



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Greater and More Perfect Hebrews 9:11-15

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This is my dad's old lantern. We used it on camping trips when I was growing up. It was the start of my collection. I always thought it was eye-blindingly bright. As I got into collecting, people told me I needed to get my hands on some of the newer Canadian-made models. They're *so* much brighter, they said. I had trouble believing that. This thing is *really* bright, I thought. Plus, it has two mantles and those Canadian models from the 70s and 80s only have one. How could they possibly be brighter? That, and when I started, I didn't want to collect anything younger than I am, so that ruled out those newer models.

Well, fast-forward a few years and I've now got several of those newer models—like this one here. I was sceptical that it could be that much brighter. Take a look and you'll see, it only has *one* mantle. And so I was surprised. That old lantern was blindly-bright, but this guy's so bright it'll scorch your retinas. One guy I know took a dozen or more lanterns on a camping trip. The first night he had ten lanterns burning and the ranger stopped by his site to say that people were complaining about all the light. He needed limit it to two lanterns. So my friend shut them all off and brought out two of these. Half an hour later the ranger came back and said, "Okay...you can light two...but not two of *those*. The technology changed. The old one works on the same design that Coleman had been using since turn of the century. The new one burns the same fuel, operates on the same principles, but it's got a better fuel-delivery system and even though it only has one mantle instead of two, that mantle is bigger and that

makes all the difference. The candle-power rating on the newer model is almost twice that of the older one. Now, I may still use the older one sometimes for nostalgic reasons—it's what I grew up with—but if my goal is to light up a campsite in the dark, I'd be stupid not to use the newer one.

I say this by way of introduction to our Epistle from Hebrews this morning. We don't know who wrote the book of Hebrews, but we do know that it was written to Hebrew (Jewish) Christians in part to explain to them and to assure them that the new covenant established by Jesus—while it has continuity with the old covenant—is nevertheless better. I haven't had a chance to listen to what Bp. Dorrington preached last week when I was away, but the Epistle was from Galatians and, if you remember, it highlighted just how tempting it was for Jewish Christians to fall back into the old way—the old covenant way—of doing things. Some of this was that it was simply the life they knew. When they became Christians they didn't stop being Jewish. But there were also Gentiles now coming into this movement of Jesus-followers. The unbelieving Jews didn't like that. As far as they were concerned Gentiles were unclean. And so these Jewish Christians were shunned by their friends and family and even kicked out of their synagogues for associating with Gentiles. It got worse as the Jews began to actively persecute the Church. Jesus had given these new Jewish believers so much more than they'd had in the old covenant, but it was easy to think only about living for the day. For Jewish Christians it was tempting and it would have been easy to simply drift away from the Church and fall back into old covenant Judaism. And so the writer of Hebrew urges them not to do that. Despite the persecution, what they have now in Jesus is so much better than what they had before. The old covenant gave a promise of a new world and a new life in the Messiah. In Jesus, the Messiah has finally come and he's fulfilled that old promise.

He's inaugurated the new world and the new life. In Jesus we take part in the fulfilment of God's promises and that's worth it, no matter the cost.

To make his point the writer of Hebrews takes his readers back to the tabernacle—that was the tent that the Israelites built in the wilderness, the precursor to the temple in Jerusalem. Look at Hebrews 9:11-14.

**But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.**

The writer here talks about tents and holy places. It might be a little foreign to us, but think back to the book of Exodus. The Lord rescued his people from their bondage in Egypt and at Mt. Sinai, in the wilderness, he gave him the law, written on stone tablets. At the same time he also gave Moses very detailed instructions for building the tabernacle—the tent complex where the people would worship the Lord and present their offerings and sacrifices.

That tent, the tabernacle, was built to mimic the garden and Eden as they're presented in the first chapters of Genesis. The imagery used to decorate the tabernacle was meant to invoke the idea of a garden. At the core of the tabernacle, as you progressed from the camp of the Israelites into the outer court of the tabernacle and then into the centre of it was the holy place, where only the

priests went, and then beyond that was the holy of holies or most holy place. That was where the ark of the covenant was kept. It was essentially God's throne room. That was where the cloud representing the glory of the Lord rested—God in the midst of his people. But no one was permitted into the most holy place. Sin and uncleanness cannot enter the presence of the Lord. Only once a year did the high priest enter the Lord's presence to offer expiation for the sins of the people.

