

Drawing Near to God

Hebrews 10:19-25

preached March 7, 2010 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Painting the Picture. Slowly and cautiously the High Priest made his way through the curtain that separated the Sanctuary from the Most Holy Place. This was the day and only day each year, when the priest could enter this room. As the smoke from the censor filled the room, he felt as though his heart was about to explode out of his chest. With anticipation and trepidation, the priest slowly approached the Ark of the Covenant – a medium sized gold covered box with a lid of pure gold with the wings of two angelic cherubim touching. It was there the High Priest was to meet with God.

Thoughts raced through his mind about whether he had and would do everything required. He feared that if he failed at any point, God would not forgive the people and he might not survive this service. Had he bathed adequately? Was he wearing the proper attire? Was the bull he selected as an atoning sacrifice for his own and his family's sins adequate? How about the goat sacrificed for the people - would the sacrifice be carried out in a way that was pleasing to God? Would the second goat, the scapegoat on which the sins of the people had been confessed, stay outside the camp after it was released? Would any in the camp violate the fast? These thoughts flashed through his mind like the flashes of cameras at a kindergarten

graduation. Today, he would be in God's presence and everything had to be right! Would he survive being near to God? Would God accept his sacrifice? Would the people be forgiven?

Outside of the sanctuary, the people waited anxiously. There was complete silence as they listened for the tinkling of the small bells sewn into the hem of his garment. When they heard the ringing, they knew the High Priest was yet alive. But when they heard no noise, their hearts began to pound loudly for they feared he had been stricken by God.

This scene was repeated year after year after year after year in the Jewish camp and holy city- one man in worship entering into God's presence only one time each year.

Hear the words again: "*Therefore, my friends, since we have the right, the liberty, the confidence to enter the Holy Place . . . let us approach.*" Something is different, radically different. "This is not your father's Oldsmobile." For us, followers of Jesus Christ, we have the opportunity to enter into the very presence of God. In worship, we can encounter the God who created his Universe.

Getting behind the curtain.

How different things were when I was a child, particularly when it comes to watching television. Today, my TV is nearly as large as a movie screen and so clear I can see the pimples on the actors' faces and I get more stations than I can watch. As a child, we received 3 stations in black and white and generally they were snowy. Every year I looked forward to a special program – "The Wizard of Oz." Do you remember The Wizard of Oz?

Do you remember the scene? In the Emerald Palace, Dorothy and her crew shook as they attempted to get an audience with the Wizard. Smoke and noise and the loud booming voice filled the room. Somewhere in there lurked this awesome creature. But when Toto pulled back the curtain they saw a man pulling levers and speaking into a microphone. It was then

they were able to speak to the wizard face-to-face. Someone had to pull back the curtain to reveal the one who had been hidden by it.

Who opened the curtain to give us an approach to God?

The author of Hebrews paints this wonderful picture using the hues of the OT practice of worship in the tabernacle to describe what Jesus' life, death and resurrection mean to us as God worshippers. He paints the abstract that our minds can hardly understand in pictures practiced by our forbears.

With the stroke of his brush, the author shows that Jesus was the High Priest who entered into God's presence, not in an earthly temple, but in the heavenly one. He went to the very heart of God's dwelling place beyond a curtain where we could not travel. He went not with the blood of a bull or goat but with his own blood. There and then, once and for all he offered the sacrifice for all human sin. No other sacrifice was/is needed. "It was finished."

These are powerful images for us of the Lenten and Passion of Christ. Images that lead us into a deeper understanding of what worship now means.

One of the most unique passages that in the passion narrative is found just after Mark records that Jesus breathed his last breath. He writes: *And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (15:38)*. Think of this, it was torn from top (heaven) to bottom (earth.) Jesus pulled back the curtain revealing the God behind it.

The author of Hebrews celebrated this glorious phenomenon. He wrote that we enter by a new and living way that Jesus opened to us through the curtain – then he gives this mystic parenthetical note – *that is, through his flesh* (imitate breaking the communion wafer and then stretching the arms to form a cross.)

How can one describe the indescribable and the incomprehensible?

Because Jesus has made the way available to us and pulled back the curtain, we can enter into God's presence through corporate worship.

The congregation then, the congregation now.

When I think back on my childhood experiences in worship and those now, I am amazed at the contrasts. I attended a small rural congregation that sang from the Cokesbury hymnal, loved shaped notes, and seldom had a bulletin. The choir practiced as they sang on Sunday mornings, there were no robes for clergy or choir, and babies were on their momma's lap. When I misbehaved, I was pinched. Now I try to keep my distance from anyone who might pinch me for misbehaving.

