

The Human Office

Psalm 132:1-14; Hebrews 9:19-28

It would do us good every once in awhile to stop and think on how central the notion of sanctuary has been in what the Bible teaches about human history. We learn early on in the second chapter of Genesis that God put the human race on the planet to tend and to guard a garden sanctuary where God could dwell and all of Adam's descendants could freely come without fear and without distraction to worship right in front of God, face to face, heart to heart. In a word, that's why we're here.

And the single fact that explains the sadness and complexity of human history since is that our ancestors failed in that mission. They listened to the Serpent, a fallen angel masquerading as a reptile, and they threw over their birthright. They gave up being priests in God's sanctuary to attempt to rule the planet in their own name, by their own lights. And the sad story of human history ever since could be taken as an account of how well that worked out.

However...but... there unfolds in the Bible a second story which tells of people like us who have wanted to repent of our ancestor's grand delusions and return to God's sanctuary and worship him as we were always meant to do. Noah in the Ark, Moses in the tabernacle, David in the holy city, Solomon in the temple, Elijah on Mt. Sinai. We read of Isaiah and Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, the Apostles at the Transfiguration, John in the visions of Revelation, prophets and apostles all, transported by faith and by God's power back towards that face to face, heart to heart experience with God that was the human birthright before we threw it away to run the world and rule our own destinies.

And much of what we've learned through the struggles of all these people is how difficult it is, once sin has entered our hearts, for us to get anywhere near God, for us to offer him anything like the face to face, heart to heart worship that we owe him. Think about it! Noah emerged from the ark into a new world that was his to rule only to humiliate himself, drinking himself into insensibility. It was all too much for him. Moses can't quite get himself to the Promised Land.

David sets up the holy city only to descend himself into the lowest kind of scandal. Solomon builds a grand temple for God and then goes and worships an idol on a hillside. Isaiah sees God, face to face just like in the Garden, but cries out "*Woe is me, a man of unclean lips!*" Ezekiel and Daniel were refugees in Babylon, they were banished from the Jerusalem sanctuary when God gave them their visions.

Zechariah, a generation later, rebuilt a sanctuary in Jerusalem that was so small and plain compared to Solomon's temple that people wept when they saw it. The Apostles were so excited to see Jesus all lit up like the Almighty in the Garden. Peter wanted to set up tents and live there!

Only to have Christ remind them that it was not yet time, that a Cross and a life of service and sacrifice lay between them and what they wanted right there and right then.

And so it's no accident that the author to the book of Hebrews has taken us on a tour of the sanctuaries as a way of teaching us what real spirituality is all about. Last week, he had us at Sinai with Moses at the foot of the mountain where Moses taught God's people and us about blood and water and scarlet wool and hyssop, all the symbols of the forgiveness and help we'll need to get within a country mile of God.

The point being that we are a long way from the Garden, we are a long way from the state of heart and mind we'll need to gain to ever worship God face to face without fear and without distraction. This worship God calls us to offer him is not something we're going to manufacture through any exercise of zeal and discipline. The whole point of entering the presence of the Almighty is understanding that he is so far above us and beyond us that no exploit of ours will ever prepare us to worship him heart to heart and face to face like we did in the Garden.

To that end, our passage teaches us that everything Moses offered Israel, the doctrines and ethics, the commandments and rituals, the sanctuary and furniture, and every person there at the foot of the mountain was speckled with blood as if to say to God's people that the whole way back to the Garden is founded on a sacrifice that would make possible the forgiveness we need to learn and to gain those qualities it will take for us to get anywhere near or become anything like God.

And throughout the Old Testament we learn the same lesson over and over. Symbols and pictures and stories all woven together to teach us that we can't get there, won't get there unless Someone else stands in and absorbs God's fury for our failure to want and live and perform the holiness that he requires of people who would serve as priests in his Garden. He warned Adam in so many words in Genesis, "Fail to protect the sanctuary, fail to observe my holiness and you will die."

