

Nothing But the Blood

We Lutherans are usually lumped together with the Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and a few other denominations, in a grouping called the Mainline Churches. These are the historic Protestant denominations founded in this country by Anglo-Saxon immigrants, more than 100 years ago, and in some cases more than 200 years ago. The term “mainline” actually originated because of a trolley car line, called the Pennsylvania Main Line, that ran through a wealthy suburb of Philadelphia where churches of these denominations were clustered together. The common characteristic of mainline churches today seem to be a theological adherence to modern biblical criticism and a left of center stance on most social issues.

If any one magazine represents and reports on the mainline churches it is the “Christian Century.” The “Christian Century” began in the 1800s as the “Christian Oracle,” a newsletter for the Disciples of Christ churches, another mainline denomination. That publication eventually took on an ecumenical and national character. The name was changed to the “Christian Century” in 1899 with the belief that the twentieth century would see, in their words, “advancing influence of Christian nations and the advancement of the Kingdom of God.”

In fact, the twentieth century saw a decline in the relative numbers of Christians as a percentage of world population. The mainline churches in the United States have been in deep membership decline for several decades.

There is truth to the jeer that “the mainline has become the sideline,” as Evangelical churches have grown in size and influence in the our country. Still, the “Christian Century” remains one of the best read magazines among mainline clergy and other church professionals, especially religious academics. I don’t subscribe, but I often read the “Christian Century” online or at the library.

Unlike many journals aimed primarily at professionals and academics, the Christians century does not print a lot of point/counter point type articles. For instance, when I worked at the Baltimore Cancer Research Center, we had some expertise regarding fungal infections. We would do a research study and publish our results in a medical journal, and then another lab would publish an article criticizing our methodology and interpretations. Then we do another study disproving their findings, and so on. Such is the rough-and-tumble world of academics, where it’s “publish or perish,” and where statements followed by rebuttals are the order of the day.

Recently there was an article in the “Christian Century,” the theme of which I took exception to, and which I felt the need address in a sermon because the article propagates an error common in mainline Christian thought today, an error that I believe may be contributing to the mainline church’s precipitous decline. A sermon, of course, is not an academic exercise and I don’t want to burden you with theological minutia. I won’t slander the author, who happens to be Lutheran, or even mention the article by name – of course, you can find it in your local library). However, I think the author’s point, and my rebuttal, fit with the theme of our first lesson today and the theme of our Lenten season.

The author says, “Christians have never embraced blood sacrifice,” and then he goes on to say that “God does not demand or require blood to redeem us. God neither inflicts violence nor desires suffering to set the divine-human relationship right.” In other words, he is saying something other than Jesus’ death makes atonement for our sins. Also, the Christian rejection of blood sacrifice, he says, precludes both the notion of a just war and the idea of suffering in passive resistance movements, as was done by Dr. Martin Luther King and others. I disagree.

The history of God’s people, Israel, is the history of the Christian church too. The Hebrew Scriptures, we call them the Old Testament, is part of our holy book. Without a doubt, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ commanded His people the Hebrews to make blood sacrifices, such as the lamb sacrificed at the Passover. The blood of the lamb on the lintel of the door was the sign for the angel of death to “pass over” the Hebrew’s dwellings. Again, at that Exodus event, it was God who closed the waters over Pharaoh’s pursuing army to save His people. And God’s people sang in triumph, “The horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea.”

Certainly God does not encourage us to use violence and bloodshed. We are not to take human life, or even animal life, lightly. But there is no denying that the world is a violent place from time of Adam and Eve’s sin, and Cain’s murder of Abel, onward. And God, for our sake, thoroughly immersed Himself in the human world in the person of Jesus Christ, and He did not make Himself immune from violence.

The story of Noah's flood from our first lesson today is another Old Testament story that relates directly to Jesus Christ and our Christian faith in regards to death and violence. We often think of the Flood account as cute story for children. But look at it more closely. God was disgusted the world he made and the people in it. God could find no one righteous except for Noah and his family. So God decided to destroy the world and start over. That's scary, isn't it? Isn't it frightening to think that God became so angry with humanity that He decided to drown them all?

The image of such a wrathful God is missing from mainline Protestant theology today. Our image of God is too often that of a permissive parent who gets walked all over and who might occasionally threaten His children with punishment, but who ultimately is too milquetoast to ever follow through. The fact is that God hates sin and that he is mighty displeased when His children sin. God is so displeased that he has to go to drastic, extreme measures to rectify things.

In the flood story the rising waters are God's righteous judgment on sin and sinners, but there's even more to it than that. The same water the judges also saves, as the waters carry the ark with Noah and his family to safety. God then recreated humanity from those eight people and He promises to never destroy the earth again with a flood. Out of divine judgment comes divine covenant and commitment. The Flood is definitely a prefiguring, a foreshadowing of Christian baptism. That is baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, which saves us from our sins.

The author of the Christian Century article has a take on how Christ's death saves us, but to me it's incomplete. His theory, which has really been around for hundreds of years, is that Jesus is the great example of faith and obedience. The author says that Jesus' passion is, "a story of the depths and lengths to which God goes so that we might share in the life of the Triune God." That's true, of course, but I think there's even more to it than that. If merely being faithful and obedient was what it took to save us, then God could have found some reasonable, un-bloody means other than the cross. But as things are, violence and death are the ultimate tests of faithfulness and obedience in this world. If the cross is superfluous, Jesus' passion could have ended at Gethsemane -- that would have been the merciful thing for God the Father to do. If Jesus' death was not necessary, than why was ritual blood sacrifice so important in the Old Testament?

We would be sorely tried to make any sense of Jesus' death outside of the Old Testament's foreshadowing. Jesus himself compared his crucifixion to the serpent Moses lifted up in the wilderness. In a world marked and marred by violence, only a violent death redeemed by God's love can sufficiently overturn the bloodthirsty powers of evil. And isn't that the meaning deepest of baptism, that we are drowned and dead with Christ, and then raised up to new life?

In the flood the world drowned and God started a new world with the survivors on the ark. In baptism our sins are drowned and we begin a new life each day by the grace of God. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was once and for all, we don't re-sacrifice Christ on our altar at Holy

Communion. Still, Christ, the innocent victim, continues to pour out his blood for us that we might be one with him. Still Christ calls us to suffer for the good of others. Still we are called to defend our neighbors against abuse and violence. Still the blood of Christ conquers all.

Why did the 20th century fail to be the Christian Century those confident Protestants in 1899 dreamed of? Why do the mainline churches continue to hemorrhage members? Why do we feel so personally out of the mainline? Perhaps it is because our presentation of Christ has not been passionate enough. Perhaps it is because we have not been willing to suffer and die for Christ as he did for us. Perhaps it is because we have not taken seriously enough the violence that infests the world and the blood of Christ which is the only cure. This Lent, may we learn what it means to be submerged in that fountain full of blood drawn for Emmanuel's veins. Amen.