

**MOTIFS OF CRUCIFIXION:
BLOOD SACRIFICE**

Isaiah 53:4-5, 7

Romans 3:22-26

Hebrews 2:14-18

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday of Epiphany, January 23, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part in a series entitled “Motifs of Crucifixion,” drawn heavily from a book written by Reverend Fleming Rutledge.¹

SCRIPTURES

Isaiah 53:4-5, 7

*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed...
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

Romans 3:22-26

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, through the faith of Jesus Christ² for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

² The underlined phrasing represents an alternate translation found within the translation notes in *The New Revised Standard Version*.

Hebrews 2:14-18

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Many years ago in a church I was serving at the time, a loyal, active member approached me in the hallway after a communion service and said: “I am not going to attend worship anymore when we are serving communion. I just cannot stand the mention of blood.”

This week during our worship planning meeting, one of us said: “I like the idea of us doing these sermons on the crucifixion; but the sign outside the church is kind of jolting to me, and I’m wondering if we shouldn’t go with something softer.” We thought about adding the individual motif each week, but when I said, “Well this week’s would be ‘Blood Sacrifice,’ we quickly agreed that we would leave things as they are.

Perhaps this sermon is an attempt – 25 years after the fact – to respond to the woman’s question: “Why blood?”

We are not as uncomfortable with the idea of *sacrifice* as we are with the image of *blood* around it.

- Every year at Westminster, we commemorate Remembrance Sunday, in which we remember those who have *sacrificed* their lives for our nation.
- We have a couple of families in which parents are caring for acutely or chronically ill children. All parenting involves *sacrifice*; for these parents, the sacrifice is almost beyond human comprehension; yet they rise to, and rise to it well.
- And any number of us *sacrifice* in ways known only to ourselves and God (and perhaps a handful of others).

But what does “blood sacrifice” mean as *one* motif for the crucifixion of Christ?

I.

The primary reality to which the motif gives witness is the *forgiveness*, indeed *overcoming*, of our own *personal sins* as part of God’s *more encompassing victory* over the *power* of Sin and Death.

- After the Fall, the Power of Sin had so imprisoned the human order – the universe, the realm of nature, all of humanity – that the people of Israel could not come near to God because of guilt.
- God provided a *means* for the fallen Israelites to live in God’s presence.

- That means was something outside what the Israelites themselves could offer – it was the life of a lamb unblemished and blameless.
- The blood of this innocent animal – offered by the priest – was the means God provided the people of Israel to obtain remission of their sins and move closer into the presence of the God.³

While the blood of any creature often makes us squeamish, Christ's shedding of blood of Christ underlines the seriousness of the power of Sin he combatted.

- Remember when Jacqueline Kennedy refused to allow the blood of her husband to be cleaned from her stockings, or to change her pink suit. "I want them to see what they have done," she said.⁴
- One of our elders opened a Session devotional quoting Presbyterian minister and writer Frederick Buechner: "Writing is really quite simple; all you have to do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein."⁵

Any cause for which we sacrifice blood is serious.

- Throughout the New Testament, there are three times as many references to "the blood of Christ" as to "the death of Christ."⁶
- "Without the shedding of blood," wrote the author of Hebrews, "there is no forgiveness of sins."⁷
- Fleming Rutledge writes: "The motif of ...blood sacrifice is central to the story of our salvation through Jesus Christ...without this theme the Christian proclamation loses much of its power, becoming both theologically and *ethically* undernourished."⁸

There is indeed power in the blood.

³ Rutledge 235-236.

⁴ Rutledge 236.

⁵ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/7/23/open-a-vein>.

⁶ Rutledge 236.

⁷ Hebrews 9:22.

⁸ Rutledge 233. Italics are in Rutledge's text.

II.

All our passages today speak to this power. The prophet Isaiah writes of the Suffering Servant:

*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.*

After the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians began to equate these poignant words with Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

*...he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises [by his blood] we are healed...*

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As the early church was finding resonance with Isaiah's words, the Apostle Paul was traveling across the Greco-Roman world. He proclaimed *that* the death and resurrection of Christ – including his shedding of blood – brings forgiveness of sins and victory over the power of Sin. Preparing to visit the church at Rome, he writes them:

*For there is no distinction
Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;
they are now justified by his grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
whom God put forward
as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood,
effective through the faith of Jesus.*

Paul was announcing – ahead of time – forgiveness/justification/rectification for the people he was about to visit – rectification for all who have come to believe – rectification made effective through the blood of Christ. “By his stripes, we are healed.”⁹

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Our third reading, from the complex New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, echoes how the *forgiveness of individual sins* is part of God's *comprehensive and universal action* of overcoming the *power of Sin* writ large, again, through the blood of Christ.

⁹ Isaiah 53:5 NKJV.

*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood,
[Christ] himself likewise shared the same things,
so that through death
he might destroy the one who has the power of death...
Therefore he had to become
like his brothers and sisters in every respect,
so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest
in the service of God,
to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.*

Thus, as *one* motif of crucifixion – one of many, nearly all interrelated – the *sacrifice of blood* enacts atonement, forgiveness, justification, rectification – and overcomes the power of Sin through the crucifixion of Christ. It “opens a vein.”

III.

But the sacrifice of blood also bears witness to *hope*.

Eras earlier than ours were less constrained by the literalism of technocratic language, the precision of social science, the striving for neutrality and objectivity coming out of the Enlightenment. Until the past hundred and fifty years or so, metaphor and motif were more commonly understood to bear witness to realities larger than themselves.¹⁰

Thus, our grandparents and great-grandparents were more willing to use metaphor and imagery in bearing witness to their faith, all the while filled with “blessed assurance” that the “rock” on which they stood was “Christ the Solid Rock.”

One hymn they loved was penned in the 1700s by British abolitionist William Cowper, to express gratitude for the blessings of forgiveness he had received:

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.*

*The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, though vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.*

¹⁰ In making this point, Rutledge (page 236) cites David L. Wheeler, “The Cross and the Blood: Living or Dead Images?” *Dialogue* 35, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 7-13.

*Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its power
Till all the ransomed church of God
Be saved, to sin no more.*

*E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.*

*Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
I'll sing Thy power to save,
When this poor lisping, stammering tongue
Lies silent in the grave.*

*Lord, I believe Thou hast prepared,
Unworthy though I be,
For me a blood-bought free reward,
A golden harp for me!*

*'Tis strung and tuned for endless years,
And formed by power divine,
To sound in God the Father's ears
No other name but Thine.¹¹*

Each stanza Cowper wrote ends with blessing:

Sinners...Lose all their guilty stains...

Washed all my sins away...

Redeeming love has been my theme...

I'll sing Thy power to save...

*A golden harp for me...to sound
...no other name but Thine.*

¹¹ William Cowper, "There Is A Fountain Filled With Blood," 1772.

When the woman told me she could no longer take communion, I wish I had had the presence of mind – and the theological awareness – to say:

*The language of blood
Points to God's power
To overcome
Every human tendency we have developed
To shed it in our hostility to one another.
Please come back to the Table.*

Amen.