

2014_04_02 Midweek Passion 5
Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
Pastor David Pfeiffer

The Blood of Christ in the Book of Hebrews:

5 – THE BLOOD THAT SPEAKS

Hebrews 12:22-24

INI

Grace to you from Him who is our Great High Priest, who mediates a New Covenant in His own blood, and peace to you in His blood, a blood which cleanses us from all sin (Hebrews 1:1–2) Amen.

Worship is a matter of mystery. It is a mysterious joining together of heaven and earth.

There is a difference between a mystery and a secret. Think about it – what happens to a secret once it becomes known? Once it is known, it ceases to be a secret. But what happens when a mystery becomes known? Really, it is only the beginning of the mystery. At first it might appear most ordinary and plain, a little unusual even. But the more you get to know about the mystery the more meaning and appreciation it fosters. A mystery is different than a secret, because it is intended to be uncovered and the more it becomes known, the more it reveals.

Take the mystery of life for instance. It is the most plain, obvious thing in the world. Either you are alive or you are dead. Yet, no scientist in the world can tell you what life is or what death is. The more closely you know about the intricate workings of the human body and mind, the more there is you don't know. The study of life is a the study of a mystery. The deeper you investigate, the greater appreciation you gain for this great mystery of God's creation.

Worship is a matter of mystery. Take for example, a person with no experience or understanding of Christian worship. What happens when he walks into a liturgical Lutheran worship service? He looks around and sees this odd, diverse group of people meeting for no apparent reason. They sit all over the room, some mostly in the back. And up in the front is one man turning around and around, back and forth. They call him the minister – whatever that means.

He sees young and old and everything in-between. They sing strange songs, and they don't even seem to be very good singers. But they sing their hearts out. They stand up. They sit down. The minister reads something. The people say something. And then

the strangest thing happens: at the end of this event, they go up to the front together. The pastor hands them a small cracker which they eat and a small shot of wine which they drink. And then they leave. This is like nothing he's ever seen before.

A mystery might seem quite plain and even strange at first. Until the blood speaks, it cannot be understood. Worship is a mystery – the more you know about it, the more you realize there is you don't know. Tonight we take that deeper look, and we pray with the aid of God's Spirit that we would gain a greater appreciate for this mysterious joining together of heaven and earth. It is a mystery that can only be understood when the blood speaks.

So we turn to the fifth in our series of text dealing with the blood of Christ in the book of Hebrews...

Hebrews 12:22–24

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, 23 to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

Tonight we uncover a mystery. We uncover something that on the surface seems strange. Yet when the blood speaks, we begin to see what cannot be seen; it speaks and we uncover a mysterious joining together of heaven and earth; we find that in Christ, the presence of heaven has come to earth. And the deeper we look into it, the greater appreciation and wonder we have for this thing we call worship. It a mystery uncovered by the blood that speaks.

There are seven invisible aspect of this mystery described in our text.

1) the place of worship is heaven

Firstly, where does worship take place? Well, where are we? We're at 0S850 Wenmoth Road, Batavia, IL. We're in a building. And our services are held here each Sunday at 10 a.m. In this sense, it is an earthly location: a city; a building. If this is all you knew, walking off the street this would seem quite unusual. It is unlike anything else Americans do. But a mystery means there is more to be discovered; a deeper reality that is to be uncovered.

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

The place of worship is heaven.

2) the angels accompany us in praise and adoration

Secondly, who is there? We look around and see how many? Yet all around is an invisible number, one which cannot be counted. It is called “a myriad of angels.” We should expect to find angels in heaven. They are the “holy ones” as the psalm says. These powerful beings serve and praise God before His throne day and night. The surprising thing is that we should be there – that this odd group of diverse, sinful people are called holy and given angelic status. The angels accompany us in praise and adoration before God’s throne.

3) all believers on earth are united as members of this heavenly assembly

Thirdly, who on earth is to be granted this access and status? Well, I suppose we could look to our membership roster; our denomination; our orthodoxy. We are members of Ascension Lutheran Church, after all; we are members of the CLC. We have all the rights and privileges of membership. However, does our constitution say anything about access to heaven? To trust in our membership at Ascension is to be left on earth. It leaves us separated from God’s heavenly presence, with no comfort in the last day, no access to God’s eternal holiness. We need blood; we need Christ. For this heavenly assembly is comprised of those names registered, not on earth, but “in heaven.”

23 [But you have come] to the church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven.

Worship is a mystery that unites the church on earth as members of a heavenly assembly.

4) we stand in the presence of God the judge

Fourthly, who sits at the center of it all? Of these seven aspects, right in the middle is God the judge. It is God who must judge, who can alone grant or withhold access. We come before God the judge. And why should we be granted access? We’ll come back to this.

5) the spirits of the faithful departed are present in praise and encouragement

Fifthly, around the throne are both the church on earth and “the spirits of righteous men made perfect” (12:23).

These are they who have gone before and died in the faith. The spirits of believers who have died believing in Jesus are with us and among us in Christ. A grandfather, a great-aunt, a mother and father, a spouse: they are with us in divine worship, for they are joined to Christ and alive in Him. The spirits of the faithful departed are present in praise and encouragement.

