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Trail of Blood

Matthew 27:26

Those of us who have had the privilege of walking along Omaha Beach in Normandy know that the beach has been swept clean of the debris of war. The broken down equipment is gone. The fallen soldiers have been buried in the national cemeteries nearby. The beach is an empty quiet place. Six years ago a collector from England made a rare find of an artifact from D-Day on that beach. It was a dog tag, blackened with age, bearing the name and identification information of an American soldier who died in the landing. The tag was buried near the spot where 20-year-old Private William B. Clark probably died. The tag was eventually returned to surviving relatives of the fallen soldier in Huntingdon, Tennessee (Associated Press).

My uncle was a 32-year-old engineer when he came ashore on Omaha beach on D-Day. He has written about the confusion on the beach that morning and how many young soldiers, or “boys” as he called them, died without firing a shot. My uncle was already a veteran of the North African and Sicily campaigns. He was experienced at locating and removing mines and convinced a number of those “boys” to follow in his tracks as he cleared a path up the ridge to escape the deadly fire directed at the beach. There was one image which represented the sacrifice of blood for my uncle that day. It was the sight of one of the “boys” who had been shot “in a kneeling position with his head bowed low over his rifle (Bruce Huey Memoir).” The information on William Clark’s dog tag also suggests the meaning of that defining moment of World War II. It said “Blood Type O.” What was achieved that day was paid for in blood.

It is a similar trail of blood which Matthew sees in Jesus’ journey into Jerusalem. Blood was at the heart of the festivals which were being celebrated in Jerusalem as Jesus arrived. One of those festivals was the Day of Atonement. On this day the priests in the temple would bring forward two identical male goats. One goat they would send away. The other goat would be slaughtered and the blood sprinkled all over. This blood was meant to atone for the sins of the people. The people were to receive the sprinkling of that blood as a sign of God’s forgiveness of their sins.

Matthew picks up on this theme in the angel’s message to Joseph about the baby who is to be born of Mary. The angel tells Joseph to “name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).” The name Jesus means salvation in Hebrew. The gospel writer goes on to develop the theme of the Day of Atonement in another way. As Jesus arrives in Jerusalem there is another Jesus who is causing a stir. This is a notorious criminal called Jesus Barabbas. When Jewish authorities decide that someone needs to die so that the city can be saved from a general conflagration, two scapegoats are available. Pilate performs the task of the priest in sending one Jesus away while the other is ritually slaughtered. And so it is that he asks the crowd which Jesus is to be released and which is to be crucified. The crowd that calls for the blood of Jesus of Nazareth has no clue about what is really happening. They do not know that the blood of the one they slaughter will be sprinkled on them as a sign of God’s forgiveness. Pilate doesn’t get it either but he knows that this blood means something. That is why he is so careful to wash the blood from his hands.

A trail of blood can be seen in the early history of this congregation. The members of this church who worked in the Underground Railroad knew they were risking their lives to help slaves escape to freedom. They were friends of Elijah Lovejoy who was killed by a pro-slavery mob as he tried to defend his printing press down the road in Alton. They knew that the same thing could happen in Springfield. Some of our members agreed with a young congressman named Abraham Lincoln that the Mexican-American War would open the way for the spread of slavery into Texas and the Southwest.

The pastor of this church in 1848 was the Reverend Albert Hale for whom a large plaque was created in the East Narthex. Hale preached a sermon in this church in which he expressed his opposition to this war. When word of that sermon reached the delegates of the State Constitutional Convention meeting in Springfield many delegates were angry. When a resolution to the convention was introduced denouncing Hale, it passed. Some hotheaded delegates of that convention later spotted Hale on the street and physically assaulted him. In the beating these delegates administered they undoubtedly drew blood.

With the blood of their minister spilled in the street, the congregation was galvanized. Some members did not agree with Hale's position on the Mexican-American War. But they did appreciate the vision for racial justice which motivated his response to the war. When the outrage of this church was conveyed to the convention, the resolution condemning Hale was rescinded. Hale was then invited to give the invocation at the next meeting of the convention. In that moment of crisis, this congregation understood that the spilling of their pastor's blood was an expression of his love for them and his ministry on their behalf. They had been sprinkled with that blood. They knew that this love had a claim on them.

Matthew's gospel also follows the trail of blood to the upper room where Jesus dined with his disciples for the last time. There they celebrate the Passover together. This was the other festival of blood. In that ritual they remember how the lambs' blood was spread over the doorposts. That blood prompted the angel of death to pass over these houses. The plague of death would visit the households of Egyptians but not those of the Israelites. This blood on the doorpost did much more than let the Israelites go free. It was a sign that they belonged to God. Their identity was sealed in blood.

When Jesus shares the cup of Passover with his friends he tells them that it is the new covenant sealed in his blood which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins(Matthew 26:28). It is this covenant of love which has the ultimate claim on our lives. A familiar hymn by Isaac Watts says it like this:

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all
(When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,
verses 3, 4).