



Roanoke, Virginia

August 23, 2020

“The Sacrifice that Matters”

Hebrews 13:10-16

George C. Anderson

I am about to open a time capsule. I will do so by reading a passage that, in my imagination anyway, was put away in a capsule that was not to be opened until August 23, 2020. If we had opened the time capsule to read this passage any previous year of my life or our church’s history, this strange passage might be read more as a historical curiosity than a Gospel Word for today. Now, I am sure a good preacher like our liturgist this morning could have read this passage in, say, 1954 if she had been alive or even 2019 if she had been asked, and coaxed a good sermon from it... but it might have required a bit more of her time spent with her nose in commentaries to come up with the right explanation and her eyes staring out her window to the passageway to come up with the right words.

But this is 2020, and we are in strange times. And in strange times, a strange passage might be just the right pairing, something along the lines of:

roast beef and horseradish sauce,
strawberries and chocolate,
cinnamon and apple,
blueberries and steak,
(or is that just me?).

You’ll be the judge of whether or not this passage is a good pairing with 2020 when I read it. But first, I want to lift up what normally is strange about it.



Our passage speaks of animal sacrifices. The Preacher of Hebrews—**because Hebrews is a sermon, I call the writer the Preacher**—the Preacher of Hebrews speaks of animal sacrifices to make a Gospel point. While animal sacrifices are no longer offered, his congregation knows of what he speaks. The congregation is largely Jewish, and they can hang in there with his talking about animal sacrifices the way we can hang in there with someone talking about phone booths and playgrounds with metal slides and jungle gyms. We don't normally see them anymore, but we know what they are about.

So, just to get our minds right before hearing the passage, here are a few things to know about those sacrifices: In the wilderness wandering days, the years between the escape from Egypt and the entry into the promised land, animal sacrifices were offered in a moveable tent called the Mishkan or Tabernacle. When the stone Temple was built in Jerusalem it had something of the same layout of the Tabernacle because it was to be a permanent tent. Animals again were sacrificed in this tent primarily to symbolize the cost of human sin. Then the remains would be burned outside the tent.

What kind of animals would be sacrificed?

Bulls, sheep, goats, pigeons and doves.

And how was the sacrifice to be done?

Well today's sermon is rated PG, so I won't go into detail.

The important thing for you to know, though,
is that there are a lot of details I am not going into.

The first seven chapters of Leviticus are filled with them.

OK, the sacrifices are the strange part. But what makes the passage not so strange is this 2020 reality for Second Presbyterians: once we normally thought of the offerings of worship happening inside the walls of the church, and now, where are most of our worshippers on Sunday mornings? In dens, kitchens, living rooms, cars, or outdoors on walks. Strange times.

Listen for the strange Word of God for strange times:

¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. ¹³ Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Offer your sacrifices outside the walls, the Preacher is telling us.

To use a phrase that politicians use way too much, let's be clear. Let's be clear that even back in the good ole days when we regularly met for formal worship within the walls of this sanctuary, our passage still had a Gospel point to make that was as true then as it is true today. We are to offer our lives to God outside of Sunday and outside the walls of the church. But maybe we



can embrace that fundamental Christian truth in a special way during this strange time when we gather as a disassembled body rather than an assembled one.

Let's first remember what it was like then and what it is like now.

- Then, announcements were read in a bulletin. Now, they are read off slides.
- Then, a liturgist would call us to worship. Today, anyway, we watched a film where members of the church scattered about call us to worship.
- Then, Elizabeth Link would say, "Let us pray," and all the heads in the sanctuary would bow. Today, she said, "Let us pray," and in the early service the few attendees bowed their heads and in this online service I saw the two heads of our technicians bow; Sound-technician-Doug with his long hair and Live-stream-technician-Darin with his not long hair. But most heads are bowed at home, on walks or in cars.
- We had music then and we have music now... but we have a disassembled choir.

Just to push it a bit more, we are disassembled not only because we are not worshipping in the same place, we are not even worshipping at the same time. If this week's worship service is like previous ones, most of those who attend online will do so later in the day or later in the week by going to a link. So, during Bauer's baptism, when Scott Berglund asked the congregation if we will help Jason and Whitney raise Bauer in the faith, the answer "Yes" will be given all week long.

Of course, I can't wait until we can gather in the sanctuary again, but this passage won't let me whine about it... at least not today. Maybe during this time of disassembled gathering the wonderful Gospel message and charge of our passage can be heard in a very 2020 way.

