

Text: Hebrews 10:1-18
Songs of the Passion Series

 3rd Lent Midweek
Hymn: *All the Blood of Beasts*

Bleeding Love

In the name of him who shed his precious blood for us, dear friends in Christ: as we have been pursuing this series of meditations inspired by some of the classic hymns of the Lenten season, I'm reminded how it is that some of them seem to soar above the rest. I'm thinking of such masterpieces as *O Sacred Head Now Wounded* or *Stricken Smitten and Afflicted*. Such hymns possess the perfect blend of poetic imagery and melodic mood. They appeal to our hearts and minds in a very powerful way and they move us to greater depths of feeling and reflection. They have rightly earned their place as the seasonal favorites of many Christians.

The hymn for this evening's meditation is not one of them. No, I can't imagine that it's anyone's favorite. I mean, as a hymn *Not All the Blood of Beasts* doesn't have much going for it. It's got one of those generic hymn tunes that's about as bland as tofu. It sounds like something a beginning violin student would learn right after *Hot Cross Buns* and *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. Even worse is the subject matter. Its opening line presents us with the ugly mental portrait of countless animal sacrifices. We're to visualize a spectacle of carnage: whole herds of slaughtered oxen, sheep, and goats, and literally bucketsful of blood being poured out upon a blazing altar day after day ... year after year ... and all, as it turns out, to no avail. Yuck. Who wants to sing about that? The only good thing about this hymn is that it's short.

Or so it may seem at first glance. Obviously I wouldn't have chosen it unless I thought there was something worthwhile for us to consider here; and I hope by the time we're done, I've convinced you that it is in its own way a real gem – one that is usually too quickly passed over by our eyes that naturally tend to seek out brighter and shinier stones.

But first a little historical information: this hymn was written by an Englishman named Isaac Watts who, as you can see from his dates in the hymnal, lived his adult life in that period about two hundred years after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Watts was a prolific hymn writer, publishing nearly 500 different hymns in the course of his career. A dozen or so of his better works appear in our hymnal, including such well-known hymns as *Joy to the World*, *Alas and Did My Savior Bleed*, and *Our God Our Help in Ages Past*. What's most remarkable about Watts' career is that he more than anyone introduced congregational hymn singing to the English speaking world. We take it for granted, but what most people don't know is that prior to the Reformation people never sang hymns when they came to worship. The only singing (such as it was) was done by choirs of monks or nuns who usually simply chanted the Psalms or parts of the liturgy in Latin. Since most people didn't know Latin, it was only so much noise to them – pretty noise, to be sure; but pretty meaningless too.

Very early in the Reformation, Luther saw that hymn singing would be a great way to teach the essentials of the faith to the people sitting in the pews. Being something of a musician, he wrote several such hymns. Following that pattern, many more accomplished German hymn writers produced an amazingly large tradition of Lutheran hymnody: hymns that teach doctrine or that tell the story of a biblical text. The idea was to support and reinforce the faith of the congregation by having them sing what they believed. This was important because a lot of people back then couldn't read; and even if they could, there was no way most people could get their hands on a Bible. Hymns helped the people retain what they had been taught.

But there were other Protestant reformers who did not follow Luther; guys like Zwingli and Calvin and several others. For the most part, they rejected the idea of creating any new hymns. They rejected it for the same reason they rejected things like religious art and stained glass windows. They felt that anything not actually written in the Bible was wrong. Specifically with respect to hymns they said, "What's wrong with the hymns we already have – the ones God gave us; namely the Psalms? Are you saying they aren't good enough?" They felt that anyone who wrote a new hymn was insulting God's inspired Word.

That was the tradition in England when Isaac Watts was growing up. The only hymns that were allowed were the texts of biblical Psalms set to music. And unfortunately for several generations of English people, there hadn't come along anyone who was particularly gifted in the art of setting Psalms to music. So what English hymns were available were absolutely awful. I mean, if you think there are some clunkers in our hymnal today, I assure you that even the worst of them far surpasses in quality and relative "sing-ability" what our poor English ancestors had to endure. As a matter of fact, that's what led Watts to begin writing hymns. He had a natural talent for lyrics and rhyme, and one day he was complaining about how clumsy and un-singable the songs in church were. His father told him, "If you think you can do better, do it. Otherwise stop complaining." (A man after my own heart.) Isaac took his father's challenge; and the rest, as they say, is history. Still, it took a long time – about forty years to be precise – to overcome the general opposition the English had to the creation of new hymns. There are even a handful of churches around today that still haven't got over it.

Okay, the history lesson now complete, we turn our attention to the actual words of the hymn for this evening. The biblical text that inspired Watts to write them is Hebrews 10:4, which reads: "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

You can see that the first verse of the hymn is simply a poetic restatement of that Bible passage. As I said earlier, it forcefully confronts us with the unpleasant image of Old Testament worship. That's hard for us to relate to. When we think of going to worship the Lord, we think of nice, clean, climate-controlled churches, sitting in padded pews, singing hymns, listening to (or sleeping through) sermons, and so on. It's all very orderly and neat. It is, for lack of a better word, "sanitized". Old Testament worship was anything but that. No, if you were a Jewish person, going to the temple to worship meant standing in the hot sun in a long line with a crowd of sweaty, irritable people, and being surrounded by pens full of funky animals standing in their manure and making all their animal noises while the voices of the merchants tried to shout above them. It was loosely organized chaos. While this is going on, you're there trying to keep your own terrified animal under control until you reached the head of the line. Once you got there your worship was reduced to just two things: your confession of sin and *blood*. That's what you were there for: to hold your animal still while you confessed your sins to a priest who, when you were finished, reached down with his knife, slit your animal's throat, and collected its blood in a bowl. You held the trembling lamb or goat while its life ebbed away until finally it collapsed in death. Then you put the dead animal on your shoulders and went your way while the priest poured its blood on the blazing flames of the altar. That was it. You returned to your home dirty and tired, hands sticky with blood, and clothes permeated with the blended smell of livestock and the smoke of burning blood. Got the picture? You know, after attending worship like that I don't think anyone walked away saying, "My, wasn't today's service especially uplifting? I could really feel the Spirit moving among us." No, it just didn't happen that way.

