

The Unseen Sanctuary

Hebrews 7:23-8:7

A few weeks ago I stood here and announced that I thought the key to living a stable, functional, balanced life was patterns. I said then and I still believe that the principal foundation on which our society rests, the planks on which Western societies have been built, are the commandments and disciplines and patterns and relationships which are taught in the holy Scriptures. So it follows that to the extent our thinking and feeling and acting are learned from and formed by Scripture, our lives will be relatively balanced and sane.

The two key words being “extent” and “relatively”. Because, of course, the Bible isn’t just a hand book of guiding principles and sure fire methods for us to tame ourselves and the people around us and our circumstances into some sort of self imposed order that will somehow please God. There are a lot of commands and principles, walls and fences, rules and directions taught in Scripture and the better we learn them, the better off we are, but the heart of the matter from cover to cover in the Bible is the God who never gave up on us and the Savior he sent to lead us back to him.

So, for instance, in the Book of Acts, Peter the Apostle was called on the carpet in the Jerusalem church for presuming to baptize a Roman soldier as a believer, this at a stage of history when Romans generally didn’t know about all the commandments and rituals God gave us to keep our lives on the straight and narrow. Cornelius, the Roman Peter baptized, was a good guy, sincere about finding God. He used his wealth and position to help God’s people, but the Hebrew Christians around Peter had a hard time seeing past his uniform, his accent, his culture, his politics.

It was tough for people who’d spent their whole life working the straight and narrow to accept a guy who was never going to dress or talk or eat like them. So it took a vision on a rooftop to make Peter willing to even enter a Roman soldier’s house. And it was only after the Holy Spirit visibly descended on Cornelius and his Italian relatives that Peter was convinced that these strangers really belonged to Christ.

So only then did Peter baptize them. But the Jerusalem Christians would go round and round for years over what to do about foreigners who somehow found Christ without first learning all those patterns and commandments and rituals Moses taught. Finally, years later, Peter would address them all and say in so many words, “Are we Jews really so much better that we can turn up our noses at Romans and Greeks who only want to follow Christ?” I’ll quote what he actually said in Acts 15, he said “*Why do you put God to the test by burdening these people with a yoke [all the commandments and patterns and rituals] that we have never been able to bear?*” Just read the Bible!

The stories of the Old Testament describe, time and time again, how the Chosen People, even those we remember as heroes, couldn't live up to all those patterns and disciplines and commandments God gave them to keep. People like Moses and David and Solomon had their lives go off the rails, this way and that, because some sin in their hearts, some confluence in their circumstances, tempted them to do, or take, or be something other than what God allowed. Which, by the way, was no great surprise to God.

From the moment we left the Garden, God instituted a system of ritual forgiveness where sincere believers in trouble could approach God and express sorrow and obtain forgiveness by telling God the truth and bringing an animal to an altar where the animal would die so the believer could be forgiven and go back to living for God on the straight and narrow marked out by the commandments.

All the decorations and furniture of the tabernacle, the costumes of the priests, the sights and sounds of the temple complex were given just to tell the story of how one day men and women like you and me would be able to approach God and be forgiven and cleansed and changed so that we could live with God in a sanctuary garden like we did way back when before we fell and all those patterns were fractured. So for more than a thousand years generations of priests labored in that sanctuary, washing their hands, slaughtering the sacrifice, declaring people forgiven, and washing their hands and starting all over.

It was a pattern of worship, a ritual designed to teach us that, at the end of the day, we will not be able to keep the patterns. We need a Savior, a Sacrifice, Someone to stand in and bear the judgment we have coming, no matter how good our intentions, no matter how hard we try. And we need a Priest, a Man to lead us back into the presence of God, a Man whose character and way of life expresses all those high flung qualities that the colors and finery of the old priest's costumes were meant to express.

I don't know about you, but I could stand to pray more. I could learn the gospel better. I could give more generously, worship more faithfully, I could be wiser and kinder when people need my help. I could govern the passions and lusts that rage back and forth in my heart so that I don't keep injuring myself and people who count on me. And I've tried ...and my life is better, saner, more balanced and more fruitful for the trying. But all those patterns I've learned and tried to live all these years still leave me a day late and a dollar short when it comes to loving and knowing God.

That's the dilemma that the Book of Hebrews was written to address. Because like today, back in the first century, the woods were filled with religious athletes, showmen, selling us a spiritual regimen, a world of exotic techniques and experiences, a distinctive cultural outlook different and superior to the more ordinary people around us.

