

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Washed in the Blood

While I was doing a lay internship before I went to seminary I had a mentor named Dan. He's a great guy, but he loved to have fun with me. He was famous for hazing me in any way he could think of. Once while the two of us stood at the altar on a Sunday morning he said to me, with his hands perfectly folded, "Packard, you twit!" I don't remember what dumb thing I had done, but I do recall the choir cracking up and the rest of the congregation wondering why. Once on Ash Wednesday the parish was using a brand newly donated set of crystal chalice and paten for Communion. I was the chalice bearer and was nervous about the fact that the clear chalice would make visible any lipstick that might be left on the brim. So I was very carefully wiping the chalice to be sure there was nothing to gross anybody out. Well, when it's wet, glass can be a little sticky. As I wiped once at the end of a rail, the purificator stuck, then slipped, and the wine splashed all over the front of my alb—the white vestment like this. It happened to be a really dark purple wine too. So I looked like had just been shot. I just stood there. I honestly didn't know what to do. Dan was still going down the rail giving people the host. When he got to the end and turned around, I was still standing there like an idiot with some kind of hemorrhage. He looked at me and just busted out laughing. He walked toward me and whispered, "You've been washed in the blood of the lamb!"

We went on and finished serving Communion. A couple of the altar guild women had noticed what happened and just as I finished administering the chalice they were up front pulling me into the sacristy. They had that alb off of me and the stain out of it quicker than you could say, "Substitutionary Atonement."

Of course the phrase, “washed in the blood of the lamb,” comes from the book of Revelation, chapter 7: “Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’”

I always wondered at that. Blood obviously would not make one’s robe white, anymore than Concorde grape wine would. There must be something more going on with this passage. The ancient Jewish celebration of Passover comes from the time when the People were slaves in Egypt and God gave Moses the instructions we heard in our first reading from Exodus. They were to take a lamb, without blemish, in other words pure white, and then offer it as a sacrifice at twilight. They were to take some of the blood of that pure lamb and put it on their doorposts and lintels. This blood would be a protection to them. God was going to go through the land and strike down the first born of humans and animals. He would pass over all the houses with the blood on the doors. Meanwhile, the People were to eat the lamb hurriedly as they prepared to leave Egypt for freedom the next day.

The blood of the lamb protected them from the last plague that killed all the firstborn children in Egypt. The blood obviously was red, but the lamb was to be a pure white. That purity represented an acceptable sacrifice to God.

In the New Testament, Jesus’ birth was attended by shepherds near Bethlehem who abandoned the sheep they were charged with keeping, the sheep that were bred to be offered as sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. We first meet Jesus as an adult in John’s Gospel when John the Baptist points to him and proclaims, “Behold, the Lamb of God!”

Jesus is the Lamb of God because he is the one truly pure sacrifice. He is the one human in history who resisted temptation completely. He fulfilled God’s holy Law in a way that no one

had been able to do previously. When he willingly submitted to death on the cross, his blood was poured out for us, to protect us from eternal death, to free us from slavery to Sin, to provide us nourishment unto eternal life, and to wash away our sins and make us pure. His is the pure blood of self-sacrifice that covers us to protect us from God's wrath. When he offers his disciples the bread, which is his body broken for us, and the wine, which is his blood poured out for us, he offers us his very life. He gives himself as the final sacrifice, the final, decisive act of love, placing himself, and his blood, between our sins and God's righteous anger. Just as the life-blood of the pure lambs of old protected the Israelites at the Passover, Jesus' life-blood protects us. His purity purifies us, washes us clean indeed.

As we make our regular altar call and come forward to receive Jesus as the Lord and Savior of our life, we remember him, we obey his commandment to keep this sacrament until he returns, we accept his loving sacrifice on our behalf, we recommit ourselves to serve in his name, and we are fed by his spiritual presence in a special and unique way. We are also mysteriously bound together, with Jesus and with each other, into a body, a corporate entity, the incarnate presence of God on earth. For all that God has done for us, for the gift of Jesus and his sacrifice, for the blessings and benefits that we have received at his hand, we can only say 'thank you'. As inadequate as it may seem, this simple act of obedience, faith, and thanksgiving is the greatest thing we can do. It is precisely what Jesus told us to do. It is our privilege. It is our joy! It is our duty. We come to the rail humbly, with thanks that we have been washed in the blood of the Lamb and made pure. We do this today, and we continue to do it as our worship and our witness. We keep the feast, as we have been told to do, until we keep it for all eternity at God's table in heaven.

Amen.