

Mid-week Lent Vespers
March 3, 2021
Exodus 24: 3-11
Hebrews 9: 15-22
Psalm 40: 1-13 (v. 17 Antiphon)
Mark 14: 22-26

In the name of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

Eureka! Jackpot! Paydirt! My heart raced as I made my purchase, hoping the sellers wouldn't realize their mistake. I found the \$100 trillion bill in the coin shop for just a few dollars. \$100 trillion! That is even more than the national debt. The material desires of my heart were within reach. I was determined to test the statement, "Money can't buy happiness." I made my way to the local stereo shop, prepared for the purchase of a lifetime. I picked out the best processor, preamp, speakers, and interconnects. I went to the counter to pay the bill which would only be a tiny fraction of my newfound wealth. The total being a paltry \$65,000, I confidently pulled out my singular bill. The guy at the counter was puzzled at first, then he told me, "You can't redeem that here. It's from Zimbabwe. This is America. If you want to buy this stuff, you have got to bring in the right currency." Dejected and empty handed, I walked away.

When I was a kid, there was a wrestler, the Million Dollar Man. His theme song mentioned that everything has a price. It seems to be a part of the human condition to believe that everything can be purchased. Our justice system even adopts this ethical philosophy. When someone has served a prison sentence, we say he has paid his debt to society. Fines, penalties, taxes, fees, all are financial means of restoring oneself into proper standing with the community. The bad conscience is a wholehearted believer in this notion that everything can be restored through punishment, sometimes even self-inflicted punishment.

Many systems have been devised throughout human history; systems designed to address the issue of redemption. The idea that humanity is flawed and in need of restoration is not unique to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Virtually every society has a set of mores and taboos, lines that people shouldn't cross, but they do. And when they do, the society must take action to resolve the violation and make things right. In ancient Israel, there was an elaborate system for dealing with sins and taboos. Not everything that required a type of purgation was the result of moral failure. There were many non-sinful conditions which rendered a person impure. Animal sacrifices, drink offerings, grain offerings, oil offerings, and ceremonial cleansings were essential to the system of redemption. A necessary component of the system of offerings was that blood would be used to purify the various articles used in the liturgical life of Israel. The altar, the Tabernacle, and the utensils for carrying out the offerings were purified with blood or oil. The people would recognize an exchange. The creature's life was in its blood, and its life was exchanged for the life of the people of Israel. The life of the creature took on the impurity of death, leaving life behind. Leviticus says that the blood was given to Israel to make atonement on the altar, meaning to splash against the altar.

The most dramatic example of this was the Day of Atonement, when in addition to purifying the altar, the High Priest would enter the Most Holy Place with blood from a bull for his own sins, and he would sprinkle the atonement cover on the Ark of the Covenant and sprinkle blood before the Ark of the Covenant and the curtains of the Tabernacle. Then, he would repeat the process with the blood of a goat, this animal being offered on behalf of the entire nation. The

Mishnah records this confession, said as the goat was about to be sacrificed: “O God, I have committed iniquity and transgressed and sinned before You, I and my house and the children of Aaron, Your holy people. O God, forgive, I pray, the iniquities, transgressions, and sins which I have committed and transgressed and sinned before You, I and my house and the children of Aaron, your holy people...”¹ The blood from the animal was collected in a basin and used for the rite. It is the application of blood that purifies, not necessarily the mere shedding of blood.

The sacrificial system of Israel included daily sin offerings, offered at the third and the ninth hours after sunrise, roughly at 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Day after day, blood would be splashed on the altar to take away the sins of the people. Life was poured out on the altar to purify it from the sins which were contaminating it. And this is an idea that has been somewhat lost on modern man, the concept of contamination. Pollution and contamination are things that happen to the environment, the water, the air, or some matter. Defilement is a foreign word in a world in which nothing is sacred. But there is such a thing as soul pollution. There is such a thing as soul contamination. There is such a thing as soul defilement. These are all things that we feel more than we perceive, as the guilt of sins, past and present, creeps into our thoughts and reminds us of our need for redemption.

There is something disturbing about this kind of guilt. It is not the kind of guilt that you can make right just by feeling bad about it. You feel it deep within your soul, and no system of penalties and punishments can properly purge the pollution. In open rebellion to God’s desire for us, we engage in activities which degrade us and others through what we read, watch, and discuss. There is no financial pathway to redemption for such a condition of the soul, not even if you had a \$100 trillion bill. The required payment appears to be as infinite as the base desires which made the payment necessary in the first place. When this kind of godly sorrow over sin emerges, there is a recognition that one needs redemption to come from outside of one’s self.

