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We Need a Place to Meet God

a sermon on Hebrews 9.1-14

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The Sunday school teacher told his class the theme of the day's lesson, "Jesus is the way to God." One little girl's hand shot up. "Why do we need a way to God?" she asked, "Isn't God everywhere?" Stop a moment and ponder her question. How would you answer it? The teacher wisely saw her confusion. There is a way you get someplace, like a road. If that's what Jesus meant when he called himself "the Way," then why indeed? God *is* everywhere. But we also use the word "way" to describe the *means* of approach. If your politically active friend tells you, "I need to find a way to see the President," programming 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue into your GPS device and offering it to let him borrow it will not solve his problem.

Ancient Jews believed God is everywhere, but they had a special place to worship him: the temple in Jerusalem. They believed this was the one and only place on earth where sacrifices acceptable to God could be offered. If you asked them why, they would answer, "Because God has chosen this place. The temple and its sacrifices are the means he has appointed for us to approach him."

We are a democratic people, and something in us rebels at the thought that God must be approached through proper channels. We don't think it should be this way, even though we have to go through certain channels to see our doctors or to get a day in court. We know God is more important than a doctor or judge or the President, but for some reason we feel the Almighty ought to be at our beck and call, like a butler who is always standing just out of the way but always within hearing of our little bell. If God were to ask, "Who are you to call upon me?" we would be offended. In this respect, the ancient Jews were wiser than we. They understood the transcendence and holiness of God. They knew God had to make accommodation for us to draw near to him. They believed that in his grace, God had appointed a way for them to approach God and for God to live in their midst. This way was the temple and its sacrifices. This was the place God met his people.

This is the last sermon in my Lenten series on Pictures of Jesus in the Old Testament. The other pictures were human figures: a prophet like Moses, a king like David, the Suffering Servant, and the Son of Man. This picture is not a person but a place, the temple. Once again we will see the familiar pattern: Jesus fulfills an expectation but

goes wildly beyond it. In this case, Jesus assumes the functions of the temple and its sacrifices, but improves on them considerably.

Astute listeners will have noticed that I am preaching about an Old Testament picture from a New Testament passage. The reasons are: first, I couldn't possibly read everything in the Old Testament about the temple. Second, this passage in Hebrews does what I want to do—or I should say that I want to do what it does. It considers the temple as a picture—the word it uses is *parable*—about Jesus.

To understand this picture of Jesus we have to know a little about the temple. What was it for? How did it work? The purpose of the temple was to allow God's people to be close to God but to stay safe. Part of how it did this was, it provided a means for forgiveness of sins.

God wanted to dwell with his people, and they wanted him to. But they also wanted to be safe. God is powerful, and power (even good power) can be dangerous. Think of a nuclear reactor. That's power, put (hopefully) to good purposes. But if you live near one you care about the safety at the plant. The book of Exodus describes the time Israel saw God's glory on Mount Sinai, and it was something they were too scared to go through again. Chapter 19 tells the story. Israel came to Mount Sinai. God told Moses to come up the mountain, but to keep the Israelites back. Think smoke shrouded the mountain. There was thunder and lightning and a trumpet blast so loud all the people trembled. In chapter 20 God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Right after that we read this: "When the people witnessed the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'" [vv. 18-19]

God is holy. Too holy to approach casually. Too holy to approach safely, unless he provides a means of access, a way his people can draw near him without endangering themselves. That was the purpose of the temple. The temple allowed God's people to come very close to him, yet it preserved a boundary. This boundary was symbolized by the veil that separated the sanctuary from the Holy of Holies. But more on that in a moment. Here's a crude analogy for you to chew on while you wait: If you have been to a zoo, you have probably seen a lion. I have seen one up close. The experience is thrilling, isn't it? But I would not want to encounter a lion in the wild with nothing between the lion and me. At the zoo, there was a barrier made of steel cables. The lion stayed on his side, and I stayed on mine, and that arrangement suited me fine. In a crudely similar way, the temple allowed people to get close to God, close enough to worship, but it maintained a barrier, made not of steel but of embroidered cloth. "Come this far but no farther."

