Hi,

Today is May Day, the centerpiece of many ancient spring festivals. At least it feels like spring now. Of course, it may be full-on summer soon too!

Here are today’s updates:

* I began sending these emails out the first Monday after we all retreated to our homes. At first there wasn’t much going on, but that quickly changed as I moved my classes on-line. So, I’m going to cut these emails back to Monday through Friday, as I strive to maintain a sense of balance.
* **In my 12:00 noon Sunday class, I’m beginning a series titled, *God and the Virus***, in which we will be looking at the theological, pastoral, and personal challenges posed by a pandemic. [The Wall Street Journal has an essay today on this topic](https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-and-vindication-of-god-11588288416?mod=opinion_lead_pos7). (The article may be behind a pay-wall). As always, it will be [on my personal Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/scottengle).
* The Weekly Bible Study for this weekend, *Simple Practices,* is attached.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org/). All of this week’s videos and podcasts have been posted.
* Keep sending in those movie and book recommendations.

Yesterday, we looked at the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. The priests and sacrifices were never the “real thing” but only pointed to the real thing, Jesus, as the writer of Hebrews makes clear.

***Hebrews 8:1–7, 10:1-4 (NRSV)***

**Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” But Jesus has now obtained a more excellent ministry, and to that degree he is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second one.**

**Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**

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. However, our ignorance blinds us to many of the riches in the biblical writings.

*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 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.

Lent, for example, 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.

Lenten practices are best thought of means by which we can acknowledge and confess how much of our lives we live away from God, by which 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. Shouldn’t all our months, all our years be Lenten in its truest sense.

*Movie recommendation*

In this lockdown, all of us at St. Andrew are finding our way forward day by day, week by week. We are trying new things, abandoning some and building on others. Surprisingly, that is how one of the greatest films of all was done -- writing and revising the script in the evenings before shooting the next day. Greatness can emerge from the creative spontaneity of talented people. Watch *Casablanca* with that in mind. #2 on the AFI Top 100 list.

*Book recommendation*

Roger Olson is a professor of theology at Baylor and is an Arminian Baptist. I always find him worth reading. One of my favorites is *Questions to All Your Answers: A journey from Folk religion to and Examined Faith*. The book will be a big help to anyone seeking to understand the historic, apostolic faith we all proclaim.

‘til Monday, grace and peace,

Scott