

The Blood of Abel
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Hebrews 12:18-24

At the end of his great book, the preacher of Hebrews takes us to the heavenly city of God, the place where the ascended Christ rules, and he gives us a multisensory experience. He opens our eyes and our ears to the glory of the place. First He shows us sights for our eyes. We see a heavenly mount Zion—a heavenly Jerusalem—essentially a glittering version of the beleaguered earthly city. We see thousands upon thousands of angels in festal procession—angels on parade. We see the church of the firstborn enrolled in heaven—which I take to be the departed saints who’ve run their race, the great cloud of witnesses from Hebrews 11. We see God, the Judge of all, presumably sitting on his throne surrounded in glory. But then he tells us to open our ears to a sound. Listen, he says, and you will hear the sprinkled blood of Jesus speaking a better word than the blood of Abel.

I think most of the visual images here are pretty clear. You can sort of make a picture in our heads of the multitudes and the angels. You can imagine a crowd gathered around the throne, radiant and fully alive. The preacher of Hebrews shows us a joyful, welcoming place and he contrasts it with the fear and dread of Mount Sinai. But that second metaphor, the sonic metaphor, is maybe a little harder to grasp. Because it’s a little odd. Blood that talks. Who ever heard of talking blood? What are we to make of it? The preacher says that both the blood of Abel and the blood of Jesus speak, but what is the blood of these respective men saying? And why is the blood of Jesus a better word? That’s what I want to explore with you tonight.

First: What is the blood of Abel saying? Well, we know that this is a reference back to Genesis 4 and the story of Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel are the sons of Adam and Eve. They become rivals when Cain feels that his brother is favored, and in his jealousy and anger, he rises up and kills his brother. The Lord confronts Cain. “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain plays dumb. Abel? Abel who? But the Lord comes back at him with the words that form the background of the Hebrews text: “What have you done! Listen! Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!” I know what you did to your brother, because I can hear your brother’s blood speaking. Somehow the injustice, the atrocity committed by Cain talks. It cries out. It resounds. Cain buried his brother’s body, but the blood cries out: “Help! There’s been a murder here! Injustice! Somebody do something about what has happened here!” And God hears that voice.

So on one level, the Blood of Abel is a reference to a particular sin and a particular story. But of course you know that nothing in those first chapters of Genesis is particular. What happens in Genesis 1 to 11 is about everything and everyone. The author of Hebrews understands that; that’s how he reads Genesis 4. When he hears the blood of Abel speaking, the blood of Abel is not simply speaking about what Cain did. When the blood of Abel cries out from the ground, it cries for all the victims of injustice and cruelty whose cries for help and justice have not been heard, have not been answered.

Because if you listen carefully, blood really does speak. If you have ever been to ground zero – the former world trade center site in New York, you will have no trouble understanding how that’s true. People tend to talk about the place as if it is a holy site, and when you visit there, there is an aura that you usually associate with a shrine. And that of course has everything to do with the blood of the innocent victims who lost their lives. Their blood still cries from the ground and the voice of that blood is strong! The blood that cries out from the ground of the trade center site was enough to launch two wars, one in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. I remember that when the debate about the war in Iraq was raging and people were wondering if we should be there and when people were asking whether or not we should be there, one of the things you often heard people say to justify our continued presence there was: “I think you’ve forgotten what happened on 9-11 in New York. I think you’ve forgotten about the lives of those innocent people.” Their blood still cries from the ground.

Or go to the deep south today – say rural Alabama – and ask them about the Civil War and what they think about the civil war. What will they say to you? “Civil War??? Oh... You mean the war of northern aggression.” For large parts of the South, the civil war isn’t something in the history books, it’s a grave injustice perpetrated by the north that still affects their lives today. The blood of those young southern boys still cries out from the ground. And it doesn’t even have to be murder or war to make Abel’s blood cry. Any injustice will do. Maybe you’ve been in the home of a single parent whose spouse has abandoned her under particularly nasty

circumstances. And the pain of that act resounds. There is an aura of pain about the place. It's almost haunted. As if the blood still cries out from the ground. I've met middle aged men and women still visibly devastated by bullying they received when they were in middle school. They still shake when they tell you about it. The blood still cries from the ground. Abel's blood is still a loud and compelling voice. In a thousand languages, in every corner of the earth, it cries out.

Because Abel's blood speaks in such a loud voice. Because the voice of Abel's blood is inescapable, it will provoke a response. Look around and you will see all sorts of attempts to answer its cries. Genesis 4:19-24 passage shows one of those typical responses. That's the response of Lamech. Lamech is Cain's descendant. In Genesis 4, he speaks to his wives and shares his strategy for living in a violent world, a world where people kill each other and blood cries out from the ground.

Lamech's solution? Take it upon yourself to even the score. When someone hits you, hit back harder. Don't be a doormat. People understand strength. So when someone does you wrong, come back at them HARD. Notice that when Lamech gives his solution to the voice of injustice, he preaches it as a kind of gospel. His wives are his congregation: "Listen up O wives! Hear what I have to say: A man wounds me...I will kill him. A man strikes me – even if he is young and strong, I will take him down! Ruthlessness my dears! Strength! That's what it takes in this world. Killer instinct. Nice guys finish last. Cain was my ancestor, but do you know what his problem was? He wasn't strong enough. If Cain is avenged 7 times. I will be avenged 77 times!" This is Lamech's 'gospel.' This is Lamech's way of handling the cry of ancestral blood.

