



HOLY COMMUNION SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 10, 2010

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Lection - Hebrews 9:11-21 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.11) But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), (v.12) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. (v.13) For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, (v.14) how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (v.15) For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. (v.16) Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. (v.17) For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. (v.18) Hence not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. (v.19) For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and

all the people, (v.20) saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you.” (v.21) And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In the black church, we hear the preacher quote Psalm 107:2a, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!” We hear the saints say, “I am redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.” We sing songs that imply redemption by the blood of Jesus -- “What can wash away my sins, nothing but the blood of Jesus...oh precious is that flow, that makes me white as snow; no other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus”¹. We may also sing words such as, “Would you be free from the burden of sin...There is pow'r, pow'r, wonder working pow'r in the blood of the Lamb; There is pow'r, pow'r, wonder working pow'r in the precious blood of the Lamb.”² These are songs about redemption that comes through the blood of Christ, the Lamb of God.

Redemption, what does that word mean? Most often in the New Testament it means to purchase something that has been lost and to do so by the payment of a ransom. It could also mean an act of making amends or an act of paying off a debt. For Christians, it is the price that Jesus paid to return us to good standing with God. It was his life for our lives. We had a sin debt that we could never pay and He paid it in full. So, on every occasion during which we participate in a communion service, we are seriously mindful of the grace and love that has been shown to us through the broken body and shed blood of Christ. During communion, our churches cry out “redeemed!” through the preaching, reading, and singing of the Word, and the drinking and eating of the sacraments. This is our embrace of Holy Communion.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Hebrews 9:11-21

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

A church that I served in a large city bordered four suburbs so it bore the name of an “urban city,” but the neighborhood was suburban. A nonprofit organization wanted to buy a vacant building and use it for a pre-release prison center for men. These men only had a few months to a couple of years before being released. I went to a few community meetings to address the opening of this center. The director explained that the inmates were not hardened criminals and would be continuously supervised. They would have jobs and others responsibilities in the center. He said the purpose of this program was to merge these men back into society and make them responsible, law abiding citizens.

Of course, all the ministers thought this was a great idea. We saw this as an opportunity to help these men and provide ministerial aid to the program. But, the people in the community did not want “those” kind of people living in “their” ward. The people in the community did not want to give “those” inmates a chance. They did not want prisoners in their community, even though these men were at the end of paying their debt to society. The society/community wanted to perpetually keep the men’s past ever before them by

not accepting them back into the community. They wanted them to remain bound to their past. They were not willing to risk having these men in their community.

Everyone knows that jobs are hard to come by for former inmates. Many of them cannot vote and their records will follow them for the rest of their lives, even after they have paid their debt to society. Approximately 700,000 men and women are released annually from prison. I can't help but think that the same mindset displayed by those in the community in which I formerly served plays a part in the fact that two-thirds of released prisoners end up back in prison. Even when inmates pay their debt to society, they are not allowed to be free. When released, they are physically free but socially and economically imprisoned. As leaders in the church, we have an obligation to advocate for those like these prisoners and to help them to become fully liberated from their past. This is exactly what Christ did for us when he allowed his body to be broken and his blood to be spilled. He freed us from a sentence that would forever hang over our heads no matter how much we tried to make amends.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Jesus tells His disciples that He did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer gives examples of Jesus being the fulfillment of the law by contrasting passages in the Old and New Testaments. This passage is an example of the Old and New Testament in dialogue. In it, the writer makes clear that Christ came as the greatest High Priest embodying the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands.

Unlike the sacrifices spoken of in the Old Testament—which required that the people bring the blood of goats and calves for yearly sacrifice—Christ did a new thing by submitting His own blood for the sacrifice. His blood allowed Him to enter into the Most Holy Place once and for all, obtaining eternal redemption for humanity. His blood allowed us to enter the very presence of God because we have been redeemed and reconciled to God.

Blood was always a part of God's covenant with His people. In the Old Testament, animals were sacrificed as Israel sought to keep its covenant with God. The blood of bulls and goats sacrificed were powerful enough to purify and cleanse. The author of Hebrews acknowledges that the animal sacrifices did their job at the time. However, he makes plain that Christ's sacrifice was superior to that of the animals. The animal sacrificed cleansed and purified and this needed to be done year after year. But Christ's sacrifice was without sin and no additional sacrifice is ever needed. What Christ did was enough for all of eternity. Christ's payment is sufficient and eternal and it ushers in a new covenant.

By dying, Christ opened the way for a new relationship between God and humanity. We are no longer bound, but are free to live as creatures transformed by Christ. He does not hold our past against us but frees us to live for him in the present, regardless of who we are or what we have done.

Because he died, we have the inheritance of redemption and so much more. And each time we stand in remembrance of his actions on our behalf, we are grateful. We are humbled. We are encouraged by such a great love and the greatest sacrifice. During each communion service, we drink of his blood and eat of his body in solidarity with him through the compassion we show the stranger and the least of these, through acts of justice for those without an advocate and through love for all because this is how the world will know that we are his disciples.

Celebration

Christ has come to do new things in and through us. We have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus. Unlike the world and society, God does not hold our sin record against us. As far as the east is from the west our sins have been cast away. We are redeemed. In the words of a song, “Jesus dropped the charges. Jesus dropped the charges. Case dismissed. Case dismissed; saved by grace.”³

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Blood; a covenant; a tabernacle; ashes of heifers; scarlet wool and hyssop; a scroll; and

Sounds: The noise of goats and cows; water (the sound of cleansing and sprinkling); and the groans made by Christ on the cross as his body was broken and his blood was shed.

Notes

1. Lowry, Robert. “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus.” Gospel Music. Doane, William and Robert Lowry. New York, NY: Biglow & Main, 1876.
2. Jones, Lewis E. “There is Power in the Blood.” (1899)
3. “Jesus Dropped the Charges.” Lyrics online location: <http://www.allgospellyrics.com/?sec=listing&lyricid=4582> accessed 9 September 2009