

November 14, 2021

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Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

“Jesus Sat Down”

There has been a lot of speculation about the impact the pandemic will have on churches. Over the last year and a half, probably all of us have experienced a change in our spiritual life, our religious habits, and how we relate to the church. Even before the pandemic, with the decline of church membership and worship attendance, there was a sense that big changes were on the horizon.

I’ve had this image on my mind. I’ve shared it with a number of you in various settings. I can’t remember where I first heard this, but I think it’s a helpful way to think about the inevitable changes that are coming. There was a time when there were payphones everywhere.

If Cumberland Farms was there in 1980, most likely, there was a payphone out front. You could find them at gas stations, shopping centers, airports, and bus stations. I can’t remember the last time I saw a payphone. Today, you’d be hard-pressed to find one anywhere.

Given that reality, one might conclude that people don’t like to use phones anymore. Of course, we know that’s not true. Phones have pretty much taken over our lives. It’s just that the form they take and the delivery system has changed.

In a similar way, we could view the decline of church membership and worship attendance as a sign that people don’t believe in God anymore or that people just aren’t as spiritual as they used to be. However, most people don’t think that’s the case. I would submit that people are just as hungry for God and spiritual as ever. It’s just that the form the spiritual life is taking is different than the past. The delivery system for spiritual experience may need to change.

The changes taking place in our world around us and in the religious life is creating a lot of questions and anxiety, but I find our reading from Hebrews this morning to be a source of comfort. A few years ago, I went to the Holy Land for the second time.

We had a group of adults and youth from the church I was serving go on a pilgrimage. Of all the things to do on that trip, swimming in the sea of Galilee, hiking the Mount of Transfiguration, visiting the Holocaust Museum, the part that is most special and meaningful to me is visiting the Western Wall.

The Western Wall is a massive, blank wall built of huge stone blocks. It’s Judaism’s holiest site. The wall is part of the retaining wall of the Temple Mount and was built by Herod the Great in 20 BC during his expansion of the Temple. The plaza in front of the wall is a permanent worship site.

The tradition is to write a prayer on a little piece of paper, curl it up nice and tight, and stick it in a crack between these huge blocks of stone. When I touch those stones and add my prayer to the thousands of others, I feel a powerful connection to the divine and to the historical events laid out in the Bible.

It's incredible to think that, 2000 years ago, Jerusalem, and specifically the Temple in Jerusalem, was thought to be the meeting place of heaven and earth. The Temple Mount was the focal point of communication between God and humanity. It was viewed as a conduit through which messages passed from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth and all of it was mediated by the Temple priesthood. The Temple priests were believed to have special access to the mind of God, on the one hand and they would offer up the sacrifices of God's people on the other.

Animal sacrifice was an important part of worship in the Temple. It might be hard for us to imagine, but in the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, "In offering an animal, a person was offering himself or herself vicariously. It had the power of atonement." Heschel went on to write, "In offering a sacrifice, humanity mingled with mystery, reached the summit of significance: sin was consumed, self abandoned, satisfaction was bestowed upon divinity."

Today, there are no animal sacrifices. There is only a remnant of the Temple that once was. Religious expression has taken very different directions from those ancient times, which brings me to the letter to the Hebrews. We don't know who wrote it. We don't know the intended audience, but when we read the letter, we enter into a fairly sophisticated theological argument.

Listen to these words again. "And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins." The repetition provides a sense of monotony. Day after day, again and again, the priest offers the same sacrifices and says the same prayers and performs the same rituals, over and over again, and it's not even effective.

The sacrifices were supposed to atone for sin, making a person right with God, and restoring that relationship. The author of the letter indicates that animal sacrifices can't take away sins. It's not what God desires. Israel's prophets had been claiming that for a long time. What God desires is righteousness and justice, not burnt offerings.

So, the priest stands day after day, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. Nevertheless, it was the central element of religious life. The Temple was at least, in part, designed for this purpose. There was a whole industry based on it. It's a picture of futility.

But here's what the author of Hebrews says. "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." Did you notice the juxtaposition? The priests stand, day in and day out, offering the same sacrifices over and over again.

Jesus offered one sacrifice: himself. It was one sacrifice, good for all time, and then he sat down at the right hand of God. The priests remained standing because they had to keep working. Jesus sat down because he completed the task. To indicate that Jesus sat down was to say the work is done. The task is complete.

I stood up to deliver the sermon. When the sermon is over, I'll sit down. That will be your indication we are moving on to the next item in our bulletin. This may or may not be what you and I believe, but this is the argument of the author of Hebrews. Jesus did with one sacrifice what the priesthood in the Temple could not do with generations of sacrifices.

Jesus restored the relationship between God and humanity. Jesus bridged the divide between creation and creator. That means that whoever you are and whatever you've done, you don't have to worry about whether or not you are right with God. Jesus took care of that. You don't have to worry that you're not good enough. You don't have to be concerned that you are not worthy of God's love. You don't have to try really hard to be accepted. Male or female, gay or straight, young or old, documented or undocumented, rich or poor, wherever you are on your life's journey, you can rest assured. You are accepted.

Why did Jesus sit down? Why are we told Jesus sits at the right hand of God? Because the task is completed. The author of Hebrews tells us he sat down at the right hand of God and since then has been waiting until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet. The image is of a priest who has made a single offering, a one-time-only act, and is now seated, waiting for the full harvest of benefits from that never-to-be-repeated sacrifice.

Then the author says *Therefore...* Whenever we see that word "therefore" in the Bible, that's when our ears should perk up, because something important is about to follow. What we get are three admonitions. For the author of Hebrews, these three elements seem to be the core aspects of faith. Perhaps, no matter what changes come to the church and in our religious lives, if we hold on to these three things, everything will be okay. It won't matter what changes come.

Since what Jesus did for us gives us confidence to act boldly and the assurance that God is on our side, let us do three things. First, let us approach God full of the assurance of faith. In other words, keep pursuing God and that relationship. Secondly, let us hold fast to our hope. Don't give up. Hold on to God's promises. Lastly, encourage one another. Those are the three things. Let us approach God. Let us hold fast. And let us help one another. Let us reach out to our neighbor. Let us show up for one another. Let's make this world more just and more kind for everyone.

The fact that Jesus sat down, indicates that everything that needed to happen in order to secure our lives has been accomplished. We can relax about our faith life. We can rest assured. We can have confidence in the God that never leaves to face our troubles alone. Because Jesus sits at the right hand of God, it is well with my soul.

And now, I too, will sit down.