

“An Anchor for the Soul: God in the Neighborhood”

Hebrews 9:1-14

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 21, 2016

I just want to come out and say what I suspect you're thinking. These are hard words. We came here this morning in our modern, air-conditioned cars, with stereos and satellite navigation. We live in a fast-paced technological era with iPhones and high speed internet, and space travel. And we read this description of these ancient practices of priests and animal sacrifices and the sprinkling of blood and they couldn't sound more foreign. What in the world could this possibly have to do with us today? Well, lots as it turns out. In fact, you could say it has everything to do with us today. So let's dig into it and find out.

As we have studied this book of Hebrews over the past few months, one of the main things we have learned is that the writer is interested in a comparison between faith in Christ and the old Jewish faith. The ministry of Jesus was contrasted with that of Moses. His message was compared to the message of angels. Jesus' priesthood was compared to the priesthood of Aaron and also Melchizedek. In chapter 8 we saw the New Covenant contrasted with the Old Covenant. In each case, the point the writer of Hebrews was trying to make was that Jesus is better. Remember that he's writing to a group of Christians who are in danger of abandoning the Christian faith and going back to the synagogue. The point is not that the old covenant worship was wrong. But he wants them to see the foolishness of going back to what was incomplete and insufficient when they already have something far better.

Here in chapter 9 we find the contrasts continue between the old form of worship and sacrifices in the earthly Tabernacle and the true heavenly Tabernacle. And that's our first clue to the meaning for us. If you have been around *anyone* having a baby in the last 40 years or so, then you are familiar with the sonogram or ultrasound. I remember when Leslie was pregnant with our son Michael we went in for those sonograms. They would have us bring a

video cassette tape and they would record the whole thing for us. Then they would also print out several copies that we could take with us. And of course we showed them to anyone who stood still long enough. We were excited and we wanted everyone to see our child.

The funny thing is that within a few months we stopped showing people those pictures altogether. Why? Was it because we weren't excited about our baby any more? Of course not! The reason we stopped showing off the picture from the ultrasound was that we had something much better. We had the baby himself. And tons of photos, too. Trust me. Before he was born, that fuzzy little black and white printout was the best we had. It's purpose was to point to something better in the future – the real thing.

The system of worship and sacrifices in the Old Testament were not wrong. In fact, they were commanded by God in great detail. The books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy go into great detail about the entire system. God gives Moses very specific instructions on how to build the Tabernacle, along with all the furnishings and utensils that were used. He gave more instructions on what the priests were and were not to do. Our passage this morning begins, “Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.” We can't underestimate the importance of the Tabernacle in the life of the nation of Israel. The Tabernacle was a large tent set up according to God's instructions and it was placed at the geographic center of the camp with each of the tribes of Israel camped around it. Everything about the Tabernacle said “Glory!” The tent was made of fine cloth, the poles and their bases were covered in silver, the furniture built out of the finest wood and the utensils made out of pure gold. God commanded them to build a lamp stand with seven lamps, all made out of out of gold. The

priests were to keep the lamps burning day and night.

The Tabernacle was meant to be the place where God dwelled with His people. That's been God's desire all along. From cover to cover, the Bible tells us that what God wants is a personal relationship with you. He loves you so much that he will go to great lengths to be near you. He was willing to be present in a tent in the desert to be near His people. The problem of course is that the people couldn't be near a holy and just God because of their sin. They had not kept their end of the covenant. They could not experience God directly. They couldn't have personal fellowship with Him.

The Tabernacle, and later the Temple, was set up with three sections. There was the outer courtyard where the altar for the sacrifices was located. This was as close as the common people could come to the presence of God. Then the Tabernacle itself had a large outer room called the Holy Place. This is where the priests served, keeping the lamps burning and keeping hot coals on the altar of incense. Then finally was the inner room, the Holy of Holies. This is where God's presence was. It was where they kept the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolically was God's footstool on earth. Between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies was a thick, woven curtain separating the people from God. Nobody when behind the curtain except the high priest and only one day a year. And everybody was a nervous wreck on that day.

Verse 9 of today's passage tells us, though, what the problem was with this system. "According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper." The system of sacrifices that God commanded were able to make people ceremonially clean so they could participate in the religious life of the nation. But those sacrifices couldn't actually deal with the guilt that comes with sin. They couldn't clean the conscience. The only sacrifice that could do that would be one like us only perfect. The Bible tells us that Jesus, the perfect Son of God,

offered himself as that perfect sacrifice on our behalf. But he wasn't just the sacrifice, he is also the high priest.

Here's the thing. Everything in the old covenant system pointed forward to Christ. The golden lampstand pointed to Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world." The table of show bread and the jar of manna in the Ark pointed to him who said, "I am the bread of heaven." And of course the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments in the Ark point to the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts."

The Tabernacle and the system of animal sacrifices all pointed forward to Jesus. They were like the sonogram image. Each element of their worship was a copy or shadow of the real thing, the spiritual reality. They got a glimpse of the fulfillment of God's promise of forgiveness and redemption. They got a taste of his presence. It was a good thing. But now Christ has come. As he said, he didn't come to abolish any of the old covenant but to fulfill it. Where the priests would take the blood of animals into the earthly Holy of Holies, Jesus took his own blood into the real, perfect, heavenly Holy of Holies. He accomplished forever what all those animal sacrifices pointed to. This is what verses 13 and 14 mean. "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 old was good. The new is better.

That brings us to our situation today. First, where they had no direct access to God, we have unlimited access. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. We have our perfect High Priest in the Holy of Holies continuously. We can go to God directly and without fear. In fact, Jesus himself is the Tabernacle. John 1 says, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Or as

the Message version puts it, “the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”

Second, Jesus took all of our guilt on himself. How could one person take all the guilt of the entire world? Because He is fully divine. Jesus bore the punishment in his Spirit. The agony of the cross pales in comparison to the agony of his spiritual separation from God the Father. But because His Spirit is infinite He was able to conquer death on our behalf. The barrier between us and God has been removed. At the exact moment Jesus died, that huge curtain in the Temple was torn from top to bottom. God had removed that barrier.

Finally, you may be thinking, “doesn’t sin still separate us from God?” The short answer is no. Romans 8:38-39 says, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor

powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” But what sin *does* do is prevent us from *experiencing* God. Our sins are forgiven but they still get in the way of being close to God. And the cure for *feeling* separated from Him is worship. It’s in worship that we praise God in prayer and song. It’s in worship where we hear God speak through the reading and preaching of His Word. And it’s in worship that we confess our sins to Him and are reminded that in Jesus Christ we *are* forgiven. If you want to have that kind of close relationship with God, it’s available to you. There’s no need to look anywhere else but in Jesus. He is the way and the truth and the life.

Amen