Lamech's gospel has disciples. Niccolo Machiavelli for instance. Machiavelli, the Florentine political philosopher and author of the famous book, *The Prince*. He lived right around the time of Calvin and Luther, and in his own way he was part of a reformation, but not a Christian reformation. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli preached a gospel of strength. Machiavelli was openly contemptuous about the way of Jesus or any philosophy of life with high moral ideals. Peter Kreeft described Machiavelli's view of Christian ideals this way: "Machiavelli's argument was that traditional morals were like the stars; beautiful but too distant to cast any useful light on our earthly path. We need instead man-made lanterns; in other words, attainable goals."

And those goal should be achieved by force. He saw all of human life and history as determined by only two forces: virtue (force) and fortuna (chance). And in such a world, brute strength and propaganda were the tools the prince needed to keep order. "It is far better to be feared than loved...[for] men worry less about doing an injury to one who makes himself loved than to one who makes himself feared. The bond of love is one which men, wretched creatures that they are, break when it is to their advantage to do so, but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective." In Machiavelli's view you had to be willing to do cruel and immoral things for the sake of success. For example, in chapter 3 he suggests that a really good strategy for securing a newly conquered land is kill everyone in the ruling family and then make sure life goes on as usual for the rest of the people. There are lots of modern leaders who practice some version of Machiavelli's ideas. There are lots of modern people who are disciples of Lamech and Machiavelli. Machiavelli addressed princes and rulers in his book, but governments aren't the only place where disputes arise and blood cries out. Every day, and I do mean every day, probably a dozen times every day we come into situations where someone else's will comes into conflict with ours. In those situations, Lamech and Machiavelli say push. Fight. Be ruthless.

Is this the best we can hope for? A world where Abel's blood cries out for the ground and the best answer we can come up with is Lamech's brute force?

Here's why the preacher of Hebrews so excited! Because he knows there is a different answer to the blood of Abel than Lamech's way. The preacher hears that better voice. The answer to the blood of Abel that rings forth from the heavenly courtroom where the angels march in festal procession is the voice of the blood of Jesus. Jesus is a prince. Jesus is a king, a ruler. But he didn't rise to his power by following Machiavelli's recipe. He got there by emptying himself and taking the form of a servant. That's why God raised him up and gave him the name that is above all names. He did it through grace and mercy. What does the blood of Jesus say? It says: "I have not come to save the righteous, but sinners." It says, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing." It says, "Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good." It says "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. It says, "This is my blood given for the complete forgiveness of all your sins." It says, "And here's how often you ought to forgive the person who sins against you, not 7 times, but 77 times." It says, "Behold I am making all things new." If the world of Lamech is a world without grace, the Kingdom of Jesus is a world with grace at the very center. When grace and mercy are

at the center of the way you meet the injustice of the world, you really are participating in a new world, a new creation.

Is this just idealistic talk? Am I living in a fairyland when I think we can overcome the troubles of this world through the way of Jesus? Well let's think about some real examples. Let us compare two different men: Robert Mugabe and Nelson Mandela. Both men fought to liberate their countries from colonial rule in the last half of the 20th century. Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Mandela in South Africa. They chose very different paths.

Zimbabwe finally shook off the colonial yoke completely in 1980 after a long period of civil war. That was when Robert Mugabe took over the reins of government. He followed Lamech's path. Mugabe's approach to the people who were against him was merciless. He has met the sins of the past with force and recrimination. He used force and intimidation to put down his political enemies of every color. Lots of people were assassinated. He confiscated all of the lands of the white farmers. When Mugabe responds the injustices of the past, when he heard the blood of Abel crying out from the ground, he responded with force. In fact, he made sure that his supporters kept hearing the voice of Abel's blood so that he can stay in power and justify his actions. Every time America or Britain put pressure on him to change and be less brutal, he got up in front of his people and said that the old colonial masters want their colony back. The bottom line: At the end of Mugabe's reign, Zimbabwe was the poorest country in Africa, and from 1990 to 2006, the average life expectancy for a man in Zimbabwe fell from 60 to 42.

Contrast this with South Africa. South Africa attained majority rule when Nelson Mandela came to power in 1994. South Africa had a history of violence and oppression that was arguably even more brutal than Zimbabwe's. The voice of the blood crying from the ground was even louder there. But instead of taking Lamech's approach to the old hurts, Mandela, with the help of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, guided by the work of Jesus, chose the road of forgiveness. They formed the truth and reconciliation commission which allowed anyone willing to come forward to admit that they had been responsible for injustice, a kind of forgiveness: amnesty from prosecution, so long as they came clean. It wasn't a perfect process. It was messy and difficult and terribly sad. The stories heard by the commission were heart wrenching and the grace they offered was not cheap.

But it was powerful. On balance, South Africa is in much better shape than Zimbabwe right now. Socially culturally, economically...the blood of Jesus has spoken a better word than the blood of Abel.

So you see, when we sing about the blood of Jesus and we celebrate the blood of Jesus, and when I stand up here at this table and say, "The blood of Christ was given for the complete forgiveness of all your sins," we aren't just celebrating a personal forgiveness whereby sinful people get to heaven; we are participating in a whole new way of living in this world, we are becoming citizens of a whole new kingdom, a kingdom under the rule of a crucified king. There is a terrible amount of pain and injustice in this world. The blood of Abel still cries out from the ground, and its voice is strong and terrible. But Jesus voice is stronger. The blood of Jesus really does speak a better word than the blood of Abel.

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