6) Jesus serves as liturgist, mediating the New Covenant

Sixthly, we have our liturgist. You might think the pastor leads us in liturgy. And he does. But he does so in the stead and presence of Someone Else. This is a heavenly liturgy, a service before the Most High God. And it could never happen, if we didn't have a Great High Priest to go between us and the Father and offer an acceptable sacrifice on our behalf.

"We come to Jesus, the Mediator of a New Covenant."

7) finally: we access all this through the sprinkling of Christ's blood – a sprinkling of blood which speaks great things to us

You would think that Jesus would be the culmination of our text. You would think that He is the central and last element of worship, completing this mysterious event we call worship. In many ways, He is. But there is yet a seventh element – the last and practically speaking, the most crucial element.

v.24 [you have come] to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain. It was Abel's offering in Genesis 4 which was accepted by God. Cain's offering was not. In anger and jealousy, Cain killed his brother. So God responds to Cain: "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." Abel's death was a testimony to his faithful worship and trust in God's promises. Abel's blood cries out for the LORD God to make good on His promises.

And God has made good. The seed of Eve has come and offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. The blood of Christ was shed for us and now speaks to us even better things. It does not cry out for God to make good on His promises, it actually cries out that God has made good on His promises. Unlike Abel whose blood cried out in death, calling for redemption; Christ's blood cries out in life, enacting redemption. Jesus'

blood speaks forgiveness and testifies to a heavenly reality that has come to earth – it speaks better things than that of Abel.

It says...

“Drink of it, all of you. This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

So the blood speaks. In the proclamation of the gospel, the blood of Christ speaks grace and forgiveness and grants us holy access. This is the blood for sprinkling. That is, it is the blood which is meant to be sprinkled upon us. This happens in the hearing of the gospel, and even more so, in drinking of the cup. In holy communion, our very hearts are truly sprinkled with the blood of Christ. You can see why the Lord’s Supper is the culmination of our worship. It is the central event that brings us into God’s holiness. The blood speaks and heaven and earth are joined together in Christ. It uncovers and plunges us ever deeper into the mystery of worship.

The blood speaks and we approach Mount Zion, to the city of the living God. Christ’s blood is the blood of God’s Son. Although it is human blood, it is also divine and eternal – where we receive Christ’s blood, we come to the heavenly Jerusalem together with all its heavenly wonders. Yes, we gather on earth, geographically located in a certain place at a certain time; but at the same time we are in heaven.

The blood speaks and we receive us angelic status. As saints, made holy in the blood of Christ, we stand along side the holy angels. We join the angels in offering praise and adoration before God in heaven.

The blood speaks and the whole church on earth is united. This is not a matter of who I am or what I do or what earthly group I belong to at all. Instead these names are registered in heaven. It transcends denominations. “The church” is a communion of all who believe in Jesus throughout the world. We share His blood in holy communion and therefore share Christ’s rights and privileges as firstborn of God. Worship is a mystery that joins the communion of saints on earth to the heavenly assembly.

The blood speaks as we come before the Judge. How shall we stand? John writes, “the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son cleanses us from all sin. ... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:7,9). And when is it that we come before the judge? Where in our liturgy have we been using these words from 1 John? It is part of the confession and absolution. Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. In the absolution the blood is offered

before God for our sins, and then returns to us with absolution. This is the ministry of the keys: "whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." We stand before the judge and are justified in the blood of Christ.

The blood speaks and we even joined to the spirits of those made perfect. We are joined to those who have died believing in Christ. This same blood which we take in holy communion is the blood which they have taken in holy communion. Do you see how crucial the blood is? A grandfather, a great-aunt, a mother and father, a spouse: those who have departed in the faith are still with us in Christ; as we say in the communion liturgy: "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious name..."

You can see why, in many ways, it is silly to talk about having a small congregation. There is no such thing. As believers we are mysteriously visit the heavenly Jerusalem, with all the company of heaven: the angels, the church on earth, God the judge, the saints in heaven, and Jesus the Mediator of these things. Here we eat, we drink, we listen and then we leave with all the blessings of heaven.

On the surface it seems strange. What else is like it? Here we are, a diverse group of every age, with different backgrounds, different personalities, interests, ideas, levels of understanding; different sins and flaws and scars.

Worship is a matter of mystery. The pastor hands you a small cracker and a drink of wine. But the blood must speak. God's word must act and make this happen. The blood speaks: "this is My cup of the new covenant which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Your liturgist is Jesus. Through the cup Jesus mediates a new covenant. The pastor acts as liturgist on earth, and Jesus acts as liturgist in heaven. The pastor turns to the altar, Jesus turns to the throne of God; the pastor speaks to the people, Jesus speaks to the people. The pastor hands down the bread and the wine, Jesus hands down His body and blood. He is present and mediates this heavenly reality in His blood.

Worship is a mysterious joining together of heaven and earth. And what uncovers this mystery, what makes this all possible and makes this all known is hidden in the blood and spoken through the blood. We see nothing. Yet the Word speaks and we are sprinkled with the blessings of heaven. Amen.