

Apocalypse Now

Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

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I'm guessing that the book of Hebrews is probably not one of your favorite books of the Bible. It's not a very exciting read. It's kind of dry, and most of it is occupied with the kind of thing we hear here, high priests and sacrifices and such. The main thing Christians seem to have gotten from it is this notion of Christ as the perfect sacrifice, the one that makes all other sacrifice unnecessary. It's standard Christian language, but if you really think about it, it gets pretty macabre.

As I understand it, the whole point of sacrifice in ancient religions in the first place is the idea that the gods get angry at our sins and are out for our blood. So you offer a sacrifice, whether human or animal, so that the gods will get distracted by that blood and be satisfied and won't come after you. You can find traces of that idea in the Old Testament, and it even shows up occasionally in the New Testament, as in Hebrews, which may be part of why we're not too crazy about that book. I mean, is that really what religion is about, appeasing an angry God? More to the point, is that really what Jesus' death is about? That's certainly been one common interpretation in the history of Christianity, fueled in no small part by the book of Hebrews. The idea that God is righteously angry at us for our sins. We keep offering animal sacrifices, but they only prove to be a temporary measure. God's anger needs to be appeased, though, so Jesus steps up and offers himself as a perfect sacrifice, the sacrifice to end all other sacrifice, and God is at long last satisfied. There's a certain logic to this, and yet follow it to its logical conclusion and you get a God who is so angry that nothing satisfies God except the blood, the death of his own son. Is that the kind of God you want to have anything to do with?

Well, that's one view, and as I said, it's pretty common. But there's another way to look at this whole sacrifice thing. Earlier this year I preached a sermon about how you can see religion as telling us something about the universe, but you can also see it as telling us something about ourselves. If we take this second perspective, if we look at religion to see what it tells us about ourselves, then we discover that the whole notion of sacrifice is a kind of sanctioned violence. Way back in the beginning, to keep people from just killing each other off in an endless cycle of violence and revenge, societies came up with human sacrifice, a kind of ritualized murder that appeased not the gods' bloodlust but our own. Pretty much all human societies practiced some form of human sacrifice in the beginning. Over time they moved to animal sacrifice instead. That transition is preserved even in our own Bible in the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. In that story, Abraham at last understood that God does not in fact desire human sacrifice. But Abraham couldn't give up the notion entirely, so he sacrificed a ram in Isaac's place.

With that in mind then, what is going on with Jesus and all this talk of sacrifice? Consider that the Romans at that time also practiced animal sacrifice. They had given up human sacrifice a long time ago, and yet there was one way in which it was preserved, and that is in the Roman use of the death penalty. Today we tend to think of the death penalty as a punishment or a deterrent against future crime. Maybe that's true, or maybe that's what we just tell ourselves, but certainly in Roman times the death penalty was meant to convey a message. It was a form of sanctioned violence that was meant to prevent widespread bloodshed.

Think of that famous story of the slave revolt led by Spartacus. The Roman Empire was fueled by the labor of hundreds of thousands of slaves. Spartacus led a revolt that could have overturned the entire Empire, but the Romans managed to catch him and his army of slaves. They could have resold the prisoners and made a profit. They could have put them to the

sword and have done with it. But none of that was enough. The Romans crucified 6,600 of Spartacus' followers, mounting the crosses along the entire Apian Way from Brundisium to Rome, and their bodies were never taken down. They were left there until they rotted. This isn't about punishment. This is about sending a message, sanctioned violence to prevent more violence.

The problem is, it doesn't work. Violence becomes its own cycle. What did other slaves think as they saw those crosses along the road? I'm sure they felt fear about what would happen to them if they attempted a rebellion of their own. But I'm just as sure they felt anger, outrage at what the slaves had suffered. Their anger fostered feelings of resentment and a desire for revenge. Such a brutal display can keep people down, but it can also rile them up.

It's no mistake that the Romans chose the same method of execution for Jesus. As with Spartacus, they wanted to send a message. Jesus' crucifixion was meant as a kind of human sacrifice meant to prevent further violence and rebellion. But Jesus foiled them. Not by raising a rebellion of his own, not by cutting them down with the divine arm of righteousness, but by submitting to this bloody machine and showing us a better way, a way of forgiveness and of peace. He forgave his executioners for killing him. He forgave the disciples for abandoning him. And in forgiving them he brought a message of peace. Over and over again the resurrected Christ says, "Peace, peace, peace." And at last the bloody cycle of violence was ended.