The contrast of what was in the congregation of the people of the OT and what came to be through Jesus Christ is far greater than that of my childhood experience and now. In the OT worship on the Day of Atonement, everyone except the High Priest was outside the temple. The congregation had no direct access to God. They could only encounter God through the mediator. God was distant from them.

In his classic book *Simply Christian*, NT Wright proposes that there are essentially three views of God that people hold. *Pantheism* says that there is a divine force in everything. Everything is divine and the divine is in everything. This understanding has commonly been held by Eastern religions such as Hinduism but in recent years has become popular with some in the church. Wright points out that the second view, *Deism*, reaches to the other extreme. From this perspective, God is distant and can hardly be known and has little interaction with our world. Some of our nations forbears held to positions of Deism. In some ways the congregation being outside the sanctuary is a portrait of this way of thinking – God is distant from us. The third that Wright identifies he calls *Christian* – God is separate from creation yet is transcendent. God is distant, yet God is involved in history and the human experience. In the language of the morning, "God is behind the curtain, but joyfully in Christ pulls it back."

When we come in for corporate worship, we are no longer on the outside. We have become priests who enter the sanctuary – *you are a royal priesthood who should call forth the praises of God* (1Peter 2:9). When we enter, we discover that the curtain has been torn in two. There we experience and see God. We find what

Matthew wrote of Christ is true: "*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*"

What does this experiencing God in worship look and feel like? I have seen it as I have looked at a woman weeping as she kneels for Communion and receives the bread and cup. It happens when a person makes it known, "I want to join this church." I have heard it in the voice of one leaving the service, "Dwight, I felt like you were speaking directly to me." I sense it as David plays an anthem and I visually survey the congregation and see people with closed eyes communing with God.

On Ash Wednesday I spent time with the children to share with them about Ash Wednesday and impose the ashes. It was a delightful service. When I put an ashen cross on the forehead or hand, I would say to the child, "Jesus loves you and this cross says that you love Jesus." Some did not want the cross. So I took the hand of these and said, "Jesus loves you." Then I pointed to their heart and said, "Jesus lives in your heart." On Thursday morning, I received an email from a mother of one of the children. She wrote: "Will had a stellar performance getting himself ready for bed and even being helpful to his two younger siblings, I commended Will on his behavior. He said, 'Well, it all happened tonight at church.' 'Really?' I replied. 'Tell me about it.' 'I don't remember everything the minister said, something about Jesus and love, but boy, did it work!' Hinton, his little brother, chimed in, 'Yeah, and he held my hand and pointed to my heart. That's what I remember.'"

How we come to worship.

While there is great contrast in the worship of what was and the worship that has come to be, there are some vital parallels we must understand.

Before the priest came into worship, he had to prepare. He had to select animals, prepare clothes and think through what he was to do. He had to bath and put on special clothing. He had to be prepared to enter God's presence.

This morning I can see that most of us have done some preparation in coming to worship by bathing and putting on our "Sunday go to meeting" clothes. No one came in their PJ's this morning and people are willing to be seated close to you.

These acts have a place in our preparation. But as you might suspect there is something deeper.

The author of Hebrews tells his readers that we are to come "with a true – genuine and sincere – heart." Worship is a matter of the heart and so we come, not playing church or pretending to be something we are not. We come as we are with a confident faith that God will be present, receive our praise, and touch our lives. We expect the transcendence of God to fill this place.

The author shares the images of being sprinkled with water and being bathed. These images took the Jewish reader back to the preparations of the priest. But for followers of Christ, these remind us of the waters of baptism, how in those waters we are washed clean and our sins forgiven and how Christ identifies with us. We are claimed as daughters and sons of God.

A few weeks ago, I heard Dr. Tom Long preach at Lake Junaluska. He is a professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He said this, "More people are afraid of being found out than of dying." Many carry a guilty conscience. But in Christ, our hearts are sprinkled with the water of cleansing – we are forgiven. We belong to Christ. As we confess our faults, failures and sins, we are forgiven.

So when we come to worship with an authentic heart that believes God will be present and receives the fullness of God's forgiveness in Christ and when we readily confess who and what we are, we come prepared to encounter the One behind the Curtain.

Response to the Word.

As we come to this table, we believe that Christ is present in this bread and in this wine. Here in this place, we can experience the presence of God. The curtain has been torn open. We are here in God's presence and can enjoy a meal with God.