An important function of the temple was forgiveness of sins. God is holy. His people are to be holy. Sin separates us from God, and not in a good way. Sin has to be dealt with if God's people are to live and worship him. Again, God provided a means for this in the temple, through the sacrificial system. Before I proceed, I'll let you in on a big secret: It didn't really work ... at least not in the way most people at the time supposed. The blood of bulls and goats never removed anyone's guilt. Only Jesus' death on the cross can do that. The sacrifices were like a sign, pointing toward Jesus, so that we could understand the cross. The sacrifices were the shadow, and Christ is the substance. What the temple was meant to do, Christ did. Those who came to the temple were forgiven of their sins, but not because they offered a lamb. They were forgiven because Jesus died for them.

OK ... The temple was about access to God and forgiveness of sins. It helps to know something about the layout of the temple at this point. The sacrifices actually took place outdoors in the courtyard of the temple, where the main altar was, not inside the temple itself. The courtyard was the only place normal people could go. Only the priests could go inside the temple building. It had three areas. It had a vestibule. It had the sanctuary, which was 90' long, 30' wide, and 45' high [1 Kings 6.2]. If you went to the Explorium when the Dead Sea Scrolls were in Mobile, they had a computer simulation of the temple. The Wednesday Wheelers went to that. If you saw it, you can better visualize the temple. Anyway, at the back of the sanctuary was the Holy of Holies. It was shaped like a cube, 30' on every side. This is where the Ark of the Covenant was kept in ancient days. Later the Ark was lost, but the Holy of Holies continued to function without it when the temple was rebuilt. A beautifully embroidered veil separated the Holy of Holies from the sanctuary. No one ever went into the Holy of Holies, except one person (the high priest), on only one day per year (Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement), and never without blood to offer.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would sacrifice a bull and a goat. He would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle some of the blood on the covering of the ark. The blood of the bull was for his sins and the sins of his family. The blood of the goat was for the sins of Israel.

Bible scholars among you might point out that Israel started worship in the wilderness with the Tabernacle—a temple made of tents. Then they had a temple, but it was destroyed. Then they built another temple. But the layout and procedure were always the same. The Holy of Holies was always separated. Only the high priests ever went in there, and only on the Day of Atonement.

By now you should have an adequate picture of the situation. God's people had a means to draw near him, but it was a very restricted means. They could get close, but not too close. There was a barrier, symbolized by the veil that hung between the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies.

Now the stage is set for a strange thing that happened when Jesus died. You may be wondering how this is a picture of Jesus or what it tells us about him. The payoff comes in Mark 15:37-38. Jesus is dying on the cross. We enter the action just after Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The people standing around misunderstand. They think he is calling for Elijah. They offer him something to drink. Here is Mark's account of what happened next: "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ... And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."

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If you didn't know about the temple, you'd miss the significance of those two precious details. But you know about the temple, at least enough to understand what happens here. The veil is torn. The barrier between Holy God and sinful humanity is gone. It's torn in two, destroyed. And, it was torn in half *from top to bottom*. Removing the barrier was God's action, not ours. He did it. He did it at the exact moment when Jesus died.

You see, Jesus offered, by his death, the atoning sacrifice for our sin. One sacrifice, sufficient for all time. And because he did so, our relationship with God changed. The means of access to God changed. No longer do we need to make sacrifices. No longer do we have to keep a safe distance: "This far and no farther." No longer is intimacy of approach reserved for the high priest or the priestly class.

Jesus is our means to God. He is the way. He is the place we meet God. And we meet God safely, without fear, because our sins have been removed. Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sin, so that we can approach God confidently. We do so reverently, to be sure, for God is still transcendent. He is still holy. God has not changed. He is the same terrifying God who had to hide his glory on Mount Sinai behind thick clouds. God has not changed ... but we have. We have been made holy by the blood of Jesus. We have changed, and the way we approach God has changed. We come to him through Jesus Christ, by faith.