No sinner may enter the presence of our holy God. This is why Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden. But there in the wilderness, as God's plan of redemption began to move forward, he instructed his people to build this tabernacle so that they could once again know him, so that they could live with him in their midst. It was a partial undoing of the consequences of sin. Adam and Eve had once lived in the most holy place, in God's presence. That's what Eden was about. They were to live and to serve in God's presence, cultivating his garden. And as they were fruitful and multiplied, the garden, that holy place would grow—until it fill the whole earth. Because of their rebellion, Adam and Eve were driven out from God's presence. But in the wilderness the Lord helped Israel to build a model of that most holy place, he took up his residence in it, and he gave the people a law by which they could live on the periphery of that manifestation of his glory. No, they couldn't enter directly into his presence, but whereas Adam and Eve were driven away, in the tabernacle, the Lord now drew his people near. It was the beginning of something good. The tabernacle, the law, the whole old covenant were good things. They reminded God's people of his promise to one day set all of creation to rights and to restore his people fully to his presence.

The problem for Israel was that in the day-in and day-out activity of living

around the tabernacle, of living the law, and of routinely making sacrifices and offerings, it became very easy to forget that all of this pointed to a greater reality and a greater fulfilment. These things were dim shadows of a much greater reality. The tabernacle, the sacrifice, the law were never meant to be a permanent arrangement. The point was never for God's people merely to camp out around the place of his presence, merely to be able to get close to the Holy of Holies. The point or the goal was to return to Eden itself, to return to a life in the presence of the Lord. God and humanity brought back together; Heaven and earth rejoined. As Christians we're, too, often guilty of forgetting God's end goal. We come to the Lord's Table on Sundays, we gather with our brothers and sisters for worship, and we make it very routine and hum-drum, forgetting that what we have here is a down-payment on the full inheritance that Jesus will be bringing with him when he returns—of resurrection and new life and of living fully in the presence of the Father.

This is what the writer of Hebrews is getting at when he talks about Jesus as our great high priest of the good things to come. The tabernacle was a *good* thing, but it pointed to *better* things, just as the Lord's Supper is a good thing, but points to something even better. And Hebrews says, as our high priest, Jesus entered not in to the most holy place of the tabernacle. No. At the cross Jesus entered into the true, the real holy of holies—the one of which the holy of holies in the tabernacle was only a representation and only a shadow. In his death, Jesus entered the real, the actual presence of his Father. The good news is that because Jesus has entered the Father's presence as our great high priest, since he has made purification for us, we're now ourselves welcomed into the Father's presence as well.

Again, in the face of hostility and persecution, many Jewish Christians

were tempted to simply go back to the old way of doing things. In their day the temple, the great building of stone on the mountain above Jerusalem, had replaced the tabernacle, but it was laid out on the same plan and served the same purpose. The temple and the sacrifices were good things. Why not just do things the old way? The Lord had commanded them, after all. Why risk persecution by joining with Gentiles to worship Jesus? And so Hebrews reminds them: as good as the temple was, Jesus went to the real place the temple represents. The temple was a model that pointed to the heavenly reality. When Jesus takes us into the heavenly reality, how can we possibly justify going back to the model?

Jesus as our great high priest entering the most holy place naturally leads us to the second point Hebrews makes here about the new covenant and how it's better than the old. The priests of the old covenant entered the most holy place of the tabernacle once every year. We're told here that Jesus entered once and for all time. The old sacrifices were good until the next time you sinned. The sacrifice that Jesus made at the Cross is good for eternity. Why? Because when the old priests went into the holy of holies they took with them the blood of goats and calves. Jesus entered the presence of the Father with his own blood.

