



Blood Marks

In the name of him who is called Faithful and True, dear friends in Christ: like sleuths seeking the facts of a case, in our series of Lenten devotions we have been pursuing throughout the Scriptures what I have described as a trail of blood: the diverse ways that blood acts to communicate divine truth about God's plan of salvation in Christ Jesus – and thus far primarily how blood acts *for us*.

This evening I'd like to draw your attention away from the path we've been following and direct your focus to a different trail of bloody images that is on a converging course with ours. Both trails lead to (and will indeed meet at) the cross; but tonight's path is the one that traces our Savior's movement through the pages of Holy Scripture. Blood acts on him too; to be specific, it *marks* him. It functions like a red flag that tells us "Look over here. I want you to see something – or rather, I want you to see *someone*."

To introduce the concept, last week we considered the ancient Israelite religious festival called the Day of Atonement. That was the day on which a year's worth of Israel's accumulated sins that had been piling up in the Temple were removed from it and placed upon the head of what was called the scapegoat: a goat chosen by God to be the sin bearer for his people. Recall that two goats were brought forward to the high priest that day. He cast lots over them to determine which would be the goat of sacrifice, the blood of which would be placed on the Ark of the Covenant to atone for the people's sins, and which would be designated the scapegoat to bear the sins away. After the lots were cast and the choice was made, the latter, the scapegoat, was marked by a red ribbon tied to its horns to identify it as such. This ribbon, the color of blood, told everyone who saw it that this goat had been chosen by God to bear their sin.

Something similar is happening in the narratives of Jacob and Esau. Recall that Esau was the firstborn of the twins, and that he also held first place in his father's heart. But despite his father's preference for him, as the story unfolds Esau is systematically stripped of the birthright and blessing that are rightfully his and they are given instead to his far less deserving, dishonest twin brother, Jacob. That this is God's doing is shown to us from the start. Esau is born covered in a mantle of thick red hair. That's why they named him Esau. It means "hairy" – which not coincidentally is from the same Hebrew word that means goat since they too had thick coats of hair. So Esau is not just hairy, he's red goat hairy. And that ought to make us think of the scapegoat because that's what Esau is for Jacob. He is marked from birth as the one who will suffer loss for his brother's benefit. He is in this sense a prophetic foreshadowing of Jesus who bears our sin while we get both the birthright and blessing that properly belong to him, the beloved Son of God.

The trail of blood next takes to a second Christ figure: Joseph, who is another beloved son and favorite of his father. It's precisely his father's preference for him that causes Joseph to be hated by his ten older brothers, who also despise him for his dreams that suggest one day they will bow down to him. They intend to make sure that never happens. When the opportunity arises, they ambush him, planning to kill him. But then a better way presents itself: Midianite traders headed for Egypt pay them silver for Joseph, who will make a fine slave. He's as good as dead and the brothers make a handsome profit. But what to tell their father? They take Joseph's precious coat – the one that marks him as his father's favorite – and they dip it in goat's blood. They present the coat to Jacob and allow him to draw his own conclusions. "Joseph, my son, is dead." And as far as Jacob is concerned, Joseph remains dead for more than twenty years. The goat's blood proves it.

What the brothers don't know is that their betrayal of Joseph initiates the chain of events that causes his prophetic dreams to be fulfilled. When next they see Joseph, he has risen in glory to the right hand of the most powerful king on earth. He is in the process of saving the ancient world from death by starvation. His suffering has resulted in salvation for all – including the brothers who despised him. Joseph, whose robe was dipped in blood to mark him as dead, forgives his brothers freely and gives them a home in his kingdom.

From there the trail takes us to the enigmatic deathbed prophecy that Jacob bestowed upon his son, Judah. It's the one that says that the scepter – that is, the kingship – would remain with Judah's descendants until the one comes to whom all nations owe their obedience. That would be the Christ, of course. Speaking of him, Jacob declares that he tethers his donkey to the choice vine, a poetic way of saying his destiny is tied up to Israel, which is the Lord's favorite planting and vineyard. And also that his garments are washed in the blood of grapes, which is to say he's wearing a red coat – again, marking him as the sin bearer, the one whose suffering results in salvation for the faithful. His dark eyes can peer into the hearts of men. And his amazingly white teeth foretell of the absolute truthfulness with which he speaks.

Still on the Messianic blood trail, we go next to the prophet Isaiah who presents us a vision of a heroic warrior storming out of the land of Edom – Edom being the nation that descended from Esau. They were often the enemies of Israel. It just so happens that the word Edom means "red". It was the nickname given to Esau when weak and faint with hunger he agreed to trade his valuable birthright for a bowl of red lentil stew (just as Christ trades his infinitely valuable birthright for our blood red guilt and shame). Now this warrior comes out of Edom where he has executed God's judgment. His garments are thoroughly spattered with the blood of Israel's enemies. He alone has won the victory. He alone has rescued the Lord's people. He alone has worked their salvation. Why? He explains it is because of the Lord's steadfast love for his children. In his love and in his pity he redeemed them.

From that vision, we follow the trail to the revelation of St. John who sees another conquering hero. This one is mounted on a magnificent white horse. The rider's name is Faithful and True. He is the judge of all nations. He is crowned with many crowns. He is called the Word of God. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. And his robe, like Joseph's, is dipped in blood. We can have no question about who this might be.

All these blood red prophetic types and visions running through the Scripture are directing our gaze to the person and work of Jesus. As I said before, they are like red flags waving to capture our attention. At the same time they tell us who Jesus is and reveal various aspects of what he has come to do. And we find their fulfillment in the mocking of the soldiers – a whole battalion turned out to ridicule, insult, and abuse the One chosen by God to bear our sin and shame. They crown him with thorns, symbols of the curse. They place in his hand a makeshift scepter, a symbol of authority; but then they use it to beat him. They kneel and offer him false praise and honor, and then spit on him. And they place upon him a red robe, unknowingly marking him as our scapegoat.

It's a red flag. It's a bloody marker. The Lord is telling us to look. Behold the Man. See your Savior. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!