. Indeed, blood is central to understanding both the faith of the Old Testament and that of the

New. To take seriously the scriptures that Jesus knew is to grapple with blood sacrifice and blood taboos, while to engage with the scriptures that tell and explain the story of Jesus means to try to understand Jesus' words to his disciples about drinking his blood and their interpretation of his own bloody sacrifice.

Let's look first at how blood was used in the religion of Jesus and his disciples. Central to the faith of Israel is the concept of covenant, the binding promise between Yahweh and the people. The online Jewish Encyclopedia defines covenant as "An agreement between two contracting parties, originally sealed with blood." The most primitive covenants, the scholars say, were concluded with the covenanters cutting each other's arms and sucking the blood, thereby becoming "brothers of the covenant." All of us are probably familiar with this concept from popular movies with pirates, Indians and other primitives using a similar blood-mingling technique to become "blood brothers." Indeed, some scholars now believe that the Hebrew word for covenant is derived from an ancient root meaning "cut." The covenant between Yahweh and Abraham was marked by the shedding of blood with Abraham's circumcision. Other Old Testament covenants between God and God's people are instituted with a later version of the cutting ceremony, which substituted a sacrificial animal that was cut in two after being killed. The two parties to the covenant in this ceremony, when used between humans, walked together between the two halves of the animal and then shared in the meal of meat, brought together by the blood of the sacrifice. In a similar way, the Jewish Encyclopedia points out, "after the giving of the Law Moses sprinkled "the blood of the covenant sacrifice" half upon the people and half upon the altar of the Lord, to signify the mystical union of Israel and its God."

Blood sacrifices were used at other times in the religion of Israel as well. The blood of an animal was an important part of various sacrifices for purifying from sin or ritual uncleanness. This concept had its apotheosis in the ceremonies surrounding Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On this day, still memorialized by our Jewish brothers and sisters, though without the sacrifice, the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice upon the Mercy Seat, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, kept in the innermost part of the Tabernacle or Temple, the Holy of Holies, which was entered only on this day. It was an offering to God to redeem the whole people from their sins for a year, after which the ritual must be repeated. (The word ritual, by the way, is from a Sanskrit root meaning "blood.")

Blood also figures in both ancient and modern Judaism in the form of taboos. Touching blood made one ritually unclean; the prescription for coming back into full status with the community and God is alluded to by the author of Hebrews in our passage when he mentions the ashes of a heifer. Blood was not to be eaten. This prohibition goes back as far as God's covenant with Noah and was reconfirmed in the Sinai Covenant and continued to be a point of contention between God and Israel as late as the writing of the prophet Ezekiel. This is still one of the statutes observed by Orthodox Jews who "keep Kosher" – their meat must be specially butchered to eliminate all blood from that which is to be eaten. It is also one of the few aspects of the Law required of Gentile believers in the early Church. In Acts 15, we read that James and Peter and the Council of Jerusalem called on the new Gentile Christians in eating to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled."

The ultimate blood taboo was in the shedding of human blood. Again, this was made clear to Noah in God's word to him after the Flood, along with the prohibition from eating the blood of animals, and was reconfirmed at Sinai. The passage from Ezekiel that I mentioned earlier, in which God, through the prophet, upbraids the people for consuming blood, is also a judgment on them for shedding blood. "Thus says the Lord GOD: You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to your idols, and shed blood; shall you then possess the land?"

There is an overriding sense throughout the Old Testament that all blood is sacred to Yahweh; that its use is reserved to God alone. In his commentary on Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, that great Baptist Old Testament scholar, the late Roy Honeycutt wrote, "blood uniquely belonged to God." The Episcopalian scholar Chris Haslam writes, "the blood is the peculiarly divine element in the human person." Why? Because, as Deuteronomy 12:23 rather famously says, "the blood is the life." This may be difficult for us to understand with our modern sensibilities and understanding of life sciences. But consider the experience of our early ancestors who had the common experience of seeing the life-force seep out of an otherwise healthy human or animal with their blood. For them, blood did indeed equal life. It was mysterious, it was special, it was therefore sacred. Again, as Roy Honeycutt pointed out, "it was not merely blood but life that was of fundamental concern... Blood belonged to God because life belonged to (God). Hence, both were sacred." It is the sacredness of blood and its function as the carrier of the life-force that make it the appropriate transmitting medium for both covenant and expiation, for promise and for forgiveness.