This was hard for many Jews to understand. The closest the Old Testament ever got to human sacrifice was in the story of Abraham following the Lord's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mt. Moriah. But, of course, the whole point of that story is that the Lord *stopped* Abraham from following through with the sacrifice and instead provided a ram as an alternative. (Hebrews picks this up later, because it points to what Jesus has done for us.) The prophet Isaiah wrote about the Suffering Servant sacrificing his life, but no one really ever understood it as pointing to the

Messiah giving his life for the people. Animals were for sacrifices, not people. The other difficult thing was that no one ever imagined that the priest would himself become the sacrifice. This is why the people had such a hard time accepting Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.

But that doesn't mean this wasn't all there in the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews gets at three aspects of sacrifice in the Old Testament that actually do point to Jesus and what he did for us:

First, the whole point of the old covenant sacrifices was that the people gave up something valuable as a sign of their commitment to the Lord and their trust in him. We see this throughout the law. We see it in the Sabbath. Other peoples worked seven days a week to survive, but the Lord promised to take care of his people and commanded that they take off one day a week. Not only was it a day of needed rest for them, but it was a potentially costly act of faith in which they expressed their trust in the God who had promised to care for them. In the wilderness they collected manna six days a week. If they tried to keep it overnight it spoiled. Except on the sixth day. Each Friday they collected twice as much manna and somehow it remained unspoiled as food for the Sabbath. Any other day of the week it didn't work, but the Lord did something miraculous to teach the people a point: he would care for them and they needed to trust him. Whenever someone feared he wouldn't be able to make ends meet if he took that one day off each week, there was that reminder in Israel's story. If God provided the extra manna for the Sabbath, somehow he'll do the same today if we will only honour and obey him. The same went for the tithe. Other people held on tightly to every penny they earned, some out of greed and some out of desperate necessity, but the Lord reminded his people that it all came

from him originally and that as a sign of their trust in him they were to give ten per cent back. Somehow he'd help them to live on the remaining ninety—even the poorest people. And he took care of them. They learned to trust in the Lord. But the animals sacrificed for the people in the temple took things a step further. They reminded the people of the *cost* of sin. Because of their sin, Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, cut off from the tree of life. Brothers and Sisters, sin puts us outside the presence of our holy God. Sin separates us from the source of life. Sinners die. The only way back into the presence of our holy God is by the shedding of blood. And that's the second point made about sacrifice here. Redemption from sin requires the death of another in our place. The animals sacrificed in the temple were costly sacrifices, but they were also imperfect sacrifices. They were dumb and unwilling. They served only until the next sin was committed. And they brought the people only into the tabernacle or the temple. For the people to be truly cleansed from sin, for the people to enter into the Holy of Holies would require an even costlier sacrifice.

Even though many of the people failed to think beyond the surface meaning of these sacrifices—just as many of us fail to see past the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper to the things they represent—those sacrifices pointed to Jesus. In Jesus, God himself took up our flesh—he became one of us, he identified himself with us and became our representative. He became like a second Adam. And so Jesus obediently and willingly gave his life for us. He was the costly sacrifice—the spotless lamb, the best of the flock. As our representative, he took on himself the death that we deserve. This is why we can say, as we do in the Lord's Supper, that by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world has been made. This is why we can pray

that by his flesh and by his blood our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood. The blood of animal sacrifices gave a superficial cleanness to people who had been defiled by their sin, but Jesus' blood doesn't just make us superficially clean. It purifies us from the inside out. And so we can also pray that as his body and blood make us clean, we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. By his blood we can finally enter the Holy of Holies, we can finally be restored to the presence of our holy Creator.

And that gets at the third point made here—the third way in which Jesus' sacrifice is better than the old sacrifices and the new covenant is better than the old. The sacrifices of the old covenant were shadows pointing to the real sacrifice. The holy of holies in the temple was a shadow of the real holy of holies, not just the heavenly presence of the Father, but it looked forward to the day when Creation will finally be set to rights, when heaven and earth will finally be joined together and humanity can once again live in God's presence, just as Adam and Eve did before they sinned. The cleanness and atonement offered by those old sacrifices was a shadow of the atonement and the cleanness offered by Jesus. Jesus didn't just enter the central room of the temple in Jerusalem to offer the blood of an animal on our behalf. Jesus, who is both God himself and our perfect human representative, entered into the actual presence of his Father with his own blood shed at the cross. In doing that he offers a sacrifice that washes us clean from sin to the very core of our being.

