



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for Passion Sunday

Hebrews 9:11-15

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I'd like to put our study of Ephesians on pause. We reached a good stopping point last Sunday. Now Easter is fast approaching and we need to switch gears for a few weeks. It's often the case that the lessons for the Sunday before a major feast day are meant to prepare us and to explain what's about to come and that's just what Passion Sunday does—not just for Easter, but for Palm Sunday and all of Holy Week. That said, today's Epistle from the book of Hebrews dovetails remarkably well with what we've been reading in the letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians, Paul's been writing to a cluster of little churches in what today we call western Turkey. The people in those churches were mostly gentiles—non-Jews. They had been pagans who knew the world is not as it should be. They longed for a way out. Some of them, no doubt, had taken note of the Jewish diaspora communities in their cities and those communities had got their attention. The Jews had a sense of holiness. They kept themselves apart from the moral filth, from the sexual immorality, from the dog-eat-dog world of the Greeks and Romans. The Jews had a sense of compassion, of love, of mercy that was foreign to the pagans. Maybe most of all, they saw in these Jewish neighbours a sense of hope—that history wasn't just going forever round and round, never changing, that their God actually cared for the world and for his people, and that one day he would do something to set the world to rights. The God of Israel was a God who cared, who was faithful, who would one day wipe away the tears and deal with evil. There was nothing and no one like that

in the pagan world. But that wasn't their story. The God of Israel wasn't their god. They had no right to it. The best they could do was hang out on the fringe and hope maybe something of it would rub off. If nothing else, it gave them at least a little hope to know that it was possible to be different.

And then Paul came along and he proclaimed the good news about Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, who was crucified, buried, and who rose to life. Paul told them how the blood of Jesus—if they would only believe and submit themselves to him as creation's true Lord—how the blood of Jesus would purify them from the stain of sin and of idolatry and of death. And they did believe. And in response, the God of Israel adopted them as sons and daughters. He filled them with his Spirit—drawing near to them, just as he'd promised to draw near to his people Israel. And so Paul wrote his letter to them to say that in all of this, they've become the new temple of God—the place where he has drawn near, the place where he dwells, the place where a renewed humanity—Jews and gentiles, rich and poor, slave and free, men and women—are all being brought together, the vanguard of God's new creation in the midst of the old—a people to challenge the principalities and powers, the gods and kings of the old world with the Lordship of Jesus and the inauguration of new creation.

And Paul's chief word for those gentile believers in Ephesus—so far as we've got in the letter to this point—is that this story that belonged to Israel is now fully their story. Jesus and the Spirit have brought them into it. The promises of the God of Israel are now their promises. The hope of Israel is now their hope.

And then the book of Hebrews. It takes the same themes and flips them around. We don't know who wrote it. Possibly Paul. Probably written in the mid-60s. To Jewish believers, probably at Rome. These were people who had been part of that story all

along. They were the natural sons and daughters. They were the original branches of the olive tree—not gentile branches grafted in. And, just like Paul, they were confronted with the risen Jesus and recognised that he was the long-promised and long-awaited Messiah who changed everything, who brought the old promises to fulfilment. And they believed. And they, too, became part of this community, this new Israel, purified by Jesus and filled with the Spirit. They too became part of this new temple in which God had come to dwell. But then persecution came, too. And with the threat of persecution hanging over them, it was all too tempting to go back to their old ways. The Jews had a long-standing arrangement with Caesar. They would pray for him and he would let them worship and live in peace. And so these Jewish Christians began to withdraw: back to their synagogues, back into their purity codes, away from their gentile brothers and sisters. Hebrews was written to them—to remind them of the same things Paul wanted the Ephesians to be sure of. That in Jesus and in the church, their hopes are being fulfilled, that God's new creation is being born, and that there's no going back.

