

Drawing Nearer to God

1st Sunday of Lent – March 4/5, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Hebrews 8 (The Message, a biblical paraphrase by Eugene Peterson)

In essence, we have just such a high priest: authoritative right alongside God, conducting worship in the one true sanctuary built by God.

The assigned task of a high priest is to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and it's no different with the priesthood of Jesus. If he were limited to earth, he wouldn't even be a priest. We wouldn't need him since there are plenty of priests who offer the gifts designated in the law. These priests provide only a hint of what goes on in the true sanctuary of heaven, which Moses caught a glimpse of as he was about to set up the tent-shrine. It was then that God said, "Be careful to do it exactly as you saw it on the Mountain."

But Jesus' priestly work far surpasses what these other priests do, since he's working from a far better plan. If the first plan—the old covenant—had worked out, a second wouldn't have been needed. But we know the first was found wanting, because God said,

"Heads up! The days are coming
when I'll set up a new plan
for dealing with Israel and Judah.
I'll throw out the old plan
I set up with their ancestors
when I led them by the hand out of Egypt.
They didn't keep their part of the bargain,
so I looked away and let it go.
This new plan I'm making with Israel
isn't going to be written on paper,
isn't going to be chiseled in stone;
This time I'm writing out the plan in them,
carving it on the lining of their hearts.
I'll be their God,
they'll be my people.
They won't go to school to learn about me,
or buy a book called *God in Five Easy Lessons*.
They'll all get to know me firsthand,
the little and the big, the small and the great.
They'll get to know me by being kindly forgiven,
with the slate of their sins forever wiped clean."

By coming up with a new plan, a new covenant between God and his people, God put the old plan on the shelf. And there it stays, gathering dust.

Last week, we saw that the Old Testament sacrifices were not the reality, but mere shadows pointing us toward the reality of Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice. Today, we look at this reality.

Hebrews is surely one of the most mysterious and least-read of all the New Testament books. It isn't hard to understand why. Hebrews is thoroughly grounded upon the Old Testament temple system of sacrifices and priests. Regrettably, most Christians have little understanding of the sacrificial system and little desire to learn.

What is Lent?

Mark Roberts is the Senior Pastor of Irvine Presbyterian Church in Irvine, California. He has an excellent blog, www.markdroberts.com, to which he posts regularly. This post is an excellent answer to the question, "What is Lent?" I've underlined a few sentences that are particularly relevant to today's topic.

"Growing up as an evangelical Christian, I experienced Lent as little more than a joke. "What are you giving up for Lent?" my friends would ask. "Homework," I'd say with a smirk, or "Obeying my parents." Lent was one of those peculiar practices demanded of Roman Catholics - another great reason to be Protestant, I figured.

In the last fifteen years I've discovered that Lent is in fact recognized by millions of Protestant Christians, in addition to Catholic and Orthodox believers. Lent (the word comes from "spring") is a six-week season in the Christian year prior to Easter. In the ancient church it was a time for new converts to be instructed for baptism, and for believers caught in sin to focus on repentance. In time, all Christians came to see Lent as a season to be reminded of their need for penitence and to prepare spiritually for the celebration of Easter. Part of this preparation involved the Lenten "fast," giving up something special during the six weeks of Lent (but not on Sundays, in some traditions).

Many Protestants rejected the practice of Lent, pointing out, truly, that it was nowhere required in Scripture. They also wanted to avoid some of the excessive aspects of Catholic penitence that tended to obscure the gospel of grace. In time, Protestants saw Lent, at best, as something completely optional for believers, and, at worst, as a superfluous Catholic practice that true believers should avoid altogether.

Some segments of Protestantism did continue to recognize a season of preparation for Easter, however. Here the emphasis was not so much on penitence and fasting as on intentional devotion to God. Protestant churches sometimes added special Lenten Bible studies or prayer meetings so that their members would be primed for a deeper experience of Good Friday and Easter. Lent was a season to do something extra for God, not to give something up."

continued in the page two textbox

Drawing near

At the end of the book of Exodus, God's glory descends upon the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34). God will be present with his people in a way that he had not before. However, because of God's holiness and the people's unholiness, God keeps his distance. Only the Levite priests can enter the tabernacle and only the High Priest can actually step into God's presence behind the veil, and then only to make atonement for the sin of the people, and then only once each year. In other words, the chasm between God and his people created by the people's sin is diminished but not closed. All the sacrifices and rituals practiced by the people and their priests are only a hint of the true thing.

But, in a mystery that no NT writer attempts to explain fully, Jesus' death on the cross is the perfect atoning death. It is as if God's work to restore creation was always headed toward Golgotha on that Friday afternoon. All the sacrificial rituals of the Israelites merely foreshadowed what was to come. But Jesus' sacrifice, his faithfulness all the way to the cross, is not a mere shadow that only diminishes the gap between the people and God, it is the sacrifice that closes the gap completely. It is the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Who needs a shadow when you've got the real thing.

In the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant sat behind a veil. There, God's presence rested above the ark (Exodus 25:22), separated from the people by the veil. But when Jesus dies, Mark tells us that immediately "the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mark 14:38). It isn't hard to see the significance here. Jesus' crucifixion eliminated the gap, he tore down the curtain that separated God from the people of God. Jesus made the true sacrifice; he is the highest high priest. There is no sacrifice we could make that could rival Jesus' sacrifice. We have no need of a priest to stand in front of God on our behalf. That at which the OT sacrifices hinted, has been accomplished in full, for all time, for all people. Jesus is the lamb that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The people of God are in right relationship with God; we are at-one with God. . . *Hold on*, you say, are we not a sinful people?