Somehow the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, Hebrews says, purifies our conscience from dead works so that we can serve the living God. *Through Jesus we are transformed.* Chapter 6 introduced this language of “dead works”, but it refers to our repentance

from our old pagan and sinful ways and also, for the Jewish Christians, from the obligations of the old covenant and its temple and sacrificial system. As good as those things were, as God-given as they were, Jesus now offers something better. Jesus' sacrifice undoes our sin once and for all. Through him we have access to the presence of God. What we lost when Adam sinned we now have back—or at least we have the down payment of it and hope for its fullness in the future. Jesus washes us clean with his blood and having purified us for the presence of God, he makes us his dwelling place, his tabernacle, as he fills us with the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit then sanctifies our hearts and our minds, making them holy again so that we can serve the living God just as Adam did in the garden. Jesus, by his sacrifice, not only leads us into the holy of holies to know God's presence, but in giving us the Spirit he also makes us—you and me and, collectively his Church—the holy of holies: God's presence *in* us.

Verse 15 stresses again that this is all and only through Jesus:

**Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.**

Jesus is the mediator. There's no other way. Even the old way—the way of the tabernacle and the sacrifices—that God once gave is now defunct. It's been fulfilled. The thing to which it pointed, the thing for which it was preparing the people, the new thing has finally come in Jesus.

Imagine a frozen river. The first time Veronica and I went to Montréal the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers were frozen. We were driving across the bridge from the west end of the island where the two rivers meet and we saw

a Jeep cruising over the ice back towards Montréal. The ice was *that* thick. You can do that in the middle of a cold Québec winter, but when Spring comes the bridge is the only way across. Try driving your car on thin ice—or try driving on water—and you'll die.

In Jesus, Spring has come to the world. In Jesus a bridge has been provided across the water. The law was perfectly good *in its time*, just as the ice was safe to drive on if you wanted to cross the river in January, but the time has passed for that. If you want to cross the river now the bridge Jesus provides is the only way. Hebrews was written to people who feared persecution for following Jesus. They were accustomed to driving on the ice and despite the fact that it was now melting and thin, they were still tempted to keep driving on it. Last week in our Epistle from Galatians we read about the Judaisers. They were insisting that to follow Jesus the Gentiles had to be circumcised, follow the right dietary rules, and observe the Sabbath. They still said they were following Jesus, but it doesn't work that way. That's like telling everyone how perfectly good the bridge is while trying to drive your car across the thawing river. The ice is melting. The time for those old ways has passed. Jesus offers something better and his way is now the only way.

Brothers and Sisters, do our lives demonstrate faith in Jesus as our sole mediator? While you and I may not be tempted to go back to the law or the temple or the old covenant sacrifices, we have our own pasts to which we often hold more tightly than we may realise. We profess faith in Jesus, but we still haven't repented of all of our old loyalties, all of our old ways of doing things, all of our old sources of security. We profess Jesus, but we still find satisfaction in sin and in self. We say we trust Jesus, but we still look for security in work and in money. We say we trust Jesus, but we

often evaluate ourselves not based on what he has done for us, but on what we think we've done for him. Friends, it's like giving people directions to the bridge, while we ourselves are sitting in our cars with the engine running, nosing our wheels into the water and thinking we'll somehow get across the river. Lent is a time for us to look around, to take stock, and to evaluate our situation. Easter is only two weeks away. It's a reminder that in Jesus Spring has arrived. The river isn't frozen anymore. We need to let go of the old ways of life and follow Jesus across the bridge. Yes, to follow Jesus means challenge and sacrifice, but Jesus is better in every way. He and he alone has redeemed us from death to serve the living God.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, we thank you this morning for the sacrifice you have made in the death of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. In Jesus the price of our sin has been paid once and for all. By his blood we are washed clean through and through. Strengthen our faith, Father, that we might trust fully in Jesus as our only mediator. Open our eyes to the areas of life in which we've failed to repent, and give us the faith to entrust those things to you. We ask this through him, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.