In fact, this is just what Hebrews does: it reminds these Jewish believers—in case they've forgotten—that their old way of life fell short. The tabernacle was wonderful, it was the sign of God's presence with his people, but they couldn't actually enter it. The priests and the sacrifices they offered were great. They purified the people from their impurity and from the stain of sin and death so that God could dwell in their midst, but despite being offered continually, they were never able to perfect the conscience of the people who came to worship. No, all these things were good, but the writer of Hebrews repeatedly makes the point: The tabernacle, the priests, the sacrifices the torah itself, they were part of the promise. Jesus and the Spirit are the fulfilment. Again, you

can't go back. This is where today's Epistle picks up: Hebrews 9:11-15.

But when the Messiah arrived as high priest of the good things that were coming, he entered the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands (that is, not of this present creation), and not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood. He entered, once and for all, into the holy place, accomplishing a redemption that lasts forever. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the sprinkled ashes of a heifer, make people holy (in the sense of purifying their bodies) when they had been unclean, how much more will the blood of the Messiah, who offered himself to God through the eternal Spirit as a spotless sacrifice, cleanse our consciences from dead works to serve the living God!

When the Israelites built the tabernacle in the wilderness, on their way from Egypt to the promised land, it was a house for God to dwell in. But it always pointed to more than that. It's very structure, layout, and design were meant to evoke the garden of Eden. It reminded the Israelites what humanity had lost in our rebellion against God. And it pointed forward to a future in which God would, someday and somehow, set the world to rights and once again dwell with his people. Human beings were created to live in and to enjoy God's presence, to receive life from him, and in turn to steward that life back to his creation. But when we tried to become gods ourselves, when we sinned, we drove a wedge between ourselves and God, between earth and heaven. We began to die and we brought death and chaos into the very world into which God had meant us to carry his life and his divine order. But in the tabernacle, Israel saw the beginnings of restoration: God once again, dwelling in the midst of a people purified—albeit imperfectly and temporarily—from the stain of sin and death.

The tabernacle was a promise. Its imperfection made this clear. God was with his people, but not fully. They camped around his presence and they could draw near, but there was a great veil that separated them from God. Even the sacrifices that purified them couldn't make them pure enough to pass that veil. God had made them a holy people, but even a holy people could never enter the most holy place where God's presence dwelled. Sin and death still separated the people from God. But that remaining separation—so close, but yet so far—drove home the promissory nature of the tabernacle and the priests and the sacrifices. If God was going to all this trouble to draw his people this close now, then one day he would surely bring them fully into his presence. One day he would fully heal the breach.

But as the centuries passed, Israel took the tabernacle (and later the temple) for granted. The people forgot the promise. Like the dog in the meme, sitting in the midst of a burning room, but contentedly sipping his coffee and saying, "This is fine," Israel eventually just came to see the tabernacle and the priesthood and the sacrifices as the solution, the fix for sin. Yes, God still had to deal with those wicked gentiles and one day he would smite them and put Israel on top of the political heap. One day God's presence would return to the temple. But the priesthood and the sacrifices would go on and on. That's what it would mean for the world to be set to rights. They stopped seeing the imagery in the temple that pointed forward to a day when Eden would be restored. They forgot about the vocation God had given to Adam and Eve in the beginning.

I think we too often do the same sort of thing as Christians. We come to the Lord's Table and somehow it becomes hum-drum for us. We no longer think of the end goal, of the great feast that awaits on the day when this work of

new creation is finally done and the knowledge of the glory of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. We just try to be good and we wait for Jesus to take us to heaven so we can escape the evils of the world. We lose sight of the big picture, of God's grand plan, of us and creation actually, somehow and someday, fully restored and set to rights.

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. Instead, at the cross Jesus entered into the immediate presence of his Father, laying down his life as the perfect sacrifice. As he did that, the heavy veil in the temple, the one that closed off the most holy place, it was worn in two. In Jesus, the way into God's presence has been fully opened.

So, the first point here: the tabernacle pointed forward to a better day when God would be fully present with his people. Then the second point: As the tabernacle points to the full presence of God with his people, so the priesthood of the old covenant points forward to the perfect priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus.

