

Blood, Water, Scarlet Wool and Hyssop

Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 9:15-22

One feature of our lives that we hold in common with the early Christians of the first century A.D. is that both we and they came on stage only a generation or two after the changing of an era. For instance, my mother's parents grew up a hundred years ago in a place called Witless Bay, Newfoundland, both of them born into a world of manual labor and simple technology, horse and wagon on the road, kerosene lamps in the house, fruits canned and jarred every Fall, vegetables stored cool and dry in a root cellar, neither of them having heard a voice or seen a sight that wasn't generated in their own village.

They were just about into adulthood before their lives were invaded by a dizzying array of changes, trucks and cars and paved roadways, metal ships and even submarines, electricity and refrigeration, telephones and radio, motion pictures and television, airplanes, the wonders of modern communication and travel combined with the horrors of mechanized and motorized and airborne warfare all foisted upon an unprepared world between the time my grandparents became adults and the time their children became adults. It really happened that fast.

And it hasn't stopped! Time won't permit me to talk about rotary dial phones, and eight-track tapes and typewriters with correcto-tape except to say that one of the virtues of growing old is the ability to discern both the value and the limitations of change. Change is wonderful and liberating when it isn't dangerous and virulent. And not uncommonly, it's a little bit of both! Which matters in church because we worship a God we learn from a Bible which in its day was an agent of revolutionary change.

From the moment Moses was inspired to write that a single, rational, Almighty Person created the heavens and the earth, the Bible has challenged uncountable generations of people to change the whole orientation of their thoughts. God said to Isaiah the prophet, *"My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts!...Seek the LORD while he may be found, call on him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD that he may have compassion on him, and to our God for he will abundantly pardon."*

And the reason the Bible has been revolutionary in every generation people have read it is that it is simply counterintuitive for people like us to imagine that the course of our destiny and the fate of our soul is not ours to determine. Whatever God says to us, we are always prone to try to reduce it to a system and then to somehow manage the system so that God gets manipulated into our corner and we wind up right and in control and headed in a direction that suits us.

The problem being we're wrong, we were born wrong and we will stay wrong the longer the course of our destiny and the state of our soul remains in our hands. So in our passage this morning the author to the Hebrews addresses the fact that a number of the early Christians have

been seduced by the romance and drama of kosher Jewish piety to retake control of their own destinies and through fasting and praying and cultivating a melodramatic sort of worship to get themselves to a place where God has to recognize them for the spiritual heroes they imagine themselves to be.

The problem being that all this kosher activity and religious enthusiasm left Christ far from center stage and promoted a way of life that was far from the selfless and faithful and stable life of faith and service the gospel actually teaches.

So our passage strikes a number of themes designed to show that the whole kosher universe taught by Moses, diet and ritual and sacrifice and worship was given as an overture, a prelude to what Christ actually finished only one generation before this letter was written. Our passage says about Christ, “...*he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who were called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems people from the transgressions committed under the old covenant.*”

And our guy goes on to write that the whole point of an inheritance is that you don't come into it till the person who you put in his will has passed away. Jesus played with this theme in the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The younger brother was so outrageous because he wanted his share of the estate before his father had died. He wasn't willing to let Dad be dad, wanted control over his own fortune until life taught him that he was no good at it. The wonder of the story is that the son wouldn't live with his dad till he'd become a bust and then his dad loved him anyway.

The people in Hebrews seemed to have the opposite problem. Their benefactor, Christ, had already died and left them everything, “*the promised eternal inheritance*”. The picture the New Testament draws for us is that we all have God for a Father, but in the ancient world the eldest son, the firstborn gets the lion's share of the blessing. Christ is the Beloved Son, God says of him in the gospels. At the baptism, at the Transfiguration, Jesus is the Son the Father loves. The rest of us are younger sons.

But what Christ wrote in his will is that we, the younger brothers and sisters, should enjoy all the affection and blessing and favor that Christ earned from his Father by his obedience and service. So it follows that our job is not to take center stage, not to wow and dazzle, but to faithfully serve in our Father's house and to depend on the Father's affection and blessing and favor till Christ returns and all the blessings of heaven become ours. And this was actually consistent, our passage tells us, with how Moses began the regimen that for more than a thousand years pointed toward Christ.

What Hebrews describes here actually took place in Exodus 24 when Moses descended from Sinai a second time with all the commands God gave for Israel to keep. So Moses read the scroll with all the commandments, how to live, how to eat, how to wash, what to sacrifice, how to

worship and God's people, likely shivering in their boots, solemnly promised to do it all. In front of them were altars where a number of animals had been slaughtered right in front of their eyes.

