

So. Blood sacrifice. When I read the passage for this morning, I said to myself, “Oh boy. There’s a lot of talk in here about blood and sacrifice, and I’m going to have to talk about ancient Hebrew blood rituals and the day of Atonement, and that is really not my favorite topic.” Thankfully, the passage from last week was also from Hebrews, and dealt with some of the same issues, and Pastor Kevin was kind enough to preach to you about all that last week. So, if any of you were hoping to get two sermons in a row teaching about ancient Hebrew blood atonement rituals, I am sorry to disappoint you. And if you missed it, you can find that sermon linked on the St. Luke’s Facebook page. Thank you, Henry, for putting those up there every week, by the way.

I did, however, want to preach on atonement today, because misunderstandings about how Jesus’ sacrifice reconciles us to God have caused a lot of damage to people. And one of those people is me. For a long time, how I thought about the cross—how my church preached it—kept me away from Jesus, rather than drawing me to him. But now, my faith is deeply and absolutely rooted in the cross and the resurrection—what Jesus did through that, not only for me, personally (though that is such a huge, huge part of why I am a Christian), but what it means for every human being—and not just human beings, but all of creation. Because it is so important, the way we think and understand and talk about it—and how we *embody* it—is important. So I want to talk about

how the author of Hebrews writes about it, how some people have interpreted it, and how that has evolved into a particular way of talking about the atonement that has taken precedence for some of us, especially those of us from more conservative backgrounds. Then, let's look at what this means for how we live into the promise of what Jesus has done for us in a way that is truly good news.

In trying to figure out how to broach this massive, heavy topic, one section of this passage stood out and stuck in my mind. In verse fifteen, the text in my translation reads, "And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us." It then goes on to say what the Holy Spirit has testified: "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." The author then uses "he" to refer to the Holy Spirit, saying, "he also adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.'" What I see as important here is that the author refers to the Holy Spirit as a person, not an impersonal force. But some people see the Holy Spirit taking on a more feminine role in the Trinity, and refer to the Spirit as "she."

So what is the author saying here? How is it that the Holy Spirit is testifying to them? Those following verses are a paraphrase of Jeremiah 31:33-34, written for a much earlier generation under different circumstances, about the new covenant that the Lord will make with

Israel, a time when all will know the Lord, and the Lord will forgive their iniquity and no longer remember their sins. For that earlier generation, the new covenant did not refer to Jesus; Jesus was centuries away. So how does the author of Hebrews write with such confidence that those verses should be applied to Jesus' sacrifice?

One possibility is that Hebrews' writer refers to the Holy Spirit's testimony as a way of identifying the Spirit as the author of those texts, the one working through the human writers. In addition, we might understand that the Spirit is speaking through those texts to this new generation with a sense of immediacy. Here is how I see it. The earliest generations of Christians were working out the significance of what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus meant for them and how they were to live. That should sound familiar; we're all still doing that today. Then, just as now, the Holy Spirit was crucial for understanding and living into the significance of Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit who opens us to the message of Christ, to our need for him and the new life we gain through him. The text here reminds us that the scriptures are inspired; they are God's living Word, not just dead words on a page. The Holy Spirit speaks through them.

So, in light of God's new revelation through Jesus, the Jews who believed in him revisited their scriptures to see how the Spirit was speaking to the reality of their relationship with God now. The words

had not changed, but our world has. Because of Jesus, our reality has shifted. Through his life, death, and resurrection, the very nature of our relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation has changed. Forever. And the author of Hebrews, along with other New Testament authors, are trying to understand and be faithful to this shift in light of sacred scripture. Now, keep in mind, in this period, the only scripture they would have had was the Hebrew Bible, or what we call the Old Testament. They did not have our nice canonized collection including the books of the New Testament yet; the author was writing part of it, right then! But he, or she, or they (some scholars suggest this book may have been co-authored by a woman) understood that Jesus was part of the ongoing story of the salvation of God's people. There was no longer any need for an additional sacrifice, which in those days, as Pastor Kevin explained last week, had to be made every year. Jesus had won atonement, being made at-one with God, once and for all time.

Because of the nature of Jesus' death, involving as it did blood and sacrifice, it was natural for the author of Hebrews to draw a connection between it and the sacrifices that were made at the temple, which their readers would have known about. They drew a picture of how this one-time act of reconciliation between God and humankind was effected through Jesus, in language that their community could relate to and understand. It is one of many images in the New Testament that speak to

how Jesus forgives us, heals us, and brings us to new life through him. First Timothy speaks of him being given as a ransom for all. The author of Matthew also looks to scripture to find the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice, saying, he took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.

