

SERMON

Let us Pray: O Lord may the Words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

A shepherd in Palestine sheltered his sheep in the pen for the night. Sometime after falling asleep, he was awakened by a huge commotion that brought him to his feet. He discovered that a wolf was dragging off one of his sheep. The shepherd began hitting the wolf. The wolf turned on the shepherd, biting him repeatedly. Finally, the shepherd killed the wolf. He then managed to bandage the sheep's wounds. Keeping the sheep with him to comfort it and keep it warm, the shepherd and the sheep fell asleep together. The next morning, the shepherd was found dead, his body still protecting the sheep. The headline in the local paper read, *Sheep Alive, Covered in Shepherd's Blood.*

Blood. It's a major theme in John's Gospel. Already in John 1, the evangelist writes, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" The Lamb, Jesus, will shed His blood. In John's Gospel, blood serves one purpose: to wash away sin.

Sin is always at the door, standing at the door of our lives. That's because we never measure up. We never do enough. We all fall short of the glory of God. But just because sin keeps knocking at the door, it doesn't mean we have to let him in.

But we do! We let him in! And when we do, sin trashes our living room and basement. He makes a mess out of our kitchen and bathrooms. And the backyard? Don't get me started! Then, after making a terrible mess, sin wants to stay with us for the rest of our lives. And what do we say? "Sure! Great idea, sin! Come on in!" *What?* And so we spend the rest of our lives trying to get rid of sin and all of its ugly consequences. How? Many ways.

Projection. Project sin onto someone else. Blame someone. Blame *anyone*. Blame your husband. Blame your wife. Blame your parents. Blame your teachers. And while you're at it, blame the government and the system.

Rationalization. "What I did is *no big deal!*" "It didn't *really* hurt *anybody*." "It's just this once. Besides, *no one* will ever know."

Comparison. “If you think I’m bad, you should see my boss!” “At least I’m not as bad as my sister!” “Well, remember what *he* did?” “Ha! I’m a saint compared to that sinner!”

Repression. Stuff it down. *Stuff it way down*. Live in denial. “I know it was wrong, but I’m just not going to think about it!”

Distraction. Rush around from one event to the next so that at night you collapse. Run yourself ragged so that when you hit the pillow, sin doesn’t haunt your heart and muddle your mind.

Evasion. Pop a pill, have a drink, smoke a joint. Get addicted to TV, sports, money—you name it. Anything to evade the all-consuming consequences of sin!

Do you see the problem with all of this? It doesn’t work! *None of this works!* We wake up the next day, and sin is still there, trashing our house, making life miserable and sometimes absolutely unbearable!

There’s only one solution to sin. Stand with John under Christ’s cross. “He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe” (John 19:35). John was there, at the cross. He saw it all

happen. John gives his testimony. And his testimony is true. What would that be? Christ's blood *alone* washes away sin. All sin. Everyone's sin. Yours. Mine. His. Hers. Theirs. For everyone who believes, all sin is forgiven!

Sin is forgiven—that's free for us. Good Friday, though, calls us to remember what it cost Jesus. His crucifixion at Golgotha was an act of utter brutality and barbarism. Jesus is first stripped before Herod's soldiers. He's stripped again at the command of Pilate. And then He is stripped once more at the cross when the soldiers divide His garments by casting lots.

When Jesus was flogged by the Romans the next day, lacerations tore into His underlying skeletal muscles and produced quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh.

Roman soldiers used a whip of braided leather thongs with spikes woven into them. When the whip would strike the flesh, spikes would cause deep bruises and lacerations. The whipping would have gone all the way from the shoulders down the back and the back of the legs. The Romans threw Jesus on the wood

and drove tapered spikes through His wrists and feet—all the while mocking Him and spitting on Him.

On the cross, Christ's arms were stretched six inches upward so His shoulders were dislocated. The stress of His diaphragm forced His chest into an inhaling position. In order to exhale, Christ had to push up, using His feet to relieve pressure on His diaphragm, and temporarily exhale. In doing so, the nail would tear through His feet, eventually locking up against his tarsal bones.

For six hours, this breathing motion went on and on and on, with Christ scraping His shredded back against the coarse wood until He became completely exhausted and unable to push up and breathe.

As Jesus slowed down His breathing, He went into respiratory acidosis—leading to an irregular heartbeat. In fact, with His heart beating erratically, Jesus would have known that death was near. He died of cardiac arrest.

Peter Paul Rubens, a famous artist in the seventeenth century, depicts these events in John's Gospel. Rubens's masterpiece is called *The Descent from the Cross*.

In the background of the painting, billows of black clouds linger after the three hours of darkness. In the foreground is Jesus. Rubens paints a sweeping diagonal line made by Christ's shining white shroud. Christ's head dangles to one side, and His body hangs limp. Sections of His skin bear the greenish-yellow color of death.

In the left corner of the painting is Mary, Christ's mother, who appears in blue. Mary is reaching up to her Son. Her grieving face is lit by the whiteness of the cloth and reflects her broken heart. Mary's skin matches the ashen pastiness of Christ's, and we remember Simeon's prophecy that a sword would pierce her heart. We can scarcely imagine Mary's profound sense of loss and grief.

Another woman supports Christ's foot as it rests on her shoulder. Christ's foot is an important clue to her identity. It's Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. As a disciple, she once

sat at Christ's feet. And, shortly before His death, she took expensive perfume and anointed Christ's feet.

Next to her is another woman. The tears help identify her. It's Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is crushed—*utterly*. So much so that on Easter morning she runs frantically, searching for Jesus. We'll learn more about that, and her, on Easter.

We know that the man standing on the ladder to the left is Joseph of Arimathea. His rich clothing comports with the fact that Joseph of Arimathea had enough money to buy burial spices, and he had a new tomb—all for Jesus. Joseph is looking at the man in black. It is Nicodemus, painted in black, because, as you recall, Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. We'll learn more about him at the Sunrise Service at the Easter Vigil.

The person under Nicodemus is dressed in red. It's John, the Gospel writer. It's John, the beloved disciple. It's John, the son of Zebedee and the brother of James. John's eyes are fixed on Mary, Jesus' mother. From the cross, Jesus said to Mary and John.
“Woman, behold, your son!

... Behold, your mother!” (John 19:26–27). John is already caring for Mary in her deep sorrow.

But why is John dressed in red? That’s the driving question Peter Paul Rubens wants us to ask. *Why is John dressed in red?* Christ’s blood drips from His head, His hands, and His side. Christ’s blood continues downward until it pours directly onto *John*.

John is dressed in red because John is covered in blood. John is saturated in blood. John is washed in Christ’s blood! And John says that same blood is for you! This is John’s testimony, and John’s testimony is true!

At the bottom-right corner of the painting is a piece of paper with the Latin inscription INRI with a rock on top of it. These letters stand for *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*—Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Next to the inscription and rock lies an offering plate that holds the crown of thorns and more blood. Blood is in the offering plate. Why? It’s Christ’s offering. It’s Christ’s gift, for you. *More cleansing blood.*

Peter Paul Rubens invites us to stand at the cross, like John. To hold on to Jesus, like John. To allow the Savior's blood to wash us, like John. Why? Because Christ's blood is the only solution for all of our sin.

So we stand at the foot of the cross, like John, clothed in red, forever forgiven! Amen.