And Moses taught took a branch of hyssop, which was a Middle Eastern plant something like cotton weed, he took the spongy part, dipped it in a bowl of blood and swirled the stem so that the altars, the tablets, the scroll, and the people were all speckled with drops of blood. Hebrews describes it this way, it says, "*... he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people.*"

So our author finds in this story about Moses, four features in the kosher universe that, correctly understood, foreshadow what Christ would do to make us right with God today: blood, water, scarlet wool and hyssop. The first is blood. Even as Moses read the commandments to the people, even as the people solemnly and recklessly promised to keep them all, God ordained that everyone and everything there should be covered with blood.

The point being that none of them were up to what they were promising to do! No sanctuary they built, no manuscript they wrote, no ritual they offered, no effort they made was ever going to make them right with God unless Someone, somehow died in their place, stood between them and God's justice and suffered the penalty, they had coming. It makes sense if you think about it. An honest look at our own lives will show us fractured relationships we can't fix, loose ends we can't tidy, sins and mistakes that continue to ripple out despite our best efforts to make them right.

So the ritual of Moses speckling everything and everyone that day with blood was both God's warning and God's promise that they would never manage as God's people unless they constantly depended on God's grace. After we've made a stab at the commandments, after we've made an offering at the altar, after we've washed and prayed and fasted and prayed again we will still need forgiveness and mercy. And the sprinkling of the blood by Moses spoke of mercy for all those things we couldn't fix.

Next our passage says that Moses provided the people with water. Which he didn't in Exodus 24. On that day at Mt. Sinai, there was no direct mention of water. God does provide Israel's elders a drink with their meal when they had climbed into the cloud at the top of the mountain to celebrate the covenant. But I think that meal foreshadowed Communion, so wine was more likely served than water. The point here in Hebrews is that the blood and water and scarlet wool and hyssop that Moses taught as part of Israel's worship only foreshadowed what Christ would provide for us once Moses and the Law became history.

In the Bible, the power and freshness and purity of water speak of the life changing power of God's Spirit from Genesis 1 all the way out to Revelation 22. Jesus multiplied water at the Wedding in Cana, he promised the Woman at the Well that he had water so potent and powerful that she would never be thirsty again. Jesus cried out to the Jerusalem crowds, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink! Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his*

heart shall flow springs of living water.” Just as God provided water for his people all through their wilderness journeys with Moses, so now Christ will provide the Holy Spirit refresh and renew and strengthen us in whatever wilderness we’ll have to cross on our way to heaven.

Likewise, Moses had no scarlet wool at the foot of Mt. Sinal that day, but in the very next chapter, Exodus 25, God would command Moses to begin construction on Israel’s sacred tent and scarlet wool would be one of the primary colors in the sanctuary. That detail would find expression only a generation later, when Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho, begged Joshua’s spies to spare her family and they left her a strand of scarlet wool to tie in her window. I think the scarlet strand marked her home as a sanctuary, her family as belonging to God and so she and her loved ones were spared in the battle that followed. So the scarlet strand looked forward to Jesus, to a day when God would call unlikely people from unlikely places to find sanctuary in Christ.

Finally, the word hyssop was also not mentioned when the Old Covenant was sworn in Exodus 24. But it is mentioned in Hebrews because hyssop would have been the standard way to sprinkle the people with blood. Hyssop was the implement, the applicator through which the blood of forgiveness was applied to God’s people. Israel used hyssop to apply blood on their doorways the night of the first Passover. And again the promise was that, whatever judgment was coming to Egypt that night, Someone would die so that God’s chosen could be forgiven.

Our Call to Worship this morning was a prayer first sung by David on an occasion where he had sinned so badly that no ritual Moses prescribed would ever set things right. Under Moses’ law, David deserved to die and everybody knew it. But David was inspired to appeal to a form of grace that transcended what the Law of Moses could offer him. He knew he was out of rituals. He knew that no ritual, no amount of prayer or fasting or washing would ever heal what he had broken or straighten what he had tangled. But he believed God could redeem the mess his life had become.

So David appealed to a sort of wildcard, grace-covers-all kind of mercy that transcended anything he could begin to deserve or accomplish. *“Purge me with hyssop.”* he prayed, *“and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Let the bones you have broken rejoice...Create in me a new heart...renew a right spirit within me.”* The point being that hyssop in God’s hands is kind of a wildcard, a form of mercy that allows a Canaanite prostitute sanctuary as one of God’s people, a sort of grace that admits a thief on a cross a same day pass into Paradise, fractures unhealed, loose ends untidied.

And the point here is that this is the sort of grace that all of us need if we ever want to do business with a holy God. We don’t worship and pray and fast and tithe to impress him or gain his favor. We worship and pray and fast and tithe, we stay at home and serve in his household because we know what would become of us if we ever took the course of our destiny and the state of our souls into our own hands. This is a God we can know and love and follow, a God we

ought to fear because we can never impress or manage him no matter how impressive we imagine ourselves to be.

