

Bloodbath
Isaiah 52:15
Maundy Thursday
March 28, 2013

So will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

What images does the word bloodbath bring to mind? Perhaps you think of a terrible scene of bloodshed, such as a recent radical homicide bombing in the Middle East or perhaps you're old enough to remember Charles Manson and his followers. These sorts of tragedies are often described as a bloodbath.

Our text for this evening speaks of another sort of bloodbath – one ordained by God for our good. During the past six weeks of Lent we have been considering Isaiah's portrait of Jesus, the Suffering Servant of the Lord. Our passage for this evening promises that Christ "will sprinkle many nations."

When the blood of Jesus Christ is sprinkled on us, we are washed clean from our sins. We are bathed in God's forgiveness and coated with Christ's own righteousness. We are washed in the blood of God's sacrificial Lamb (Is 53:6-7). In that sense, we experience a bath in his blood – a bloodbath.

The language and concepts in our Old Testament text may be quite foreign to us and our culture today, but our Christian faith is founded on the shedding of Christ's blood for us, on his death and resurrection. To receive the priceless blessings Christ gives to us in his Holy Supper, which we celebrate tonight, we must understand and believe what God tells us about this sacred outpouring of blood.

God's Word has some severe and sobering things to say about sin. Two verses summarize what Scripture says about God's judgment: *The wages of sin is death* (Rom 6:23 NIV), and *The soul who sins is the one who will die* (Ezek 18:20). Original sin, inherited from Adam, makes us mortal. Our original and our actual sins make us deserve the sentence of eternal death in hell. Sin leads to death, and in biblical imagery death involves the spilling of blood. Therefore, we might say that sin results in an evil bloodbath.

In order for sin to be forgiven, God requires that blood to be shed. Hebrews 9:22 tells us: *Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.* In the Old Testament, God prescribed a variety of animal sacrifices, and God granted the repentant believers forgiveness of sin. When certain animals were sacrificed and their blood was shed, the sins of the people were forgiven (Lev 1-7).

Sometimes enormous numbers of animals were sacrificed. When King Solomon brought the ark of the Covenant to the temple in Jerusalem, he sacrificed *so many sheep and cattle that they could not be recorded or counted* (1 Kings 8:5). Later, when Solomon dedicated the temple, he sacrificed 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats (1 Kings 8:63).

The slaughter of so many animals was truly a bloodbath. That bloodbath was in agreement with God's old covenant with Israel. It was for the forgiveness of sins, which God dispensed from his temple (1 Kings 8:30, 34, 36, 39, 46–50).

Isaiah says this about Jesus: *He will sprinkle many nations* (Is 52:15 NIV). What is the significance of Christ sprinkling us with His blood? The sprinkling of blood was part of the old covenant. When God first established his covenant with Israel, he instructed Moses to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed animals on the people (Ex 24:8). This blood was called “the blood of the covenant.”

When the blood was sprinkled on the people, they entered the covenant with God and became members of the covenant people. They became heirs of God's covenant promises of forgiveness, blessing, and eternal life. As the blood was sprinkled upon them, the believing people received the grace of God.

In the Old Testament, there were many sacrifices in which God told the priests to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed animal. Often the blood was sprinkled on the altar. In this way, the life of the animal was offered to God in place of the lives of the sinful people.

At other times, the blood was sprinkled on the people. The life of the animal was in its blood (Lev 17:11). The wages of sin is death, and the people's sin, when placed on the animal, required the lifeblood of the animal to be poured out. When the blood of the animal was sprinkled on the people, God conveyed to the people forgiveness and life.

In our text, Isaiah looks beyond the sacrifices of the Old Testament to the coming of Jesus. The prophet receives a vision of how Jesus will sprinkle many nations with his outpoured blood. In some ways it would be similar to the Old Testament sacrifices and sprinklings, but it would be far greater, with the highest, most heavenly gifts for those covered by his blood (Heb 12:24).

The important difference is that Jesus was sacrificed for us. Jesus was marred and disfigured as he suffered for us (Is 52:14). Unlike the Old Testament priests, who were sinful people like us, Jesus was sinless, blameless, perfect. He had no need to make sacrifice for his own sins. His sacrifice was only for us.

He is the eternal Son of God. For this reason, his suffering and death had infinitely more value than the slaughter of animals. His death pays for the sin of the whole world. Because his sacrifice was of infinite and universal value, Christ only made it once – for all time and for all people. His one sacrifice accomplished what the daily repetition of animal sacrifices, year after year, was never able to accomplish: full pardon and peace for every man, woman, and child.

The author of Hebrews says: *[If] the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean, how much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself*

unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb 9:13-14 NIV).

The sprinkling of Christ's blood cleanses our hearts from the condemnation of a guilty conscience (Heb 10:22).

According to the foreknowledge of God, we are part of the people who have been called to receive sanctification by the Spirit. That Spirit works new obedience and faith in us. And all of this activity of God, for us and in us, is the result of the fact that we have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus (1 Pet 1:2).

How do we receive this forgiveness? This is where the sprinkling comes in. In the Old Testament "the blood of the covenant" was sprinkled on the people to bring them into the covenant with God. The leaders of the people then ate and drank in God's presence and communed with him (Ex 24:8-11).

We are washed with the blood of Christ through faith in what he has done for us. It is as simple as that. In His bountiful mercy, God has provided not just his Word, but also Baptism and Holy Communion, so that he might pour his abundant grace on us and into us through those three means.

In Holy Communion, we actually receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins. Just as the Old Testament believers received forgiveness when the blood was sprinkled on them, we receive God's forgiveness together with Christ's body and blood.

So in the worthy reception of this Sacrament, as well as through hearing the Word and Baptism, we can say, using Old Testament language, that the atoning blood of Christ is sprinkled on us. To put it another way, our robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin (1 Jn 1:7). We bathe in the grace of God, earned for us by Christ's blood. We undergo a bloodbath of forgiveness.

People in our modern culture may have a hard time accepting these things. Some may be skeptical that this actually occurs when we kneel at the altar and receive the elements. Some may think all this talk about Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper is merely a figure of speech, symbolic, or even make-believe.

However, the people of the Old Testament had no doubt whether the flesh and blood of the animals were real. They saw with their own eyes real animals being sacrificed for their real sins. They could feel real blood sprinkled on them.

Holy Communion is even more real, because the more perfect forgiveness earned for us by the blood of Jesus comes to us in a more complete and intimate way. We don't have to trust the subjective sensations of sight and touch to believe. We have the words of Jesus: *This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you* (Lk 22:20 NIV). A precious and holy bloodbath, for where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is life and

salvation.