Practicing nearness

Of course we are sinful people. It would be foolish to claim otherwise. We do not love God and neighbor as we should. So here, once again, we confront the "already/not yet" understanding of reality. The truth is that we are "already" in a right relationship with God. The atoning sacrifice has been made. However, it is equally true that we are "not yet" in a right relationship with God. We are already

Continued from the page one textbox

"After ignoring Lent for the majority of my life, I've paid more attention to it during the last decade. Sometimes I've given up something (like watching television or eating sweets) in order to devote more time to Bible study and prayer. Sometimes I've added extra devotional reading to my regular spiritual disciplines. I can't claim to have had any mystical experiences during Lent, but I have found that it helps me to appreciate more deeply the meaning of the cross and the victory of the resurrection. Before I began honoring Lent, Good Friday and Easter always seemed to rush by before I could give them the attention they deserved. Now I find myself much readier to meditate upon the depth of Christ's sacrifice and to celebrate his victory over sin and death on Easter.

Lent is *not a requirement* for Christians. But millions of us - Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Independent - have found that recognizing the season of Lent enriches our worship and deepens our faith."

standing before God and yet we must draw nearer to God each day. Both are true. We must practice the nearness that is already ours.¹ Lent is a time focused on such practice.

Lent is about the intentional practice of drawing nearer to God. You might ask whether we ought to be doing that every day of the year. Of course we should, but we don't. Or at least most of us don't. Lent is a period of forty days when we discipline ourselves in ways that we probably would not sustain for the rest of the year. It might be more time set aside for daily Bible reading or prayer. We might fast regularly or meditate. We might care for others in new ways. Lent is about the dramatic rearrangement of our priorities. We desire to come to Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter standing as close to God as we can get, clear of all the anxieties, worries, and commitments that take us away from God.

Lent is also a time when we can acknowledge and confess how much of our lives we live away from God, when we can recommit ourselves to living in God's way rather than our own. In a word, Lent is a time for repentance, for a reordering of our priorities that will stick long after Easter. Lent is about drawing near to God and taking his agenda as our own.

¹There is not space here to deal with the NT's "already/not yet" perspective. If you would like to read more on this, you might go to www.standrewcl.org and read the June 29, 2003 Sermon Background Study. It even has a chart that you might find helpful. I cannot overemphasize how much richer your reading of the NT will be if you can come to grips with this particular "and" of the Christian faith. There are other "ands" of course. God is three and one. Jesus is fully God and fully human. Ours is a faith built upon "and" not "or."

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

March 5 ~ 11

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Day 1 Numbers 1-3; Psalm 28 The census; the arrangement of the tribes in camp; the Levites</p> | <p>Day 2 Numbers 4-7; Psalm 29 More numbering; protecting the purity of the camp; the Nazirite (Samson was a Nazirite - hence, the long hair); offerings</p> |
| <p>Day 3 A day for reflection and catch-up</p> | <p>Day 4 Numbers 8-10; Psalm 30 the Levites are set apart; celebration of the Passover; God's glory with the people</p> |
| <p>Day 5 Numbers 11-14; Psalm 31 The Israelites leave Sinai and God continues to provide for them; the people rebel (again!) Notice what happens when they go ahead without God.</p> | <p>Day 6 Numbers 15-17; Psalm 32 offerings and penalties; more rebellion!; the budding of Aaron's staff</p> |
| <p>Day 7 Numbers 18-21; Psalm 33 priests; a red heifer; the people whine again - about water; Aaron will not be able to enter the Promised Land because of his disobedience and he dies</p> | |

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy begins the week of March 27

Registration is now available at www.standrewccl.org

The Spring Session classes are: *Paul: On a Mission from God* with Scott Engle (Mon. morn. & Tues. eve.), *Boundaries: When to say YES, When to say NO to take control of your life* with Rev. Linda Carmicle (Wed morn.), *Paul's Letters to Timothy* with Frankey Commer (Thurs. morn.), *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* with Rev. Doug Meyer (Thurs. lunch), *Connection and Direction: Discover Your Spiritual Gifts* with Laura Zuber (Mon. eve.), *Introducing the New Testament* with Scott Engle (Mon. eve.), and *Jesus: His life, His time, His land, His Hebrew Faith* with Debbie Lyons and Janet Collinsworth (Tues. eve).

March Book Recommendation

The Message – Remix . . . A Bible paraphrase by Eugene Peterson

I am supplementing my reading from the NRSV in the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* with Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary language. I'm finding that Peterson helps me to make better sense of some of the more difficult (dare I say tedious) passages. The "Remix" is an inexpensive, hard-bound, compact edition of *The Message* with verse-numbered paragraphs.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by discussing the reading from Hebrews. Was it helpful to read Leviticus first, followed immediately by Hebrews? Do you see what we mean by referring to the OT sacrificial rituals as shadows of Jesus' death on the cross? What does it mean to you to think of Jesus as the sacrifice to end all sacrifices or the true high priest who eliminates the need for any other priests? Much of Hebrews 8-11 is built upon Jeremiah 31 and the new covenant. The writer of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 in today's passage. What is this new covenant that Jeremiah promises? You might discuss what it means to have God's covenant written not on stone, as with the tablets given to Moses, but on our hearts. Or what it means to know God first-hand, without having to go to school or buy a book titled *God in Five Easy Lessons*.

What has been your own history with Lent? How has your practice of Lent changed over the years? Do you tend to see it more as a time of denial or a time of preparation? What are some practices or disciplines that you might commit to for Lent this year? What would you hope to gain? What might get in the way?

How can we prepare ourselves for a truer, deeper, richer experience of God's love on Good Friday and Easter? Preparation not only means taking on new ways, it means shedding old ways. Of what do you need to repent? When you reflect on your relationship with God, what brings you sorrow? What would you most like to change? How do you think such change can come about?