

Blood Carries

In the name of him who bore in his body the sins of the world, dear friends in Christ: Last week on Ash Wednesday we began this series of Lenten devotions in which we are examining what we could call the “theology of blood”. We’re looking at the various ways Scripture uses blood and its attributed powers and abilities to communicate truth to us. The intent is that like detectives we follow this bloody trail of biblical images to where they all lead: to the cross and to our bleeding, dying Savior who in love gave himself for us.

We began with the Scripture’s first mention of blood. It occurs after Cain murders his brother Abel. There we read that Abel’s blood cries out to the Lord from the ground. This is blood that accuses, bearing witness to Cain’s terrible crime and demanding that the Lord bring justice. The question the account raises is whose blood cries out to the Lord against you? We saw that it wasn’t an easy question to dodge. It’s not like you can say, “Well, I never killed anybody” (assuming, of course that you haven’t). No, it goes much farther than that. Murder encompasses more than actually taking a life, it includes also those you’ve hated, treated harshly, not forgiven, insulted; or on the other side, those you could have helped in some bodily need and didn’t: the oppressed you didn’t defend, the hungry you didn’t feed, the lonely person you didn’t visit, the stranger you didn’t welcome, and so many more. It was very fitting that on Ash Wednesday, the beginning of this penitential season, we heard from the blood that accuses that we all have urgent need to repent and to receive God’s forgiveness.

This evening we move on to a different attribute of blood. And it’s fair to say that this one seems a bit more natural since it’s rather strange to think of blood actually talking and accusing. The idea in this evening’s texts is that blood *carries*. That’s a better fit. It’s what blood is: a delivery vehicle. Hemoglobin in red blood cells captures oxygen from the lungs and carries it to all the other cells throughout the body enabling them to perform necessary life functions, specifically respiration – the process by which carbon bonds in simple sugars are broken so that they release their stored chemical energy. To say it more simply, your cells need oxygen to burn the fuel that makes them go. Your blood carries that oxygen to them. Without it, the fire would go out, so to speak. The cells would cease their operation and die. So the blood carries a steady supply of oxygen to every cell in your body to keep the whole show going.

Ah, but delivering oxygen to cells is only part of the job. Blood performs double duty by carrying away from the cells carbon dioxide which is a byproduct of respiration and is toxic to the cells in your body. This carbon dioxide the blood carries back to the lungs where it is exhaled. In this sense blood is like the delivery man who brings the package you’re hoping for *and* the sanitation worker who takes the garbage away. Both functions are absolutely necessary.

And that’s only one aspect of blood’s delivery and removal service. Blood also carries nutrients to the cells – the fuel that they burn which comes from the food you eat. So also, it carries away other chemical byproducts of respiration that will be filtered out by the kidneys and expelled through what you might think of as your system’s sewage treatment and purification plant. Blood carries a lot both to and from the cells that make up your body.

And this is not to speak of the blood’s key role in fighting disease and infection. Blood carries also a host of different kinds of white blood cells that identify foreign invaders, pull them

apart for analysis, produce antibodies that fight against them, and even some white cells called phagocytes that attack and consume invaders. All this and more is being carried around by your blood constantly.

And that's why it's fairly easy to understand that theologically, according to the Scriptures, blood carries life itself. That's where the Word of God locates the very life of every creature: in its blood. And life belongs to God who gave it. Only he can give it, and so only he is authorized to take it. This is why already in Noah's day, long before the Lord gave the law to Moses at Sinai, he prescribed capital punishment for the crime of murder: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." God considers an assault on man who is his image, an assault himself. It's also a usurpation of his sole authority to take life. It's presuming to take on the role of God; and quite frankly, that's a job he's not willing to share. Do it, and your life is forfeit. You should be put to death.

This is also the reason God forbade the consumption of blood to his people Israel. He told them you can eat the all the meat you want; but the blood – that is, the life – that belongs to me. You can't have it. Therefore animals slaughtered for food had to be meticulously drained of blood which was to be poured out upon the ground.

The concept that the life is in the blood also reveals the lessons being taught by the Old Testament sacrificial system. In the pagan religions, sacrifices were offered to the gods because they needed to eat. You were serving them; basically providing them groceries – for which you expected to be paid in the form of divine favors or at least getting them to stop cursing you with whatever problems you were experiencing. The Lord's people offered sacrifices for an entirely different purpose. God doesn't need groceries. Even if he did, he could get them himself without your help. Rather the idea was this: you deserve to die for your sins. For violating God's law you owe your life. But the Lord in his mercy would accept a substitute: a life to stand in for your life – usually a goat or a lamb. Seeing that animal die was meant to be a constant reminder to you of what you deserve – and also of God's grace to you in not giving you what you deserve and yet seeing that his law that demands death for sin is fulfilled.

Such sacrificial animals were killed by having their throats cut. The blood – the *life* – was collected in a bowl, which was then carried to the blazing altar and poured out upon it. The life demanded by God was given to him.

But this is another case in which blood does double duty. Scripture also locates sin – that which is toxic to life – in the blood. This is why the color red is associated with sin as in "though thy sins be as scarlet". You see, before your sacrificial animal was killed, you would confess your sins to a priest – to a priest whose hand was on the head of your animal. The priest was acting as a conduit: your sins going in his ear, out his hand, into the animal, and specifically into its blood. Then the animal was killed, after you were done confessing. The blood then taken to the altar carried not only the life but also your sin to the Lord. That too was laid upon him. The Lord received your sin upon himself. And he, ultimately, would have to pay for it by offering his own life.

This is what's going on in the ministry of Jesus. I've mentioned before that at his baptism, Jesus doesn't go into the water to have his sins washed away like everyone else. He hasn't got any sins of his own. No, he goes into the water to take on himself the sins of everyone else. Likewise, when he tells the paralytic man who was lowered through the roof in front of him "Your sins are forgiven", where do those sins go? Why, they go on Jesus, of

course. His whole ministry is about collecting the sins of the world and taking them upon himself. And when he's lifted up on the cross and says, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing" implied in that statement is "Take it out on me. Punish me for what they deserve."

Blood carries. It carries life and it carries sin. It's powerful stuff. And this also helps us to better understand what's going on in the Lord's Supper. Put yourself in the sandals of one of the disciples on that Thursday evening. You're a good Jew. You've never had blood before. The life is in the blood, and it doesn't belong to you. It belongs to God. You would never think of consuming it. And now Jesus hands you the cup and says "Drink this. It is my blood of the new covenant". You understand he's giving you his life, his sinless life that will be in you. He takes your sin and its consequences and gives you his perfect, eternal life. Think about that whenever and as often as you come to the Lord's table. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!