Unfortunately, those passages that speak of the atonement in terms involving suffering, blood, and sacrifice have been lifted from the context in which they made sense to their communities, and can appear gruesome and hard to understand as a result. And some additions have been made through the centuries, as other Christian thinkers worked with these ideas in their own times and places. I want to name what the text does NOT say: it does NOT say that the Father demanded this sacrifice from his son as a punishment. No council or creed has ever mandated this as a single correct way of understanding the atonement, and we have seen that scripture shows us many. And the text does NOT say that we are expected to make the sacrifice that Jesus did. It says we cannot; he did it for all time, because he is the only one who could.

Some people, unfortunately, have gotten a message from the atonement that has not been good news. Some women have been told that they should stay in marriages that are abusive, because they are expected to suffer as Jesus suffered. Some feminist scholars have looked at how one view of the atonement, the one I was raised with, might make it appear that God demands the death of his son, and fear that

some could take this theology and use it to justify child abuse. However, that is not the message we see here. Jesus does not demand our suffering, but he is the one who suffers with us in our time of greatest need. Through our faith in the resurrection, we find the hope for new life, not only in the next life, but the resurrection we live right now, through him. He gives us the strength to overcome unjust suffering, but never demands this of us. And when we remember that Jesus, the Son, is God, both fully God and fully human, we recognize that it is impossible to imagine some distant God watching a son suffer from afar. Because of his nature, Jesus is the God who took on flesh to endure what we could not. God is not absent from our suffering. Through the cross, God has come to know our suffering. And it breaks God's heart.

I wonder if part of our discomfort with thinking about the role of blood and death in our salvation stems from the way we can insulate ourselves from their realities as part of our day-to-day lives. I know I am guilty of this. I go to the grocery store to buy hamburger, and it is very easy to think of it as simply meat, a packaged food product, not the life given by an animal to sustain my own. I try to remember to say grace before my meals, but it is a hard habit for me to get into; I spent a very long time not engaged in this sort of spiritual practice. But saying grace can be a time to remember the life given so that I may live. Some members of my family hunt; I do not. Hunters have a real understanding

of what it means to accept the sacrifice of an animal for sustenance. I wonder how one's history of either hunting or being engaged in farm work with livestock affects one's understanding of atonement, but that may be a different sermon for a different day.

Even aside from meat, I know that some of the products I mindlessly consume come to me only by the labor of those in other parts of the world, who are very likely treated unjustly. I do not think they should suffer. But even now as I think on it, the cross brings me to an awareness of their suffering—of all suffering. Not in acceptance, but in confession. Because I am part of many intertwined systems that contribute to this suffering, I know I cannot remove it only through my own individual actions and choices. But I can be more conscious of it, and in that consciousness, join with others to discern, in the Spirit, how we might address these larger sufferings together.

Andrew Sung Park has another way of understanding the cross. While many of us think of the role of the Father and the Son, we often forget that the Holy Spirit also plays a role in our reconciliation with God, since God as Trinity cannot be separated. As Park sees it, the Holy Spirit, who had been with Jesus throughout his life—he was, after all, conceived through the Holy Spirit—was also crucified and resurrected with him. We call this “wounded and resurrected” Holy Spirit the Paraclete. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, the Holy Spirit still

testifies to us. This is the God who comforts and defends those who have been sinned against—who have been separated from loving communion with God because of the sins others have inflicted on them. The Paraclete also convicts sinners, through the symbol of Christ's blood calling them to repentance. And because of the networks of brokenness in our world, we are each of us in different ways sinner and sinned against. In both cases, God heals us of our wounds and frees us from the pain of alienation, both from God and one another. No longer separated from God, we are healed, moved from lives of aimlessness to becoming regenerated creatures in Christ. It is through this reconciliation that we can, as the author of Hebrews puts it, “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,” together as a community.

Finally, the author of Hebrews exhorts us to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” To me, this is the most crucial aspect of a relationship with God. I follow Jesus because he is the confession of my hope. Our hope. In the Spirit, I trust that he is the one who saves, redeems, and offers me new life, abundant life, every day. We are to encourage one another as we see the Day approaching—that is, the day of Christ's return. It is then that our reconciliation will be complete, that all will be restored, that the promise, held now through faith, will be fulfilled. In the meantime, he calls us to love and good deeds. As reconciled people, may we trust in

his faithfulness, and find strength together in his Spirit to love as he first loved us. Amen.