The word for redemption implies three possible conditions, and none of them are good. The first is a redemption from slavery, as in being released from the bondage of debt-caused servitude. The second is to be redeemed from the penalty of death. And the third is to be ransomed as one held captive in a war. In each of these cases, the person in need of redemption is incapable of setting himself free. They don’t have the resources. When it comes time for God to do the liberating, the redeeming, He has a different currency than man; His redeemable currency is sacred blood.

When Israel was in need of redemption from Egypt, it was the blood of a lamb which was applied to the doors of the people, and they ate the Passover lamb as part of the process of redemption. The rite of Passover developed in Jewish tradition to include four cups of wine, consumed at different points in the rite, which were connected to four promises of God. In Exodus, God promises to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt, to free them from bondage, to redeem them with an outstretched arm, and to take them to Himself. Shrouded in the shadow of this ceremony is the redemptive work of Christ which He set out to do in the Passover of His Passion. The shadow contains a beauty that allows for a greater appreciation of the reality.

By the time of Jesus, the Passover lamb had taken on a definite role as a type of blood offering, with the blood of the lamb being spilled around the altar. On Holy Thursday, Jesus participated in the Passover meal with His disciples. At the third cup, also called the Cup of Blessing, He instituted the new Passover. “This is my body. This is my blood of the covenant...”

¹ *Yoma* 4:2.

But Jesus makes an odd statement which might be understood rightly when seen within the context of the Passover: “I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God.”² After the third cup of wine, corresponding to the promise of redemption, Jesus and the disciples sing the Halal Psalms of thanksgiving and make their way to the Mount of Olives, just to the east of the Temple Mount. There was an omission here that would have been apparent to any practicing Jew. The meal itself was not complete. By not partaking of the fourth cup of wine, Jesus leaves the Passover in suspense in order to become the sacrificial Lamb of God. Just before He breathes His last, He says, “I am thirsty.” Some wine vinegar was there for the purposes of the execution. And when He had received the drink, He said, “It is finished.” The new Passover was now complete, and Jesus could lead His new exodus. This was the cup that Jesus prayed would be allowed to pass from Him, yet He was wholly submissive to the Father’s will. Jesus’ sacrificial death was not only about Him shedding His blood, it was about Him becoming the lamb whose blood redeems humanity by His outstretched arm before He took us to Himself as His people.

There are two main themes to keep in mind as we consider how the blood of Christ redeems us. First, let us consider the theme of redemption before taking up the application of the blood. I mentioned that there were three ways to think about redemption; as slaves set free, as a commuted convict, and as a prisoner of war bought back. In all of these cases, we have no currency of our own that would suffice. Not that we don’t have enough of a given currency, we don’t have the right currency. Anything we could put forward for our own ransom is like Zimbabwean dollars, not just worthless, but invalid. His precious blood is the acceptable currency in this case, which redeems us from slavery to sin, redeems us from death, and redeems us from being held captive in the kingdom of Satan. The liberation is complete, we have been redeemed, and like the children of Israel before us, we sing, “The Lord is my strength and my song, He has become my salvation.”³

As for the application of blood, this is something that is easily overlooked. The last verse of our reading from Hebrews is pretty well known among Christians. It is always assumed to mean what it says in translation, that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. The context of this statement matters because there was an allowance for bloodless sin offerings.⁴ So, this verse does not mean that it is the shedding of blood that brings about forgiveness and redemption, although the shedding of blood is necessary. It is what is done with the blood that matters; the application of the blood sanctifies, purifies, and redeems. The blood is applied to the doorframe in the first Passover. The blood of the covenant is applied to the people when Moses sprinkles it on them. The blood of Jesus is in the heavenly Most Holy Place, where it pleads on our behalf as Jesus applies it to the atonement cover. The blood of the lamb washes our robes as it is applied in baptism. And the blood of redemption is the wine we drink at the Lord’s Supper where Christ gives us His body as real food and His blood as real drink. His life is in His blood, and when it is poured into us, His life overcomes all that is death and impure in us. His life becomes our own. So, let us with joyful hearts, celebrate the redemption won for us in Christ as it is applied to us in the new Passover.

² Mark 14:23-26

³ Exodus 15:2

⁴ Leviticus 5:11