The problem is, we're still so used to thinking in terms of sacrifice, including the idea that God somehow demands blood, that it's very hard for us to really get Jesus' message. Take the example of our story from Mark. The disciples make some innocuous statement about the Temple, sounding like a bunch of gawking tourists, and Jesus turns it into a teaching moment. The Temple, keep in mind, is the place where sacrifices took place. Jesus says it will be torn down, not one stone will be left in place. What do we take from that message, that the system of sacrifice, of sanctioned violence will end? Or do we make the same mistake the disciples do? They think he's making a prophecy. More to the point, they think he's saying God is going to blast the Temple apart in a display of righteous anger, of divine violence. Eagerly they ask, "When will these things happen? What will be the signs?" And Jesus, as he so often does, responds not to their outward question but to their inward thoughts. And what does he say? He warns them not to read too much into the violence and mayhem they will see. Specifically, to not attribute these things to God. First he warns them that many will come claiming to be the Messiah, but they will be false. Two things above all mark a false prophet: they claim to have all the answers, and they claim the right to use holy violence. Think of Julius Caesar. Of Napoleon and Hitler and Stalin. False messiahs, all. Secondly he warns them not to be afraid when they hear about wars. There will indeed be wars, he says, and we are always tempted to think God is behind it all, that these are indeed the signs of the end of times. But Jesus says that's not true. God is not behind those wars: humans are. In other words, the apocalypse is not God's doing but our own.

This is a hard point to grasp, but think about our own times. How often do people see the violence around us as being somehow God's doing? We try to read religious meaning into the September 11th attacks, into wars. We may not overtly say that God flew those planes into the towers, but we still attribute it to religion, not to human evil. Look at the violence at Fort Hood. Everyone seems so eager to point the finger at Major Hasan's religious beliefs. We ascribe religious meaning to what happened, even if what we're really doing is condemning certain religious beliefs, specifically Islam. I'm not saying that religion didn't play a role in it, but what is the cause? The lesson people seem to want to take is that religion is the cause of this violence, and that if we got rid of religion (or in this case Islam) then we'd get rid of the violence. But I don't believe that for one second. Religion is the excuse. The source is the violence that lies in the human heart. Get rid of religion, and all you'll do is force people to come up with another excuse. The cycle of violence continues. Indeed today it seems to thrive. But it's not religion that's feeding this violence, it's the human desire for

revenge, for payback. Look at these terrorists. What fuels them? Resentment, anger, a desire for revenge or punishment. And how in the world do you wage a war against that? You can't go to war against that with an army, although we keep trying. All our wars since World War II are getting messier and messier, against elusive, nebulous enemies. And the more we fight, the more we make things worse.

Look at the Israel/Palestine conflict. Can violence end that conflict? That's what they keep trying now, but it just begets more violence. Not even justice can end that conflict, because there's just too much injustice all around. I ask you: what in the world can possibly end that conflict EXCEPT Jesus' way? For people to finally say, "Enough of this. I forgive you. Peace, peace, peace."

Or if all this talk of wars is too lofty for you, how about a subject much closer to home, domestic violence? It reproduces the same cycle we see in wars, an endless loop of violence. Those evil parents for beating their kids! But where did they learn that violence from? In almost every single case, parents who abuse their kids were themselves abused by their parents as kids. And the cycle is not truly stopped if those parents get arrested, if the kids get put into a better home. What it takes to finally end it is for someone to say, "Enough of this. I forgive you. Peace, peace, peace." As the book of Hebrews says, "When sins are forgiven, there is no more need to offer sacrifices."

It doesn't seem like a very convincing approach in the face of such violence. It's understandable that we're skeptical. And yet, what do we really have to lose? More to the point, this would indeed be impossible if we had only ourselves to rely on, but when we have God to rely on, then it's not so impossible after all. The message of the book of Hebrews, far from being a message about how God demanded Jesus' death for the forgiveness of our sins, rather is about how because of Jesus' forgiveness of us, we now have courage to follow a new way, a way that leads to life. The way for us to escape the cycle of violence is not to look to God to kill our enemies, or worse for us to take up arms ourselves. Rather for Hebrews the answer is to be found in the new community we have found in Jesus, a beloved community of those who have been forgiven by a life-giving God. In the face of wars and rumors of wars, Hebrews urges us to hold tightly to the hope we say is ours, for we can trust that God is faithful. We should encourage one another to love and be helpful to others. And finally there's this interesting comment about church attendance. The Contemporary English Version puts it, "Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship." But this is not a case of the church truant officer! Rather, Hebrews is pointing out the importance of the community meeting together regularly so that we can give each other strength and courage in the face of so much violence and warfare, so that we may encourage one another in love and rededicate ourselves to the tasks of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Because there are indeed wars and rumors of wars all around us. It's enough to make us faint of heart and weak in hope. It's enough to fill us with thoughts of anger and vengeance. If we try to weather these frightening times on our own we will indeed sink beneath the waves. But together we can become a life raft, buoying one another up. So it is important for us to meet regularly: not to give praise to a vain God, not to gain Brownie points so we can get to heaven, but so that we can share companionship with other forgiven people and remind ourselves again and again of Jesus' better way. We come together so that in one another we will find the strength to say loud and clear, "Enough of this. I forgive you. Peace, peace, peace."