

## His Own Blood

<sup>NRS</sup> Heb 9:1 Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary.<sup>2</sup> For a tent was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence; this is called the Holy Place.<sup>3</sup> Behind the second curtain was a tent called the Holy of Holies.<sup>4</sup> In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant;<sup>5</sup> above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.<sup>6</sup> Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties;<sup>7</sup> but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people.<sup>8</sup> By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing.<sup>9</sup> This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper,<sup>10</sup> but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right.<sup>11</sup> But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation),<sup>12</sup> he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.<sup>13</sup> For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified,<sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

It was a cool, crisp fall day. It was my first year at the University of Texas. I was walking from 21<sup>st</sup> Street down Speedway. Speedway was always a funny name for this street- you could only go about 10 miles per hour on it, and now I think they've closed it to traffic for good these days. It was 6 in the morning on a Saturday- do you have any idea how quiet a college campus is on a Saturday at 6? It was fantastic. I was headed towards Gregory Gym. There I would find a small group of people waiting to meet a guide who would take us out to the biggest piece of granite south of the Colorado border, a small mountain the Indians called Enchanted Rock. There we would learn the fundamentals of climbing.

For me it was a big deal I was even there. It's the first trip like this I remember doing entirely on my own. None of my friends were interested, and so I just signed up, and I sent my money in, and I filled out all the paperwork, and then I showed up- having no idea who I would be spending the day with. And to be honest- while I was a little nervous about rock climbing, I was really more apprehensive about finding out who my friends would be that day.

It turned out to be a pretty small group- and to my relief, they were a pretty friendly bunch. There were two couples from the business school- they were older, but they were about my brother's age, so I felt kind of at home with them. There were a just a few others who showed up I don't remember that well, there was the guide, and then there was little old me. I remember driving out there in the bus, riding with this bus load of strangers- I remember feeling so grown up, being there all on my own.

And then there was the mountain. I say mountain- after living out here for a few years now, I'm not sure I'd call it a mountain- but it did have this big, sheer wall of granite. And when you're up there with just a harness, a belay rope, and just the touch of your shoe smearing on to a hold- it seemed big enough, believe me.

You know there are a lot of things they don't tell you about climbing- like how counter intuitive is, for instance. When you're up there, towering above the earth- the thing you feel like doing is hugging the rock as closely as possible. Of course if you do that you will fall. What you have to do is the strangest feeling thing in the world- you have to lean back, keeping your weight on your feet as much as possible, trusting your shoes to hold you. Very strange feeling.

Another thing they don't tell you, though admittedly less counter intuitive- the rock is hard. I know this seems like a no brainer- and I'm not sure what I didn't think about it, but it's not like you're climbing on pillows up there. It's rock- and rock bruises and cuts you just as much as when you climbing on it as if you fall down on it. I think that's why rock climbers always have this funky hair and all that- it draws the attention away from the scraped up knees and bleeding shins that make the sport seem slightly less glamorous.

So at the end of the day, after we've either made it to the top or close to the top, we rappel down, and we load up the van again to go home. I look down, and I figure we're close enough to Halloween to tell this story- I look down and my arms and legs look like they've been attacked by a potato peeler. I'm exaggerating a bit- but I was scraped up pretty good. There were streaks of blood drying into what looked like a miniature version of an old river bed system.

And I must have been standing there for a few minutes, admiring my battle wounds, because one of the MBA women walks past me and says with a sneer- "Well are you going to admire yourself all day, Braveheart? You look gross! Go wash off, and let's go." And with her comment I suddenly went from feeling like such an adult, to feeling like such a child. And I stood there, embarrassed and not knowing what to say, but I also knew that for some reason I didn't want to clean off these marks, either. I wanted to leave this blood, although for reasons I didn't myself really understand.

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Blood. It's what our text from the book of Hebrews is all about today. In a wonderfully well crafted piece of writing, the author of Hebrews tells us about two kinds

of temples, two kinds of priests, and two kinds of sacrifice- but it's blood, it's blood that ties the two pieces together.

The writer starts out telling us about how it *used* to be, back in the day- with the tent in the desert when the people of Israel were wandering through the wilderness. It's a really cool text, because it's like when you're looking at a house or an apartment today- how you can go online and check out all the rooms, do you know what I'm talking about? Well, here the author assumes we don't really know what the tent was like, which is good, because most of us don't- and so he walks us through the whole thing. We start with what you see when you enter- you see a lampstand and a table with something called the bread of the presence, which are 12 small loaves representing the twelve tribes of Israel in dwelling together in unity. We learn this part of the tent is called the Holy Place, and it looks pretty much like our own sanctuary- minus all the chairs. And I'm not sure they would have known what to do with our birthday chicken. And then the author takes us further- and we step behind the curtain all the way into the Holy of Holies. And he tells us there we find a censor with incense flowing out, and the ark of the covenant covered in gold and bordered by winged seraphim. There's Aaron's rod, and the two tablets with the law, and a jar holding a little bit of manna from the wilderness.

Now after the dime tour, the author tells us a little bit about what goes on in the tent, and later the temple. He describes all the chaos of the priests who are always coming and going into the Holy Place, doing all their zillion little things. And though he doesn't go into detail- it's phenomenal, really, the complexity of the sacrificial system. You have to use different animals for different purposes- you know, and there were all

sorts of different kinds of sacrifice- sin offerings, burnt offerings, peace offerings, and the list goes on.