It is in this milieu of regarding blood and life as sacred that we must understand the words and actions of Christ and his earliest interpreters. Jesus told his disciples that his blood is the blood of the New Covenant, shed for the remission of sins. The Gospel according to John records that Jesus taught his disciples that they must drink his blood. This apparent exhortation to cannibalism or vampirism becomes clear when we understand the equation of blood with the very force of life. To drink Christ's blood is to take the very essence of the life of Jesus into us and make it our own. Nearly all of the authors of the New Testament refer to the saving power of Jesus' shed blood. We are washed clean in it; it is given for us, and so on. But what if, instead of being horrified at the implied violence in this imagery, we see it instead as metaphor for the life and spirit of Christ Jesus? The author of Hebrews points to the special nature of Christ's sacrifice, that the blood of this perfect human, given by choice rather than taken from him, replaces for all time the blood of hapless animal victims. Can we not see in this sacred story the rejection of institutionalized violence and bloodshed in favor of an open sharing of life and spirit?

I've said many times in this place that I don't believe that human beings can truly fully understand God. As the ground of our very being, as being itself and yet mysteriously personal, God is simply too much "other" for us to comprehend. And so we fall back on metaphor as we grope for understanding sufficient to guide our steps and enlighten our days. I think it is a terrible mistake to simply discard the metaphors that served generations of believers in this same struggle, to say, "well, that just doesn't speak to us anymore, doesn't work for us now." I'm not content to let the old images, songs or ideas simply fade away. I think, if you'll pardon the pun, that we've got to take up the moribund metaphor and briskly pat its face and hands until the blood comes back into them and it wakes up. I think it's important that we rediscover this image

of the blood of Jesus, to understand why we might want to plunge into a fountain of blood drawn from Immanuel's veins, to be washed in the blood of the Lamb.

What does it mean for us to be washed by the blood of Jesus? Can we see that, I wonder, as letting the life of Jesus so flow over us and inform us that we catch hold of his vision of God as loving parent? Can we swim in the teachings of Jesus, make them the medium in which we move and breathe and have our being to the point that we are fully comfortable with the presence of God in our lives as the most positive and uplifting of forces? Can we let the essence of Jesus wash away our guilt and our brokenness, our addictions and our failings, so that we encounter God and God's creation with a glad heart rather than cowering under the expectation of punishment or retribution or malevolence? The old hymn says it. "Would you be free from the burden of sin? There's power in the blood."

That same old hymn goes on, "Would you o'er evil a victory win? There's wonderful power in the blood." It begs the question, as we wrestle with this old metaphor, how are we empowered by Christ's blood? Once we are set free from the failings that drag us down in life, it is remarkable how much power for good we can begin to discover in ourselves. If we're not continually apologizing or defending ourselves to the judge in our own heads, then we are free to actively love our neighbor and our loving God. We are free, in the words of the hymn, to do service for Jesus our King. I spoke two weeks ago about the way in which we often use possessions to try to fill the empty places in our hearts, to cling to for security. But if we are filled and made secure by the life-force, the blood of Jesus, then we can make decisions about how to help others without regard to earthly possessions. We could, if we were so called, sell everything we have and give the money to the poor, so that we will have treasures in heaven, and follow Jesus.

The author of Hebrews says "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, (will) purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God." The life-force of Jesus frees us even from falling back into the "ought tos" and "shoulds" of life. Writing on this passage, Bryan Findlayson remarks, "It's hard to believe that we could ever forget Christ's high priestly work and move back toward Israel's limited cultic system. Yet it's easy to do just that. (We may) see church attendance, Bible reading, even godly-living, as a mechanism for either gaining, maintaining or progressing (our) standing in the sight of the living God. The truth is, that although our piety may be worthy in itself, it cannot "cleanse our consciences", obtain our "eternal redemption", nor empower us to "serve the living God." While we must remember the lesson of James that we studied not too long ago, that "faith without works is dead," we must also remember the words of Paul to the Ephesians that we heard just weeks before: "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

Finally, as we prepare to sing another of these awful old blood hymns and deal with this elemental and disturbing image, I hope we will remember what Roy Honeycutt and so many other scholars have pointed to as the root of the sacredness of blood. The blood is the life and life is sacred to God. All life is sacred to God. The flowers we pick, the fruit that we eat, the animals that share our homes and the animals that grace our tables, all of these belong to God. We are merely stewards, those who keep God's world in trust. All life is sacred to God. Our

partners, our parents, our children, our friends, those who proclaim enmity against us and those against whom we take up arms. All of these are God's beloved children, our brothers and sisters, whom we are called to love as we love ourselves. "Alas, and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sov'reign die? Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I?" Yes, is the answer, but not for me alone and not for us alone. Jesus came and gave his life as sacrifice and rose again not just for the good Baptist brothers and sisters at Good Shepherd Church, nor just for the right-thinking Christians in America, nor just for the Coalition of the Willing, but for all humanity and all Creation. For us to claim the power of the blood of Jesus means to work for peace with all of humankind and the restoration of all the beauty of creation. If we do anything less, we fail to truly reckon with the power of the blood and the life of Jesus and the love of God, which passes all understanding. May Jesus keep us always near the Cross, plunged beneath the flood of his lifeforce, his blood shed for us in the New Covenant. Amen.