

Paint the Town Red
Acts 2:1-21
© Stacey Steck
Preached May 24, 2015 at San José, Costa Rica

So far in this season of stewardship, we have talked about everything red in the Bible but the most common thing, and that is blood. The red stew, the red heifer, the red sky at night, these are occasional occurrences in Scripture worthy of some time and attention, yes, but they can't hold a candle to the ribbon of red blood that flows through the Bible. From the blood of Abel crying out to God from the ground to the robes of the faithful washed in the blood of the Lamb in Revelation, the Bible spills a lot of the red stuff, enough to make it at times seem like a horror story. It even makes an appearance in our passage tonight when Peter quotes the prophet Joel about how the moon will be turned to blood when God's Holy Spirit is poured out. And all of that is not even mentioning the Passover, the bloody high point of the Old Testament, or the crucifixion, the pinnacle of bloodshed in the New Testament. No wonder Jesus' words are printed in red in many versions of the Bible. It was his blood after all, that makes the whole story possible.

Whether we are comfortable with it or not, the story of our faith is a story of blood. The blood of birth, the blood of war, the blood of animal sacrifice, the blood of martyrs. In ancient Israel, blood was life. When you stopped bleeding, you stopped living. Maybe oxygen is really more essential for life than blood, because

blood is really just a carrier for oxygen, but you can't see oxygen. You can *see* blood. And you can feel it, and smell it. Maybe that's why it's red, to really catch our attention that something is not as it should be. For the Israelites, blood was serious business. That's why there are all those regulations about handling the blood of the animals sacrificed, and dealing with the blood of menstruating women, and so on. You just couldn't deal with blood casually, because that meant you were dealing with life casually, and that meant you were dealing with God, the creator of life, casually, and you never want to do *that*.

It was this way of looking at the world that gives us our image of Christ as the unblemished Passover lamb, the perfect sacrifice. Christ's shed blood takes away the sins of the world, shields and protects us, washes us clean, all those phrases, all those hymns that maybe we take for granted because we've heard them so often. All that is good news, but maybe in the midst of it, we've missed the best news of all: that because Jesus shed his blood, we don't have to shed ours or anyone else's. We don't have to shed it trying to make up for our sins. We don't have to shed it to prove our way is right. We don't have to shed it defending ourselves. It may be that we do shed our blood for someone else. After all, there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends, and that sometimes involves the shedding of blood. But if Christ's death means anything, it is that we are not called to shed our blood, or anyone else's, to get right with God, or to save ourselves. Our blood is too precious. Our lives are too precious.

So what do we do with all that red, all that blood, in the Bible? Well, let me suggest that the red of Pentecost invites us to exchange the shedding of blood for the sharing of passion, God's passion for the world. It's cliché, I know, to identify red with passion, but somehow it works. We don't give yellow roses to the objects of our desire, we give red ones. The color red is known to stimulate the appetite, and so you will see a lot of red walls in restaurants. It's intense, it's powerful. It's the color of wine and meat. It's the color plants use to attract the birds and insects that will ensure their survival. It is a color that's a call to action, not reflection.

Last Sunday, I shared that the author of the translation of the Bible called the Message, Eugene Peterson, had translated Jesus' words about the Pharisees and the Sadducee's ability to interpret the color of the sky using a well-know saying in English, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky at morning, sailor take warning." Eugene Peterson doesn't do the same thing in our passage tonight, but if he had asked me for help on this story of Pentecost, I might have suggested another well-known saying, the one we have been using for our season of stewardship. Instead of saying, "But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine,' " I would have suggested, "And others sneered and said, 'Just look at them, out painting the town red first thing in the morning' " because that's what we say when people are out and about on a drunken binge. "We're going to paint the town red" is what people say when they are going to use alcohol as an excuse to be up to no good, to be irresponsible, maybe even dangerous.

Let me clear up any misconceptions right now. We are NOT serving red wine tonight at the dinner. But we will be painting the town red, just like the disciples began to do on Pentecost. You see, they began acting a little strange, attracting some attention, talking what must have seemed like nonsense to some, and heresy to others, just like drunks do on Bourbon Street or anywhere else. But as Peter explains, it wasn't new wine that filled them, it was God's Holy Spirit of generosity, and it caused them to be up to all-good instead of no-good, to be irresponsible in all the right ways, and to be dangerous to all the powers that be. The Romans may have painted many a town red with the blood of their enemies, but the disciples were painting the town red with the red that really matters.

Yes, Pentecost is God's passion for the world ignited. It is God painting the town of Jerusalem, and the whole world, with divine passion, and using the disciples to do it. It is the good news that the age of bloodshed is over and the age of sharing has begun. It is the good news that God's grace isn't only for the few but for all. It is the good news that scarcity has been abolished and abundance has taken its place. Now, maybe it's hard to believe all that good news when the everyday news is of ISIS executing people right and left, and clashes between police and protestors, and pilots crashing airliners into the sides of mountains, to name just a few of the tragedies of these days. But imagine how bloody the world would be without the generosity of God that is slowly but surely bringing more order from the chaos. It may not seem like it, but the world really is a less bloody

place, and we Christians are a part of that march forward, maybe even its drum major, but at the very least called to show God's passion for peace and justice and abundant life in all that we say and do. And I think the way we do that best, is by being a generous people who reflect what took place on that Pentecost Day, when God's Spirit wasn't given sparingly just to the best and the brightest, but generously to the old and the young, the free and the slave, the male and the female, when the words of God's Spirit reached the ears of not only one nation but many, when God's Spirit announced with wind and fire that the old ways of blood and violence are being swept away by new ways of caring and sharing. When the church lets God's Spirit live through every member and not just a privileged few, when we tell the story not just to ourselves over and over again but to the world, when we create rather than destroy, we are truly painting the town red with the generosity of God's Spirit.

In a few minutes, after the children come back in and rejoin their families, we'll be making our estimates of how financially generous we plan to be in the coming year. And when you fill out those cards, let me invite you to be thinking red, thinking passion, thinking life, and thinking hope, because that's what these gifts represent, and that's what they really bring, in tangible ways, to those with whom we are able to share the Holy Spirit, both inside and outside our walls. And then once we go forth to celebrate how we as a congregation will paint our town red with generosity, let me invite you to really do some painting, and make your

mark with red paint on the sheet of paper you'll find hanging in the Fellowship Hall. That will be our reminder throughout the year of what the Spirit did that first Pentecost day, and what we have done here tonight. And may God help us all to be ever more open to that generous Holy Spirit of God. Amen.