But then, the great sacrifice, the sacrifice made in the Holy of Holies, was made only once a year by the high priest. On Yom Kippur, the high priest would enter into the Holy of Holies, according to tradition they'd actually tie a rope to his leg, to make sure they could pull him out in case things got dicey, and he would offer sacrifice on behalf of all. As the writer of Hebrews puts it- never without the blood, the blood of animals, in this case, did he go.

Well, the writer of Hebrews sets up this picture not to sell us on this particular tent, but as a way of understanding the person of Christ. In a nutshell Hebrews says Christ is like the high priest in that he offers sacrifice- but he entirely creative in the way he does it. Now make sure you really hear what's going on- the writer of Hebrews isn't denigrating the temple system or saying Judaism false or something like that. No, he says, the Holy Place is good- and the work of the priests is helpful. Especially early on, when someone comes to the temple to make sacrifice - it really did make them feel better. The word for sacrifice in Hebrew, *corban*, literally means to draw close. That's what offering does- it draws us close. The problem is that over time- things became ritualized. And something that once had meaning, well over time it can become just become just another job. Over time we may wind up just going through the motions, but we won't always understand or feel what we're doing. And by the time of the Book of Hebrews, the sacrificial system had grown into this series of jobs and rules- helpful to us on the outside, perhaps- but not so much on the inside.

But then in Christ, on the other hand, we see sacrifice, but with him it's very different- something new. In Christ we see sacrifice, we see blood- but it's not part of some system of quid pro quo- two sheep for a guilt offering, a turtle dove to bless a newborn. No, Christ comes offering not something out of the stale playbook, but only himself. Hebrews writes: *he enters once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood.*

With his own blood. I've never preached on blood before. I'm generally not a fan of texts that talk about blood. But this week, I came to really love this passage. I love it because when we hear he brings blood, as uncomfortable to our modern ears as it is, we know in Christ God doesn't come just to play- God doesn't come just for show. In Christ God enters into our lives for real- my life, your life. And he gets down into the dirt with us, into the marrow of our lives, into the ecstasies of our bodies, and the terror of our anxieties- he comes and puts his skin in the game. And then when we hear it's his *own* blood, not the blood of animals- we know he doesn't come as just part of the system, or just business as usual. He comes offering something entirely new, creative, and personal- he comes offering himself.

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Today we kick off our stewardship month, and I tell you I want to do it a little differently than we have in the past. I serve on the board of the Presbyterian Outlook, and our outgoing President was an extremely pithy Southerner. I remember he once said the two great tragedies of the modern church are that we've confused evangelism with recruiting, and we've confused stewardship with fundraising. Now there's an element of

recruiting in evangelism and there's a touch of fundraising involved in stewardship, to be sure- but fundraising isn't at the heart of stewardship. Not even close.

This stewardship season we *are* going to talk about finances and about where our session is leading us. But this is just the tip of the ice berg. Because stewardship shouldn't be about the minimum of what we can get away with- like the priests running with their sacrifices and the letter of the law. We're going to follow Jesus' example and see what stewardship might mean if we bring ourselves- our whole selves this year. We're going to see what stewardship might be if it's not just about your pledge card- but it's about all of the ways you and I have been blessed and how we might live our lives as we truly are: as God's gift to one another; not in an egocentric way, but a true way.

To that end we've written and published a 20 day devotional for you to use. You can use it as an individual. You can use it as a family. Every day you will find a topic, a scripture lesson, a reflection, and questions for reflection. There are even little stewardship quotes at the bottom of every page. And once a week, there's a place to write down prayers and commitments- it's marked so you can cut that out and put it into the offering plate on Sunday along with your other offerings. When we report on stewardship- we'll include these pledges as well, unless you tell us not to. If you use this devotional, you will pray all the way from contemplating the gifts God gave your family, to the gifts God has given you, to in the third week praying about how you might be able give back to the world around you. This devotional is an opportunity for you to experience how stewardship isn't simply a pledge card- it's about appreciating your life for the gift it is. This morning, please take one per family. If you want more copies- you will find the guide posted on our website.

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So, let's go back to the hill country of Texas for a moment. Back to standing around at the end of a long, hard day. I stood there in the fading light- looking at the sun setting on Enchanted Rock wondering if I should cave into this pushy MBA and just wash off my arms and legs, though I felt I shouldn't. Really, I thought to myself, what was the big deal- it was just a little bit of blood. And I stood there as she frowned at me, waiting for me to hurry up and wash. And then I made my decision. Walking past her, I said in a tired, plaintive voice, "No." "No," I said, "I just want to go home like this." And she protested, but not very strongly. And I rode home in the van with my dirty, rock encrusted, scraped up arms and legs, exhausted, but feeling quietly triumphant somehow and at peace. Since that day I've thought about that ride home and wondered why I didn't just wash off. Today I think I understand. I didn't wash off, because the blood was my own. It was my own. I brought my entire self to that day; I had the arms and legs to prove it; and I just wasn't ready to wash it off just yet. It was my own. **Amen.**