The tabernacle and, later, the temple saw perpetual sacrifices. Day in and day out, all day long, animals were brought, killed, butchered, and burned. The cloud of smoke rising from the altar never stopped. Hebrews speaks here of the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer. Those were sacrifices for atonement, to purify the tabernacle and the people of their uncleanness and their sin. The ashes of a heifer were used to purify those who had come in contact with death. And those sacrifices were offered over and over and over. People sin. Impurity—not sinful itself—but ritual

impurity was inevitable. Even the great purifying sacrifice offered on the day of Atonement—when the blood of a bull and a goat was sprinkled in the most holy place to purify the nation and the tabernacle, to keep it and them a fit place for God to dwell—even that had to be done every year—year in and year out. And, in that, they pointed to something greater. Over the time, the people forgot. But all along, the necessity for repeated sacrifices pointed to a day when God would provide an atonement that would last forever.

When Jesus made that once-for-all and perfect sacrifice with his own blood, it was hard for people to wrap their heads around. Again, they'd forgotten that the whole system had been pointing to this. But, too, no one ever expected the coming Messiah, the great high priest, to offer himself as that perfect sacrifice. But the writer of Hebrews stresses: it was there, all along in Israel's scriptures.

All those animal sacrifices reminded the people of the *cost* of sin and the impurity of death. Because of their sin, Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden, cut off from the tree of life. Brothers and Sisters, sin separates us from the presence of 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. The sacrificial system taught Israel that 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 most holy place, into the presence of God, would require an even costlier sacrifice.

Those sacrifices pointed to Jesus. In Jesus, God himself took up our

flesh—he became one of his own people. He did that so that he could represent them. He became like a second Adam. In that role, Jesus willingly gave his life for them—and 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 ask that 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, the ashes of the heifer purified them temporarily from the stain of death, 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 signposts pointing to the real sacrifice. The most holy place in the temple was a signpost to 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. And his purifying sacrifice prepares us for the gift of God's Spirit—the life of the age to come, a down payment on the resurrection of the dead, given to us today.

Somehow the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, Hebrews says, purifies our conscience from dead works so that we can serve the living God. Brothers and Sisters, *through Jesus and the Spirit we are transformed*. No longer just going through the motions of holiness, but purified from the inside out to be a people who desire holiness. Jesus and the Spirit have given us a taste of the age to come, of new creation, of the world set to rights, of our tears wiped away, of our sins forgiven. Jesus and the Spirit have made us the new temple, the place where God dwells, the place where the hope of the world is known, stewards of his grace and of the good news that brings this same grace and hope to the world. Through Jesus and the Spirit, not only has God come to dwell with us, but we've been restored to our vocation—to be the priests of God's temple and to steward his goodness, his faithfulness for the sake of the world—to make his glory known through all the earth.

And then verse 15:

For this reason, Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant. The purpose was that those who are called should receive the promised inheritance of the age to come, since a death has occurred which provides redemption from transgressions committed under the first covenant.

Jesus is the mediator. There's no other way. As persecution came, these Jewish believers were tempted to go

back the old ways, the ways before Jesus. Hebrews was written to remind them: the old ways, the tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices, their days have passed. The promise they pointed to has come. In Jesus, God has established a new covenant and he is the sole mediator.

Every time I preach on this passage, I'm reminded of the trip we made to Montréal in the winter. On the bridge over the confluence of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers we saw a jeep speeding the opposite direction below us, on the frozen river. Commonplace in Quebec and Ontario, but not for this California boy. 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 on the thawing ice and you'll die.

Brothers and Sisters, 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 used 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. Hebrews reminded them and it reminds us: 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. Will there be challenges and sacrifices along the way? Of course. But Jesus and the Spirit have shown us the signs of God's spring. The flowers are breaking through the snow, the buds are forming on the tree. God has provided all the signs of his goodness and faithfulness and the inevitability of spring. Let us commit ourselves to the one who has given his life to restore life to us and let us give our lives that the whole world might know his glorious spring.

Let us pray: Almighty God, look with mercy on your people; that by your great goodness we may be always governed and preserved both in body and soul, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*