Back then it was mystic Pharisees, rabbi's around the edges of the Christian fellowships who saw themselves as masters of the Mosaic system, men whose prayers and fasting and giving and

learning worked them into a state where they were subject to visions and angels and blessings beyond the reach of ordinary disciples who had to go to work in the morning. You know sociology is a funny thing.

The Apostles, virtually all of them lifelong Jews, knew better than to think that visions and blessings and prosperity and mastery could be conjured by attempting to be more Jewish than Moses. They had heard it all in their synagogues growing up, “If you become more faithful, more generous, more spiritual, more kosher, you will usher in a new Messianic Age in which Israel will conquer and rule and prosper!” Guys like Peter and Paul knew better than to buy into this stuff.

Peter had tried to be the Old Testament hero on the night of Jesus’ trial, waving around his sword, about to take on a platoon of Roman soldiers till Jesus intervened and probably saved his life. But once being a hero was off the table, once mastery slipped beyond his reach, what got Peter back on the rails? It was a Savior who knew Peter was going to fail and went ahead and died for his sins anyway.

And, I think, it was a Priest, Christ, who met Peter after the resurrection on a beach in Galilee and forgave and reinstated Peter as a disciple and an apostle. Jesus brought up the matter of Peter’s failure, brought Peter to tears by reminding him of it. But then Jesus commanded him, “*Feed my sheep!*”.

In other words, Peter learned both forgiveness and duty from the Priest God sent to teach us all the same. And not just Peter! Paul was the rabbi’s rabbi, the master of everything kosher and spiritual and right. He says so himself in Philippians 3! So down was he with Moses that, in the Book of Acts, Paul helped execute Stephen for fear that Stephen’s raving about Jesus would somehow undermine the patterns and disciplines and rituals that held Paul’s life together. No one prayed or gave or studied with more zeal than Paul!

And all that zeal did for Paul was to turn him into a bitter, hateful, one dimensional, religious bigot. Till one day, years after the resurrection, Jesus met Paul on his way to another tiresome crusade and Christ identified himself as the Savior and the Priest Paul was really meant to serve. Christ both forgave him and taught him duty, set his life on the rails, all in the same incident. Paul’s religion bought him nothing till he found a Savior and a Priest. I said earlier that sociology is a funny thing.

I’ve watched the growth of ISIS fanaticism these past few years and I’ve been surprised at the traction such a medieval ideology has gained in places like London, Manchester, Brussels, Paris, Orlando, San Bernardino, influencing people who have long been in the west, long subject to western influence. And I think sometimes that what has long been revealed as tiresome, hateful nonsense in places like Syria and Iraq carries a sort of false romance for Arabs in the west because it is so visibly different, so much simpler and more dramatic, than the complexities of daily life in the West.

And I think something similar happened in the first century among Christians around the Mediterranean rim. I've been fascinated to read in my Bible that the false teaching of mystic rabbi's gained the most traction in cities and churches that were far away from Judea and Jerusalem. Paul's strongest warnings against the mystic rabbi's were written in letters to places like Galatia and Colossae where there weren't that many Jews! But Jewish culture, the dramatic, visible patterns the rabbi's taught, possessed a sort of false romance, tempted some of the new Christians away from the more ordinary disciplines and relationships that they were learning at Church.

So the author to the Hebrews counters the angels and visions and drama and mastery of the mystic rabbi's with the vision Moses saw on Mt. Sinai before the original tabernacle was ever built. The presumption here is that what Moses brought down from the mountain, all the decorations and furniture of the tabernacle, all the costumes of the priests and the rituals of the sacrifice, all these were what Moses had seen in God's sanctuary atop the mountain, and that is what he built, a replica of cloth and wood and precious metals down on the desert floor.

So Moses threw a costume on his brother Aaron, white linen and bright colors and sparkling jewels, and they taught God's people a pattern of worship that would prepare peoples hearts for the Savior, the Sacrifice, the Priest, who one day would descend to a Jewish Passover festival and become both Lamb and Priest, to offer people like you and me the forgiveness and guidance we need to make our way to the original sanctuary that Moses was only allowed to see briefly in a vision.

But we'll be there forever. And the danger, then and now, is that we could get so caught up in the false romance of drama and ritual and mastery and technique that we become full of ourselves and blind to how desperately we need Christ and each other. Our priest took off his robes and washed our feet, And that more ordinary humility and purity, reverence and service is what marks us as belonging to Christ.