And so the Old Testament is littered with stories of men and women wanting to get back there, wanting to complete what Adam had left undone, Old Testament heroes, good people, ending their lives almost there, not quite reaching their dream, not quite landing where they wanted to be, not quite becoming what they wanted to be. And Moses prescribed pictures, symbols that spoke of getting the rest of the way there, the blood of a sacrifice to stand between us and judgment, water to purify the stains still left on our souls, scarlet wool to turn unworthy places into sanctuaries where God could be worshiped despite our sin and guilt, and hyssop that long stemmed plant that God could use to apply grace to hopeless cases.

And we learn in the book of Hebrews that all these rituals, all this pageantry and furniture spoke of a reality cannot be seen by the human eye, cannot be grasped by human devices. The Old Testament saints could save their souls only by understanding that the rituals spoke of a wild card that God had not yet played. It says in our passage, "*It is appointed for men to die once, and then comes judgment.*"

The picture painted here is of a dreary parade, an endless job search, candidate after candidate appearing before God, not quite making the grade, not quite living up to the faithfulness and obedience and purity it will take to man heaven's sanctuary, to love and worship and serve God heart to heart and face to face. Until Christ appeared "*at the end of the ages*" our passage says, fourteen centuries into Moses' dreary game, Christ appears in heaven's sanctuary and God is finally able to say, "I've found my man! Finally, someone to stand in my presence and redeem my people.

Here is a high priest, not mucking around with someone else's blood, not masquerading as someone who really cared about God's people, but here is Jesus fresh from the Cross having absorbed God's justice for all the wrongs of the Fall, fresh from the Grave which couldn't hold him 'cause he'd never sinned and wasn't subject to death.

Here at last was Jesus, a human who had fulfilled the human office, who had set God's people on the journey home, who had started work on a sanctuary better than what Moses and David and Solomon were able to patch together. And the point of the passage is that the trick to getting into heaven ourselves is not our trying to become what all the Old Testament heroes failed to be, not our reaching a level of praying and fasting and worshiping and serving that none of us can reach.

The trick is for us to attach ourselves to, to identify with, the one Person who ever completed this job interview successfully. The point of learning about blood and water and scarlet wool and hyssop is to understand that they all point to what Christ wants to give to anyone who will love and trust and follow him.

It's not about any of us becoming the hero of our own story. It's not about any of us dazzling the people around us with how much our lives have changed, how far we've been able to come, how much we've been able to do. That was the piety of the Pharisees which landed them in a place where, when Christ finally arrived, they didn't think they needed him. But we do need him, each of us and all of us. We are all subject to sins and errors which can only be addressed to the extent that we are willing to humbly and honestly gather as his people to worship and learn from him together.

"Wherever two or more gather in my name," Jesus said, *"there I am in their midst."* The point being that, "*at the end of the ages*", the sanctuary has become portable. Where God's people gather as church, under the authority and teaching of the apostles, that is sanctuary in the world today. *"By this all people will know you are my disciples,"* Jesus said, *"if you have love for one another."* We save our souls by loving and identifying with Christ. We save the world by loving and identifying with one another.

It is an economy that is foreign to all worldly accomplishment. It is not individualistic, not about always winning and always being right. It calls for an honesty and a humility and a loyalty

to church and kingdom that only happens when we trust Christ entirely to get us where our energy and efforts can't go.

Our passage teaches that our sins have been atoned for "*once for all*". So the moment we give our lives to Christ, we are forever free from condemnation and the dread and guilt that condemnation provokes. God may discipline us, but he will never, ever cast us aside once we belong to Christ.

And the mark that this has really happened is that our hearts and minds slowly and surely become other worldly, ever more focused on the invisible, on church and kingdom, on Christ and his return. We "*wait eagerly for him*" our passage tells us, our eyes on the horizon while we serve him together in the here and now.