

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC  
THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT, MARCH 15, 2009  
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer  
Lenten Sermon Series - Part II: Salvation  
"The Eternal Sacrifice"

[Readings: Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 8:31-39; Mark 8:31-38]

Our second in a series of Lenten sermons deals with another of the great Biblical themes - Salvation. Originally it was scheduled for last Sunday when all three of the appointed readings compliment, and possibly even illuminate, each other. Perhaps you will remember that in the Old Testament reading Abraham is prepared to sacrifice, to give to God as a burnt offering, his only son Issac. In the Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection and calls it a divine thing. He also makes a subtle reference to the instrument of his death - the cross! Paul continues the thought by comparing God to Abraham who did not withhold his only son, and says that because of this offering, because of this death, resurrection and, now, intercession for us, nothing can separate us from the love of God. All of this is nothing less than the effect of "The Eternal Sacrifice."

The first of several questions raised by this theme is: What does it mean to be saved? I grew up in the "southern" Bible belt of Pennsylvania. It's not as large or as intense as the great Bible belt of the Southeast in which we live. But there were, in those days, just as many "encounters" between "Bible-believin' Christians" and "heathen Liberals." When I was in college the question "are you saved?" was always answered "from what?" My roommate had even swiped a sign that said "Jesus saves!", under which he hung another sign that said, "S & H Green Stamps!" It wasn't that we took salvation lightly, it was rather that we felt a need to rebel against theological jargon. We also didn't understand the effects of an eternal sacrifice.

An example of this kind of rebellion took place in the classroom of one of our religion professors, Dr. Charles D. Spotts. Dr. Spotts was of Amish extraction, grew up in Lancaster Co., PA, and loved to travel the back roads on a pretty Sunday afternoon. He related to us that on one of these afternoons he and his wife were driving along when suddenly they came upon a roadblock. A wild and wooly looking man approached them, shotgun in hand. When Dr. Spotts rolled down his window to find out what was going on, the man shot a question at him: "Brother, are you saved?" "There was only one thing I could reply," Dr. Spotts continued, "So I answered, 'Yes, I certainly am!'" The man responded by removing the roadblock and bidding them "Go in peace."

Dr. Spotts further explained that he could have questioned the man to find out if they both had the same understanding of "being saved." "But it didn't matter," he said to us, "because I do believe with the Anglican Archbishop William Temple that I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved, because I believe in Jesus Christ as the Eternal Sacrifice for my sins."

Now in those days I had no fear of God or professors so I asked the "eternal question!" "Dr. Spotts, from what are you saved?" "Let me put it this way," he replied. "On the day just described, by giving an honest answer instead of acting like a smart-ass I was 'saved' from getting my head blown off and another man was 'saved' from committing murder. I see that as an act of God's love in my life and therefore when a smart-ass student asks me a like-minded question, I am able to pass on that love by refraining from giving that student an 'F', thereby 'saving' him from failing my course. That requires a sacrifice on my part, but it enables the student to go on to bigger and better things. Or in other words, because of the love of Christ in my life I have been 'saved' from the sin of anger which would attempt to destroy a creature of God's creation. I have been saved from 'playing God.' Every time I put that principle into action it becomes 'present tense' and I am 'being' saved. If I continue to allow that principle to operate in my life I always 'will' be saved. I have been, am being and will be saved because nothing can separate me from that love of God."

I guess I asked for *that*, didn't I? But obviously, I have also never forgotten this incident, which happened more than 40 years ago! It comes back everytime I read these passages. It comes back everytime I think about what might have happened had I not been "saved" from flunking that course. It comes back everytime I think about the eternal sacrifice that saved me.

But why was a sacrifice necessary? Why did Jesus have to die on a cross? How does his death "save" us? These are the questions which follow naturally from what it means to be saved. Let's consider them for a few minutes.

First, why was a sacrifice necessary? Quite possibly it was not! But "sacrifice" was a way of worship that people understood. It was an Old Testament idea that sacrifice was a way of "giving back to God" a portion of what God had given to us. It was also a way of offering to God as a symbol something other than our own physical bodies.

Second, why did Jesus have to die on a cross? Because the cross was an instrument of the time that showed the world forever what sin can do; the life of Jesus was destroyed, and everyone thought it was forever. But the cross is also "a window in time that allows us (in the

future) to see the suffering love that is eternally in the heart of God." (Barclay)

Third, How does the death of Jesus save us? Easy: Christ's death led to resurrection; without resurrection, we would have no idea of eternal life (ie. life after physical death). This is a different sense of "being saved."

In other words, Salvation leads us to Eternal Life, so be sure to tune in next week!