

Christ our Passover
Proper 16, Year C
Sunday, August 25, 2019
The Rev. Amber Carswell

It was about 2009 when I stopped burning CDs altogether. By then, my phone was becoming my mp3 player and I had a car that I could plug into through an aux cable. Now, my phone can invisibly connect to everything from my stereos to my water heater, and it accesses the infinite musical galaxy of Spotify.

But when I drive my truck, a Nissan Frontier that's old enough to know better, I am brought back to simpler times where forethought and deliberation provided me with my music: my Frontier boasts only a CD player. I pulled three massive books of my old CDs out of the attic after I bought it, their weight and tangibility a charming antiquity. You might guess the problem. I'm *stuck*, basically, in the musical tastes of my peak CD-making age of about 18 to 23 years old. And this is how, my friends, I found myself driving to an appointment this week in my truck listening with a mixture of amused nostalgia and deep shame to an album by dcTalk.

If you're like my wife, you knew dcTalk only because you had a couple of nice but weird friends in college who would only listen to contemporary Christian music. If you're like me, you were one of those nice but weird people who had a time in life of only listening to contemporary Christian music. For the uninitiated, dcTalk was arguably the biggest name of that insular world.

Now, everyone has things they are embarrassed about loving at some point, right? MC Hammer, professional wrestling, Glamour shots, you name it. But there's a weird thing wrapped up in putting in that album and finding, nearly 15 years dormant, that you still know every word and remembering that feeling of believing every word, too. That your understanding of God as a 16-year-old could be evoked by an old song.

It makes me wonder what it would be like to have a catalogue of experiences or songs or images that could trace the development of your faith. The smell of an old church, the pastor's embrace, the sunburn and cicadas of a week at summer camp, all leading you and changing you until you find yourself here. For a faith that does not grow or change is like anything else in life that does not grow or change — it is dead, inert, it is that dusty glamour shot on the wall of your home. So how do we evolve in the faith? Are there common threads among us and those who have gone before us that we can recognize?

The writer of Hebrews traces the development, not of his own faith, but of the Jewish people.

An aside about Hebrews: I heard in a church once a lector say, "A reading from the letter of Paul to the Hebrews," which is about as wrong as you can get in describing this book. First, no one knows who wrote Hebrews, but it definitely wasn't Paul. Also, it's not a letter like the others — it might better be described as a sermon. And it's not *to* the Hebrews — it's written *about* the Hebrews, by a Christian who is in that point in time trying to understand this great shift of worshipping Jesus and how he fits,

how he naturally brings to fulfillment, the Jewish faith.¹ In particular: the sacrificial system and the wrath of God.

So let's start from early Old Testament with a classic lynch mob story from the Bible. Book of Joshua, chapter 7, Israel has just suffered a minor military defeat. The Israelites' loss of morale, their 'melting hearts' in battle, are unambiguously seen as the wrath of God. If the Israelites fail in battle, someone must be acting unrighteously. God provides a convenient lottery to determine just who that unrighteous person is. The lot falls to a man named Achan, and all Israel picks up stones to bludgeon him to death. In ganging up against someone else, they create unity and peace among themselves.

Setting aside actual stones, can you hear something familiar in this story?

Achan dies, and so God's wrath turns from them, the Scripture says. Of course it does, James Alison comments. "The shifting patterns of fear and mutual recrimination which had riven the people have been overcome by their triumphant and enthusiastic unanimity. From their perspective it feels as though 'peace has been given them'. This is, in fact, peace, in the way the world gives it, the peace which comes from unanimity in righteous hatred of an evildoer. But it is misperceived by the participants as peace flowing from the divinity thanks to the right sacrifice having been offered."

Time goes on. The sacrifice works just as well when it's an animal stand-in for the guilty humans. The priest would take the animal and sprinkle its blood on the people to protect them from God's wrath. It turns into liturgy, a powerful catharsis that creates the same feeling of unanimity and righteousness for the people participating in it. This scapegoating, us vs. them mentality, you know it well, I know it well, it is deep in us. There is no quicker way to unite a group of people than behind a shared enemy.²

I don't think it does us any good to say, "Of course we've moved beyond this mentality because we don't believe God is wrathful." Sure, we think that the wrath visited on Achan is human wrath. But human wrath and our justification for it is a reality; removing God's name from it does not change our circumstance. I think it clear that we have not moved past it, and we find all sorts of ways to justify it, divine or no. From the violence necessary to keep us safe, the sacrifice of the environment for our ease and comfort, to the every day wrath that we kindle with our huddle of friends against the immigrant, the native, the rich, the poor, the conservative, the liberal, the old, the young, the idea we are against, whatever threat we might perceive -- we return to that same system.

There is one exception in our tradition. The writer of Hebrews calls Jesus "the great high priest." But this priest, instead of finding yet another animal to place the community's guilt upon, instead of finding a scapegoat for the community's problems, this priest put himself intentionally in the sacrificial system. The only real innocent there ever was, placing himself voluntarily in the way of this wrath, and by doing so, he reveals us for who we are. We do not serve a God who needs to be appeased by blood; we have made this God in our image, our actions of making peace among pockets of ourselves by our mutual hatreds labeled as "divine."

When I listened to only contemporary Christian music as a teenager, I did so because the outside world of the unsaved was dangerous, corrupting, something to shore off from with like-minded individuals. But this is not peculiar to that subset of our society or a time in life. How can we be free from these most ancient of patterns?

¹ Reading Hebrews often means putting up with some measure of tiresome Christian self-satisfaction from the author that we find objectionable for many reasons.

² I owe a great debt to James Alison for tracing this line of thought in his essay, *Wrath and the Gay Question* <<http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng32.html>>. The quotes are from this essay.

The writer of Hebrews goes through the list of what faith was. It used to be something that could not be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

How important it is to recognize yourself in that place of wrath. We're all there, in some way or another. We are all that kid blocking herself off from others through sacrifice, perpetuating the wrath in the world. But that body and blood is no longer sprinkled on us to protect from wrath. We take it in, this saving victim who stepped into the place of shame and broke the system, and if we take this in seriously, we become ready to undo the world's wrath in the same way.

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast.