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Pentecost 22B, October 20, 2024

Praying in Boldness and Faith

Read Hebrews 4:12 – 16 and/or Memorize Hebrews 4: 14

It is the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day, a man stands alone at the very heart of the temple itself, The Holy Place, in front of the Holy of Holies, the very mercy seat of God. A massive curtain stands before him, dividing off the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple.

One man, one man alone, comes this far, daring to tread upon this most holy ground. He is dressed in the robes of the high priest and is serving in that office under the call of God. This one man alone is permitted to be here to undertake the most important ritual that now follows.

He will sprinkle blood so that the temple might be cleansed from impurity and prepare the scapegoat which will be sent out into the desert so that it might bear away the sins of God's people. This one man alone carries on his shoulders the weight of this task.

It is the holiest of days for God's people, it is the holiest of days for their relationship with God. It is the holiest of days because after this ritual, they will begin again with new life, new hope and new promise from their God for the coming year.

The writer of Hebrew tells us, "Since then we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let's hold fast to our confession." The writer of Hebrews is not speaking to the people of Israel, but the people of the New Israel, the church. Telling them of a different high priest than the one in the temple so long ago.

He tells them of a great High Priest, to whom we offer our confession of faith. And what is this confession? For the author of Hebrews, it is nothing less than the great theme of salvation that speaks the eternal truth – Jesus left the heavenly throne to come down to earth, thereby entering into human history.

Sharing fully in our human experience, Jesus dies and is raised, triumphantly back into heaven, where He is seated at the right hand of the Father. Incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, this is the great confession of our faith. Just as the Hebrew

people had a high priest, who entered the Holy of Holies, Hebrews says that our High Priest is no less than Jesus, the Son of the God.

He no longer passes through the curtain of the temple, for that has been destroyed, along with the rest of that building, and there is no longer a sacrifice for the cleansing of sin, for Jesus has accomplished that for all time and all people. The man who stands before the throne room of God is our new High Priest, who has ascended into the heights of heaven Himself.

Jesus alone is unique, because although He was fully man, He was also fully God. That high priest, standing before the Holy of Holies, dressed in the magnificent robes of his office, daring to enter into this most holy place, as only a man. This is true of our High Priest also, but He is even more so.

Descending from the very throne of God, Jesus fully entered into our humanity. The fullness of the infinite God is contained in the finite nature of His humanity. Fully human, this man, Jesus, knows our weaknesses. Fully human, this man, Jesus, undergoes even temptation. **Fully human, this man, Jesus, is like us in all respects, except for one. He did not sin!**

Because He knows our frailties, our needs, our hopes and our desires, the author of Hebrews urges us to turn to Him in prayer. Like the high priest of ancient days, this High Priest Jesus, stands at the very point between heaven and earth, between the sacred and the earthly.

Jesus is the great High Priest, who passed through the heavens. That earlier high priest stood before God so that God would work through him to bring forgiveness and new life to the people. Standing alone before God, that high priest would offer intercession to God for the people and then bring to them the word of cleansing and new hope.

Now we have our great High Priest, Jesus, who also stands alone before God, interceding for us, pleading for us, and offering us the new life that is in Him. Jesus is the great High Priest who passed through the heavens, and now sits at the right hand of God. The great High Priest who not only intercedes for us, but also speaks the Word of God to us. It is to this great High Priest that the writer of Hebrews urges us to entrust our prayers.

Pray, he says, pray like you have never prayed before. Pray in a daring way; pray, even in an audacious way. Approach His grace with boldness. Put aside your tentative prayers and call upon God with confidence that you are a child of God. Pray as a child, who, bent knee before the Almighty God, who created you, can speak as one who is so loved by God.

Do this, knowing that God has promised to give us whatever we ask in Jesus' Name. Remember that this is the God who sent His very own Son to die for us, confident that He will hear our praying, says the preacher of Hebrews, not like someone asking permission to do something. Rather, pray with the same confidence that children do when they fearfully cry out in the night, trusting that their parents will come to comfort them.

Don't be confused here. The author of Hebrews is not offering us a manual on prayer, a how-to- guide for an easy and successful prayer life. He's not going to teach us some techniques that will make us better pray-ers. Because prayer is not a method of expression, but it is rather an expression of complete trust in God. Prayer and the prayers we pray rest entirely upon what we believe about God and how we understand that God relates to us. These are the creedal truths of our faith.

And what are these creedal truths? God is our Father and Creator. Jesus is the "reflection of God's glory," the very Word of God and the very being of God. The Spirit is the one who brings life and speaks the Word of God in faith to us. These are the fundamental understandings of our faith the author of Hebrews has already told us to hold fast to.

Holding fast to this faith, we can dare to approach God in prayer, even though He is the Almighty of heaven and earth. Believing that Jesus is the Son of God, who has revealed God to us, we can pray with the confidence of those who are now invited to come and stand before Him and make our requests known to Him. This does not mean we treat Jesus like we're ordering clothes from the catalog; He is not the clerk who sees that our orders are fulfilled.

Rather, trusting in faith and believing in hope, we pray as those who come to stand before God. He is God, the Almighty, the creator. We are not worthy in ourselves to stand before Him. In the mystery of the majesty of God, we, like Moses of old, should be taking off our shoes as we approach the Throne of Grace. Within ourselves, we are not worthy to speak to God, for there is only one who is worthy, the only one without sin, Jesus.

But our confession, says the author of Hebrews, is Good News. For it tells of Jesus who makes possible what we could not attain on our own. Jesus is fully human in all things except sin. Because He took on our humanity, Jesus knows the full weakness and vulnerability of our daily existence, temptations, and suffering of our lives.

Yet, in that same humanity, He stands alone as high priest before God, stands before the throne of God, not to offer a sacrifice for sin, but rather because He has been the sacrifice for our sins, so that all of creation can be brought back into the household of God.

The high priest of old came to the Holy of Holies centuries ago, so that he might approach God on behalf of the people, to bring to God, their offerings, their prayers, the signs of their repentance, their cares, their needs, and their wants. Jesus is now the High Priest who has passed through heaven to do the same, to bring our offerings and prayers before God.

Fully divine, but also fully human, Jesus knows our needs and wants expressed in prayer. He knows the frailty of our lives and our existence. This great high priest carries to the throne of God itself our distress, our pain, our infirmities, our hunger for justice and our cry for peace.

Jesus, our High Priest, faces toward God on behalf of humanity; He also faces toward humanity on behalf of God. This Priest represents God, His Holy Presence among His people since Jesus is the reflection of God's own glory. It is in Jesus that we see the hidden God revealed to us. The God made known. This God came down to us, became sin among us, to bear all our sorrows and griefs.

It is to this Incarnate God, Jesus, that the author of Hebrews tells us that we can come in prayer and complete confidence that He will hear us. For he reminds us, "we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God . . . Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness."

Count me in: Knowing that Jesus intercedes with God for you, will you be bolder in offering prayer?