The temple may be a complicated picture of Jesus, but once you figure it out it is also exciting. Do you see how it answers our most basic confusion about God?

I had a friend who feared God, and not in the good way. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," but her fear was closer to dread than reverence. She explained that the difference between an ant and you is nothing compared to the difference between you and God. You and the ant are both creatures, both dependent on your environment, both made of atoms and molecules and DNA. You are so far above an ant, however, that a meaningful relationship is impossible. Meanwhile, God is eternal, and you are not. God is perfectly pure, good, holy, and just; and you are not. You can only have a relationship with God because he stoops down.

She explained that God is higher above you than the stars, and God is bigger than the universe. The ocean makes me feel small, but what's that compared to the cosmos, and what's that compared to God?

She further explained that God sets an impossibly high standard of holiness, and she was acutely aware that she fell short. Martin Luther was like this. Luther lived for many years, even as a monk, with a morbid fear of God's judgment. To Luther, God was a tyrant whose terrible justice inspired the darkest dread. Until Luther discovered the good news of grace. My friend had a bit of pre-grace Martin Luther in her. For her, God was only high and far and holy.

I had another friend who was the polar opposite. He subscribed to the Jesus-is-my-buddy school of theology. God was his best friend, and a great guy to hang out with. He had lost sight of God's holiness. He had forgotten that God said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" [Isa 55.8]. Consequently, he found God cuddly and affirming, but never challenging. The real Jesus calls you out when you sin. He demands holiness and asks for sacrifice. If you can't tell the difference between Jesus and a plush doll, you've taken a wrong turn somewhere in your theology.

The mother of one of our Preschool children once tried to threaten her son into obedience. She told him, "You better quit that or I'll tell Pastor David." I will never know what lapse in her mental processes caused her to say that. He answered back, "Pastor David won't do anything. He's too nice." He was half right. I wouldn't have done anything, but only because it is not my place. My own sons can testify that I am not "too nice" to discipline them, because that is my place as their father and because I love them too much not to. However, when the mother told me of this exchange I began thinking. Children around here do know me as nice, friendly, mild-mannered. That's how I want them to know me. I don't want them to fear me. At the same time, I hope that they do not grow up with the impression that God is like me. I want them to know God loves them and that church is a safe, happy place. But I also want them to know God is God. Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and is and is to come. I want them to feel God's transcendence. I want them to know the healthy, reverent fear-of-the-Lord scripture calls the beginning of wisdom.

Do you see how Jesus gives us both sides at the same time without diminishing either? Jesus shows us God's holiness, power, justice, and glory. Yes, God is high above us. Yes, God is to be feared. And yet, he loves us. Through the death of Jesus he opened the way for us. We can enter the Holy of Holies. He can dwell not just among us but within us. He is not a tyrant. He is our loving heavenly Father.

You might prefer one side over the other. If so, you probably prefer the mercy and love. But both are essential. And I think I can show you why with a simple illustration.

What makes a little girl feel secure? Her Daddy's strength and his love. If she did not know his strength, his love would not calm her fears. He would not be able to protect her from the things that frighten her. If she did not know his love, his strength would merely frighten her. When she knows both his strength, which is able to protect her, and his love, which will do so, then she feels safe and secure.

It is the same with God. A god who loved us but didn't have the chops to set the world right and give us justice and peace – well, who needs a god like that? Who needs a wimpy God who is all nice and friendly but can't fix what's wrong with our world or us? Any God who can create and save and give us life will necessarily be a God of awesome might. On the other hand, none of us would want a god of power and might who lacked love and mercy. Such a god would be nothing but a terror.

In Jesus, the holy God of power and might gave himself to us in humble love. He has become our Father, and we are his children. That's the Good News. That's Christianity. All who come to God through Jesus are welcomed. All who belong to Jesus know God as both the Almighty and their loving Father.

The temple is a picture of Jesus, and it helps us to understand these things. God tore the veil. He opened the way. Jesus' death was the atoning sacrifice that gave us access to God. Praise be to God for his indescribable mercy. Amen.

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