

Remove Sin

Hebrews 9:24-28

The doors to heaven and earth get flung open in this passage. It is as though the author wants to shout, "Everything that we knew before was only a sketch, a mock-up, of the new reality made possible in Christ."

The writer begins by asserting that Jesus' power is not limited to the earthly realm where we create sanctuaries and only speak of heaven. Rather Christ has blazed a path for those who would follow him into the very presence of God. Not only that, but Christ enters into that holy space to intercede for us. We now have a champion in heaven, someone to advocate for us in the highest court.

The writer of Hebrews prescribes Christ as the antidote to the spiritual fatigue of a community in danger of drifting away from the gospel (2:1). In our scripture we are in the midst of a sermon on Jesus' priestly ministry. Jesus is the great high priest and our scripture demonstrates the superiority of Jesus' ministry to the old Levitical priesthood and its sacrificial system.

There are four points of superiority. First, unlike the Levitical priest's entry into a desert tabernacle made by humans, the exalted Jesus has entered God's presence, providing us believers with access to the living God. Second, while the Levitical priest entered the Holy of Holies to offer atonement for both his own and the people's sins (5:3; 7:27), Jesus the sinless one has done this solely "on our behalf" (9:24). Third, unlike the annual need for atonement in the Levitical order, Jesus' sacrifice has permanent value, accomplishing "once for all" the forgiveness of sins (9:26). Finally, Jesus not only offers the sacrifice, but *is* himself the sacrifice (9:26).

John Calvin saw in these verses the threefold office (*munus triplex*) of prophet, priest, and king through which Jesus accomplishes his saving work. As priest Jesus sacrifices himself to blot out our sin and reconcile humanity to God, and as priest Jesus intercedes on our behalf before God.

"Sacrifice" was necessary for purification through blood (9:22); as the sin of humanity is an offense against God that requires satisfaction before humanity can be reconciled to God; Jesus' death provides that satisfaction. Jesus' death is also described with a Christ-the-victor understanding. His death destroys "the one who has the power of death" and frees those "held in slavery by the fear of death" (2:14-15). We also know Jesus' sacrifice teaches us of obedience and faithfulness in the face of suffering (5:8). In short, Jesus' life and ministry, no less than his death, are critical parts of his atoning work; which puts us in right relationship to God.

This passage also helps us to begin to think about Advent, where we prepare ourselves for "the end of the age" (9:26) and its assurance that "Christ... will appear a second time" (9:28). It points us forward from Jesus' saving act to the new age Jesus has inaugurated. The second coming is not a day of judgment to be feared, but a day of salvation, because of the "once for all" nature of Jesus' reconciling work on our behalf.

These words also trumpet liberation to all bound by the burden of guilt arising from our failures to "measure up" to God's desires or even our own best intentions. Forgiveness is an accomplished reality we can live into with confidence in the mercy of the God who comes to meet us in Christ. It announces good news for all who fear death and the prospect of standing before the God who indeed judges all: the Judge is none other than our Savior.

The letter teaches us that Jesus is the Son of God, by whom God has spoken in these last days just as God "spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways

by the prophets" (1:1). Moses is to be honored (3:5), and the heroes of faith have shown us the way. Yet Jesus has inaugurated a new age and fulfills the old covenant with his "better hope" (7:19), "better promises" (8:6), and "better covenant" (7:22, 8:6). **Jane E. Fahey**

This hopeful shift in divine/human reality brings to mind a story told by David Willis-Watkins of Princeton Seminary. He tells of his time as a parish pastor when one of his elders got a call in the night from the police station. It seems that a number of the young men of the town had gotten a bit rowdy and ended up in jail. One of them used his one call to ask the elder to come get him out. When the elder arrived at the jail, he took a look at the group of boys and asked, "How many of you are baptized?" Every boy in the cell raised his hand. The elder told the officer, "I'll take them all," and he did. By virtue of Christ's sacrifice signified in their baptism, the boys enjoyed a new reality. They found an advocate—someone willing to intercede on their behalf. So it is with our life in Christ.

In this passage we hear a transition from a repeated ritual reenactment of God claiming the people of Israel to a once and for all claiming through Christ. The self-sacrifice of Christ is at once a declaration of the new covenant and an act of atonement and sin offering that God both provides and accepts.

In our culture we are all too familiar with paying annual fees, shelling out penalties on debts that have been defaulted, having to renew employment contracts, and enduring review processes to ensure that we will have our work contracts renewed. In a bitterly ironic and exploitative reality, there are companies today that still sell funeral insurance. Taking advantage of the fear of some people that they might die and not have the resources to be properly outfitted for the afterlife, some companies charge monthly premiums to the poorest of people with the promise that they will be taken care of and well laid

out in the event of death. Failure to keep up payments results in forfeiture of their policies, and the debt can even be passed on to their families. Families are required to pay exorbitant prices to keep their contracts current.

Our contract with God is paid in full through Christ. In Jesus the relationship between humanity and God is permanent and enduring. We do not need to fear defaulting on our insurance for divine forgiveness. Our sin is removed in the sacrifice of Christ. Our fear of being rejected or coming up short is done away with in the saving death of Jesus.

This changes everything. No longer does the community need to keep track of offenses against neighbor and God, nor report to the local priest for intercession or atonement. Instead, Christ becomes both the mediating presence and sacrifice. Sin is still a reality, but so now is forgiveness. We no longer belong to a fear-based community. Instead, we find that confession becomes a regular part of our life together, because revenge and punishment need no longer be feared. Just as the child who is certain of a parent's love will come forward in trust and security rather than hide in shame, so we move toward one another and God. Forgiveness engenders intimacy between both God and neighbor.

The community that is created out of this good news is one in which all are included and all wait eagerly for Christ to return, a community that looks both forward and backward. The people of God look forward to the day when Christ returns, and we hold in our hearts the memory of the saving death of Christ. This is a community whose energy can be poured into exploring, living out, and sharing the grace that is shown to all in Christ. **Elizabeth B. Forney**

My brothers and sisters, we have nothing to fear. Our sins are removed; our forgiveness is assured in Christ!