Here's the Gospel message: The sacrifice outside the walls that the Preacher is speaking of is the sacrifice God makes on our behalf in Jesus Christ. The Preacher speaks specifically of the crucifixion that happened in a dump where garbage is burned. That is his focal point. But please don't think of God's complete giving of God's self as being some magical exchange that has to happen for God to calm down.

What I am talking about is this notion in some churches that our sins so anger God that God has to sacrifice a living being in order to get over it and not take his anger out on us. No, the wonder and beauty of what God offers is so much greater than that idea that the church has called "substitutionary atonement." No, the sacrifice is Jesus himself. The sacrifice is made when Jesus is born. It is made

- as he lives and breathes,
- when he responds to need with compassion,
- when he preaches and teaches,
- when he stands up to powers while also accepting invitations into their homes,
- when he crosses boundaries to be in relationship with sinners,
 - and the infectious,
 - and liberals and conservatives,
 - and Gentiles,



- and his frustrating disciples.

Every aspect of who Jesus is—that's God's offering. That's God's sacrifice. The sacrifice is God meeting us in our humanity not only in church but also—even especially—where we live,
in our homes, where we work,
in the relationships we have with loved and hated ones,
in the arena of politics and of commerce,
with family, friends and enemies...
meeting us in our best moments
and in our worst.

Some have said that it is hard to die for the greater good, but that it is even harder to live one's life for the greater good. Perhaps that is the greatest indication of Jesus' divinity. He was relentless in his living for the greater good in all his humanity.

That is the Gospel of the passage, and now here is the Charge of the passage; you heard it in verse 13. The translation I read is confusing because it seems to invite us to submit to abuse: "Bear the abuse he endured," is what I read. A better translation is this: "Join your sacrifice to his." If Jesus' sacrifice is his whole life,

- the sorrows but also the joys,
- the burdens but also the sheer pleasure of being part of something both great and good,
- his death but also the meals, company and good work of his life,

then join your life to his.

- Be present in the world as he was and is.
- Be present in the world in his gracious, selfless way.
- Be present in the way we think and speak,
 - the way we see and treat others,
 - in what we do,
 - and in the risks to reputation, body and happiness that come when one lives for the sake of justice and compassion.

We have a hymn in our *Glory to God* hymnal called, "*Lord Prepare Me to be a Sanctuary.*" For our Call to Worship, you saw members of the church quote that title as a prayer before Marianne sang the hymn. You saw

- **Jack Avis** say it at home,
- **Aaron Copeland** say it in the woods,
- **Claudia Moore** say it on her deck,
- **Cindy Waters** say it as she was about to go to the lake with her boys,



- **David Johnsen** say it at the hospital, wearing his PPE as he was getting ready to see patients,
- and, in this time of great uncertainty surrounding schools, you saw **Alice Light** and **Carolyn Sharpe**, who are teachers, say it in their classrooms, asking to be prepared as they face the old challenge of educating young minds and face the new challenge of doing so safely during a pandemic.

They ask to be prepared to be a sanctuary, to pitch their tents outside the walls and thereby join the offering of their lives to God's offering, which is Jesus living and working among us.

I'll conclude with this thought. Many of us in the church are fasting right now. What we are fasting from are the normal ways we that have as Christians within the walls of the church to worship, study, enjoy fellowship, and serve. We have to decide whether we see this fast only as something imposed on us or as a spiritual discipline. As a spiritual discipline, in giving up some forms of normal spiritual sustenance, we can draw on the nourishment that Jesus drew on when he was alone in the wilderness. We can draw on the nourishment of the Holy Spirit and be the church of Jesus Christ outside the walls.

Prelude to the Charge and Benediction

We church leaders will do our best to lead the congregation to be the church beyond the walls. The theme of this year's Christian Education program at Second Presbyterian Church is "Church Beyond Walls." For the fall at least, most of our educational offerings will not take place within the walls of the church but will take place online. And we are going to spend our time in those online studies talking about what it means to be the people of God beyond the walls as we try to catch up with Jesus. In fact, "*Catching up with the Spirit*" will be the theme of a Fall preaching series on the book of Acts. Those are just two ways we are offering nourishment in unusual ways.

Here's my charge: Let's find ways we can best be the disassembled assembled church that worships, prays, learns and serves together while apart. Let's be the church wherever we are.