But what was it all about? As hard as it is for us to relate to that kind of worship, I think that in the modern church there is even more misunderstanding about *why* they worshipped that

way. Most people simply think, “The Old Testament was all about following the law. And since God commanded the people to bring sacrifices to him, they did. They had no choice. They had to obey the law. Now in the New Testament period, we are under grace and don’t have to follow those unpleasant sacrificial laws anymore.” And most people are grateful for that, because it’s a lot nicer worshipping in a place like this than one that looks and smells like a slaughter house. That last bit I’ll agree too; but the idea that Old Testament sacrificial worship was all about the law is completely wrong – and I daresay if we don’t understand what worship was about then, we really can’t understand what it’s supposed to be about now.

You see, there were lots of ancient religions (and still many today) in which people worshipped their gods by bringing animal sacrifices to them. They brought their gods sacrifices as gifts in order to show them how devoted they were, or how much they were willing to give up, or to try to buy favors from their gods. The idea was that the gods accepted the sacrifices as groceries for their feasts on Mount Olympus or wherever it was they supposedly lived. That kind of sacrifice is indeed all about law. It’s about people trying to please their gods with what they bring them. But that has nothing to do with the kind of worship that the Lord God of Israel prescribed for his people. The Lord doesn’t need groceries nor does he need our gifts. The sacrifices he asked his people to bring were supposed to be seen as *substitutions*. The mindset of the worshipper was to be this: I have sinned and offended against the God of heaven. His wrath rightly burns against me. His justice demands that I be punished and die and be cast into hell forever – but God in his mercy and grace has given me a way out. He’ll allow me to come to his temple with a lamb. He’ll allow me to confess my sins before him with the priest’s hand placed on the head of that lamb, he’ll consider my sins transferred to that lamb, and then he’ll take the life of the lamb in my place. You see, when I brought a sacrifice to God it was not *for him* – it was *for me*.

That’s why the blood was so important. God didn’t take the carcasses of the dead animals. All he wanted was the blood – for he had said, “The *life* is in the blood.” That’s why Jewish people were prohibited from drinking blood or eating anything that contained it. God said that the life of every living thing belonged to him – and that the life was in the blood. So when the priest collected the blood of my sacrifice I could see in a very tangible way that God was accepting its life in place of mine – and that its life was literally being consumed in the flames of the altar *in my place*. And this is how you’d worship year after year; and every time you did you were confronted by a very graphic and gritty testimony of the terrible consequences of your sin. You saw up close and personal that God’s justice demands death and blood – but at the same time, you could also see God’s grace and love for you in providing a way for something else to die in your place. When the animal died, the priest was able to say to you, “Your sins are forgiven.” And you received that forgiveness by faith, trusting that God’s promise to count your sin against that goat or lamb was true.

So we should see that the whole Old Testament sacrificial system of worship was really about the Gospel – the problem with it was that there was no end to it. That’s what the writer of Hebrews is saying in the Bible passage, and that’s what his hymn is about. It was never the blood of animals that took away sins. How could they? Though it may offend PETA activists, in the mind of God a human life is worth more than the lives of all the animals he ever created. No number of animals however large could die for the sin of a single man – much less for the sins of many. No, what really took away the sins of all those Old Testament worshippers was what their bloody sacrifices prefigured: they all pointed ahead to the once and forever all-sufficient sacrifice of the true Lamb of God – his Son, Jesus Christ – the sacrifice that God himself gave for us. Trusting in God’s promises, when they put their hands on the heads of their sacrifices and confessed their sins, they were really putting their sins on Jesus.

That's the idea captured in verse three of this hymn. We are to understand that when we stand here and confess our sins, we are doing exactly the same thing. By faith, we are laying our hands on the thorn crowned head of Jesus and putting the burden and consequences of our sins on him. And then, as verse four says, instead of seeing the blood poured out on the burning altar to show us that the price is paid, we see the true terrible justice and wrath of God poured out as the Sacrifice for our sin is raised up on the cross to suffer and die in the worst possible way. And there too we see his great love for us literally *bleeding* from his many wounds – and with his blood, his life ebbing away *from him* and dripping down *to us ... to give us his life*.

A powerful message indeed in what's an otherwise unappealing hymn condemned to be nobody's favorite. But you know, sometimes a master jeweler finds a gem so beautiful that he knows putting it in an elaborate setting will only detract attention from what he wants people to see and appreciate. So he sets it alone, simply, without any embellishment so that you are forced to focus on the stone itself. That's what Isaac Watts accomplished with this hymn. With it he points us to the cross, to the Savior nailed on it, and to *his* great self-sacrificial love for us so that:

*Believing we rejoice,
To see the curse remove;
We bless the Lamb with cheerful voice
And sing his bleeding love. Amen.*

Soli Deo Gloria!