

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

The Reverend Tasha L. Blackburn

November 12, 2006

Our Life's Blood

Hebrews 9:22

I don't know about you but that was a lot of blood. The writer of Hebrews is walking us through the system of covenants, how they are made, and there's a lot of blood. It's hard to hear and even harder to understand, this demand for blood. "Everyone knows that everything is purified with blood," the Hebrews writer says, "and unless blood is shed there can be no forgiveness!" He is drawing upon thousands of years of history, history that is beyond our everyday. We don't want to think of shedding blood or view it as having any kind of magical power. Even our songs leave out the blood. Those old hymn favorites, the ones that sing of blood, they're almost all gone. You can check it out for yourself. No fountain filled with blood here. No "there is power in the blood" anywhere in sight. This need for blood, well, it can leave us squeamish.

It reminds me of when I was attending seminary and living in Austin, Texas. The seminary has basically become surrounded by the University of Texas, the largest university in the country so we were always interacting with undergraduates—on the street, in bookstores and, in this case, in the restaurant Thai Kitchen. My friend and I were waiting for our order one afternoon when we began to overhear the conversation at the next table. It was two university students, all torn jeans and backpacks. They were talking about the Genesis story when, at God's request, Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac. Of course, as students of the Bible, we both perked up our ears. What would these two 19 year olds have to say about one of the most powerful parts of scripture? "It's horrifying," the one said. "What an abuser this God character is." Said the other, "I don't want anything to do with a god who demands that." Certainly not what one usually hears at the table next to them in a restaurant but this was a college town after all!

Their conversation was quite honest though. Honestly, I don't want a god like that either. Do you? Do we believe in a god who was so angry, who so required appeasement that sacrifice after sacrifice needed to be made? When they didn't work, these doves and goats at the altar, did God demand even more blood, the blood of Jesus? This whole system, this method of shedding our sin, it has a fancy term. It is called "substitutionary atonement." It is the belief that to get God's forgiveness something or someone had to take the punishment we deserved. The Hebrews writer refers to it saying that we know an animal will not take care of it. A normal sacrifice is not enough. The breach is too wide for that. Instead it must be Jesus. He must be sacrificed in our place, as our substitute, if we are ever going to get close to God.

Getting close to God, that's what this is about, isn't it? That's what Hebrews, with all its blood and sacrifice, is about. It's what our lives are about; getting close to God. But how do we get close? One thing we can agree on is that we can feel the breach, the yawning gap. That truth is all too clear, perhaps the only thing that is clear! We feel the breach but how do we cross over it? How do we atone? Will two doves on the altar take care of it or does it take three? Perhaps guilt works better. How much guilt will be enough? If I'm filled with guilt will that make the gap between myself and God any smaller? Or what about rash promises, words I don't mean that I blurt out when I'm down and out, will those begin the bridge that gets me to God?

Or does a man have to die, is that how this works?

Since the beginning of humanity we have been reaching, struggling to stretch across this breach we feel between us and our Creator. We have tried everything, straining and striving, to shed the weight of our sin so we can get close to God. Altar sacrifices did not work, guilt did not work, our own self abuse did not work. We stretched even more, the gap only growing. But while we were reaching, on the cross God leapt back and caught us. I do not say that easily, so please do not hear it easily. While we were reaching, on the cross God leapt back and caught us! For whatever we may believe, sacrifice and substitute or not, God is not an angry deity who must be appeased. This is not Abraham and Isaac, the Father killing the Son, because the Father *is* the Son and the Son is the Father. It is God who is being sacrificed.

This changes everything! What we see on the cross, the blood and the sacrifice that can make us so uncomfortable, it is not simply a substitute, another in our place. It is a revelation. If you want to know the character of God, look to the cross because it is not simply a man hanging there, it is God. God is not the abuser who must be appeased. God is the willing victim, crucified to put an end to all sacrifices, for when the creator of all has been sacrificed it makes any other attempts pale in comparison!

This is not a God who demands sacrifice to span the breach. Our God closes the gap, consumes the chasm, revealing the depth of love he has for creation. This means our sacrifices are not needed, nor is our guilt. Your life is not meant to be lived with fear and condemnation—do not mock God's sacrifice by living this way! For God has given everything, everything, so that you could live. Do not live your life as a sacrifice. Live it as a response, a response to the great love God has shown you.

Your burden has been lifted for “this is my blood,” Jesus tells us. “This is my blood,” our Creator God tells us. “My blood and *not* yours, shed so you can know my forgiveness, so you can know the life I have meant for you.” This is no simple substitute. It is a revelation of who it is we worship and adore and we may or may not like it—we may no longer sing about it—we may not even want to accept it—but there is a lot of blood. There is a lot of blood but God did not demand it, God gave it. Whether in the hymnal or not, that surely is something to sing about. Amen.