

“Lifeblood”

Exodus 12:1-14 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Dr. Anne M. Cameron

Maundy Thursday, 2009

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas

Last year when I was in Nazareth I purchased an icon of the Last Supper. I don't really know how old it is; I just know it is a beautiful image of Christ sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, painted in Byzantine style. I brought it here tonight to share it with you. Take a moment to contemplate it when you leave this evening.

You cannot miss the gold frame. You may see the peacocks carved in the wood. I learned the peacock is an ancient spiritual symbol (from many different cultures and religions) which the early Christians adopted as a sign of immortality and eternal life.

What I noticed this week, though, is how the color red dominates the image. Christ is wearing a red tunic, the draperies behind him are red, others, including two of the four evangelists at the top of the icon, are also wearing red. Red---a deep wine red, or even a blood-red, also dominates the table---two carafes of red wine and three filled goblets.

Blood red. Even the phrase causes us to shudder. Though we live in an exceedingly violent world, most of us have little direct contact with blood. In many ways, our lives have become bloodless. Though my own mother used to regale our family of tales of beheading chickens for dinner, none of us slaughter our own animals anymore. We buy meat in sterile, plastic wrapped packages and we quickly rinse away any blood. We have all manner of band-aids and bandages to cover even the most minor cuts. If we do sustain an injury, medical professionals whisk away the blood in short order. Because most of us here live in relative safety, we almost never see much blood, and when we do, it is almost certainly a traumatic event.

Yet blood predominates in tonight's assigned scripture readings, and blood dominates the passion and death of Christ. The Passover event was certainly a bloody one: door frames dripping with blood, the angel of death draining the lifeblood out of every single firstborn in Egypt.

Remembering the Passover during the Christian Holy Week is a relatively recent phenomenon. There has been an effort in recent years to connect the Last Supper with the Passover, one of the most ancient and important

celebrations of the Jewish faith. The gospels tell us that Christ's suffering and death occurred during the time of the Jewish Passover. Tonight happens to be the first night of the Jewish Passover this year, which will encompass the next seven days.

In Hebrew, the Passover is referred to as Pesach, which literally means "passing over". It is also thought to refer to the pascha, or Lamb. The Passover is centered in the home, with an elaborate meal, the Seder. The main point of the Seder is to remember what happened and to teach this memory to the young.

Though these Passover images smell of death, blood is the stuff of life. The ancients knew it long before humans knew the science of it. That is why they revered it. That is why they required blood be spilled for sacrificial offerings. Blood was valuable, precious. Blood had the power to give life, and blood also had the power to take life away. Blood was central to life, and blood was inevitable in death.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that "blood. . .like a bubbling spring. . .contains the very essence of life and because it does, it is a direct link to the divine source of all life."

At the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus spoke of the new covenant and Jesus foreshadowed the sacrifice of his own death on the cross. Jesus invited the disciples to drink of the cup of thisp

new covenant. Jesus offers us his very lifeblood and he asks us to drink fully of it. Not in a literal way, but an intimate, covenant making way. Blood marked the required animal sacrifices of the Old Testament, blood marked many covenants and promises, and blood continues to mark the promises of Christ in the new covenant, the covenant we share every time we eat the bread and drink the cup.

Tonight we remember the story of Jesus meal with his disciples during the Passover feast. We visualize ourselves there. We gather around that table in the upper room. We see the blood-red drapes and garments. We taste the blood-red wine. We smell the fear in the one who sold his soul for blood money. In the growing darkness we struggle to understand Jesus' willingness to give his blood. We sense he gave his life for us and for others who continue to suffer. We agonize over the suffering of our world that can be redeemed only through costly sacrifice.

Tonight we do more than just remember the Passover and the Last Supper. Tonight we contemplate the mystery of Christ's redeeming blood. Tonight we recognize the new covenant now centered in Jesus.

As we break bread for the brokenness of oppressed people everywhere and see blood being shed in violent conflict all over the world, we realize that Jesus' sacrifice calls us to sacrifice, too.

May his words be lived out in our lives as his body is broken and his blood is shed. In taking part in this sacred meal we know we must also live lives that honor his sacrifice. And as we remember the Passover, we are thankful we have been spared. We have been spared, not just for ourselves, not just for our loved ones, but also for all people whose lifeblood cries out from the ground of our warfare, for all people whose lifeblood is weakened with the iniquity of our own excesses, for all our brothers and sisters whose lifeblood cannot flourish until all are one in Him whose life flows through our very veins, a bubbling spring.

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Directory: C:\Documents and Settings\Richard\Local Settings\Temporary
Internet Files\Content.IE5\5Q9B5WO3
Template: C:\Documents and Settings\Richard\Application
Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dot
Title:
Subject:
Author: Holden
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 4/1/2009 3:50 PM
Change Number: 14
Last Saved On: 4/16/2009 10:54 AM
Last Saved By: New User
Total Editing Time: 153 Minutes
Last Printed On: 4/16/2009 8:48 PM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 3
Number of Words: 854 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 4,868 (approx.)