

THE TRUE THINGS

Hebrews 9:24-28

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

November 10, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson comes from *The Letter to the Hebrews*, chapter 9, verses 24 through 28. It recalls the Old Testament sacrifices on the Day of Atonement and speaks of Jesus as both the priest and victim, who offered himself for the sins of the world and presented his blood in heaven as the atonement for all sin. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Hebrews 9, beginning at verse 24, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁴ For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

You may be seated.

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Today we eat solid food. And I'm not talking about lunch. I'm talking about the Word of God. The letter to the Hebrews is solid food. It's a little bit more technical than some other parts of the Bible. It takes a bit more effort to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" than some other books. But this is something that I think, you as a congregation, are capable of doing. You have a love for the Word of God, and I see a persistent desire to grow in our understanding of it, including some of the deeper mysteries of the Gospel.

There are a few passages in the New Testament that describe the difference between milk and solid food. One of them is earlier in Hebrews, at the end of chapter five. We don't know who, exactly, wrote the letter to the Hebrews. There's no name attached to it. Some speculate that it was the Apostle Paul, maybe Luke, maybe Barnabas. We don't know. But what we do know is that it's really, really good. It was probably written as a sermon by one of these apostles or evangelists to a congregation that he was absent from. And it's pretty deep. So in chapter five, right after the author starts talking about how Jesus is our high priest, the preacher takes a step back for a moment and says, "About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing" (5:11). He goes on, "You need milk, not solid food" (5:12). And he laments this fact. He wants his congregation to be able to handle the solid food, but he recognizes that their dullness prevents them from handling much more than milk. By this he does not mean that they are unintelligent, but that their knowledge of the Scriptures is weak. They

have not matured as they should have. They still need milk, but he wants to serve them solid food.

Now that passage from chapter five is sometimes misunderstood. I have heard preachers say that the milk is the Gospel, as if that's what we start out with in the Christian faith, but we need to build on that by growing in good works. As of late, I hear a lot of emphasis from other Christians on personal transformation. The idea is that we start with the Gospel, but then the Christian life is about progressing from the Gospel to transforming our hearts through good works. Now, we should be very much in favor of good works, but not because they transform our hearts—they don't—but simply because they are good. If the Christian life starts with the Gospel, but then progresses to growing in good works, we're really just falling back under the Law again. We never progress out of the Gospel. The distinction between milk and solid food is not a distinction between the Gospel and then growing in good works. It's really about going deeper into the mysteries of the Gospel. The milk is learning the basics about repentance, faith, Baptism, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life (6:1-2). The solid food is simply going deeper into those basics we have begun to learn. It's cutting our teeth on some real meat. And how do we know this is what the author of Hebrews means by solid food? It's because that's what he does in the letter. He doesn't give that little interlude about milk and solid food and then switch to talking about growing in good works. He keeps trying to help them grow in the Gospel. He goes into all this detail about how Jesus is our high priest. He talks about Melchizedek. And he spends several chapters talking about the Old Testament sacrifices, the tabernacle, and the temple, and how all of those things were prophetic pictures of Jesus. Some of it is rather technical and difficult to understand. But it's the solid food that we can really cut our teeth on.

One of the marvelous things about the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that it never ceases to be amazing. At first you learn the basic facts: that you're a sinner; we learn that from the Law. But the Gospel teaches you that God loves you and sent his Son for you; that Jesus died for your sins, so God forgives you; that he rose from the dead; that he adopted you in Baptism; and that everyone who trusts in him will have eternal life. Those are the basics that even little children can understand. But you can always go deeper. And it's never about learning something different, it's always about learning the same thing in a deeper way. So the Gospel is always accessible and fascinating, whoever you are. And a big part of going deeper into the mystery of the Gospel is recognizing it in the Old Testament. It's looking at the events and laws and ceremonies, some of which seem kind of weird at first, and then realizing how those things looked forward to Jesus.

In the section we read today from Hebrews 9, the preacher speaks of how the tabernacle, and later the temple, were copies of the true things in heaven (9:24). And the sacrifices that were offered there looked forward to the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus.

The major event from the Old Testament that the preacher refers to here is the Day of Atonement. In Hebrew it's called "Yom Kippur," and that's what the Jews still call it today. *Yom* (יום) is the Hebrew word meaning "day." And *kafar*, or sometimes *kapar* (כפר), means "to cover." It's one of those rare Hebrew words that accidentally sounds the same in English *kafar* means "to cover." The idea is that the blood of the sacrifice covers over the sins of the people. And being used in this sacrificial context, it also takes on the idea of washing away sins, abolishing sins, or being a ransom payment for sins. All of that comes to be included in the meaning of the word "atonement."

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The Day of Atonement was a religious service that the LORD, Yahweh, commanded in Leviticus 16. By the way, “Yahweh” is God’s name in Hebrew. It means “I am,” and I’m going to use it a lot in this sermon.

And I need to set this up by talking a little about the tabernacle. The architecture of the tabernacle matters. All of this comes from the time of the Exodus, those forty years that Israel spent living in the wilderness after the LORD, Yahweh, brought them out of slavery in Egypt, but before he settled them in the land of Canaan. So this was about 1446 to 1406 BC. So almost 3,500 years ago. During the beginning of that time, so about 1446 BC, Yahweh commanded them to build a tabernacle. This is in Exodus 26 and 27. The Tabernacle was like a portable temple. It was a large tent constructed out of poles and curtains. And it was the place where Yahweh promised to dwell and meet with the people.

Later in the history of Israel, about 450 years later, King Solomon, the son of King David, replaced the tabernacle with the temple, which was just a more permanent version of the tabernacle. It was made with stones. But the temple was really David’s idea, not Yahweh’s. Yahweh’s idea was the tabernacle. I think he liked the idea of portability. Wherever his people went, he would be with them.

Anyway, the tabernacle was a large tent. I’ll try to paint the mental picture for you, but you can also look it up online when you get home. It was about 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. That’s just a little bit narrower than a pickleball court. And around the tent was a courtyard, which was fenced in by curtains. The courtyard was about 150 feet long by 75 feet wide, so about half as long and half as wide as a football field. And in the courtyard was a big bronze altar where sacrifices were made. Any of the Israelites who were ceremonially clean were allowed in the courtyard, so they could watch the sacrifices.

The tabernacle, or the tent itself, had two rooms in it, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The priests would go into the Holy Place every day to perform to perform their ritual duties that Yahweh had prescribed for them. But the Most Holy Place was off limits to them, except for one priest once a year. That was on the Day of Atonement.

And inside the Most Holy Place was the Ark of the Covenant, you know, like the one in Indiana Jones, except that wasn’t the real Ark of the Covenant ... probably. The ark was like a wooden chest, overlaid with gold. And on top of the lid, which was called the mercy seat, there were statues of two angels facing each other. So it looked like they were looking at each other. But they weren’t; they were looking at the LORD, Yahweh. Because that spot, in the physical space of this world, right above the mercy seat and between the two angels, is where Yahweh promised to be (Ex. 25:24). So this ark was *the* holy object in Israel. It was so sacred that one time, a man died for touching (Uzzah; 1 Chr. 13). And I don’t mean that the people of Israel condemned and executed him, but Yahweh struck the man dead, on the spot, for being presumptuous enough to touch it. When they moved it, they had to cover it and carry it with poles through rings mounted on the side of it, so that no one would look at it or touch it. The place of Yahweh’s presence was so holy. But one day a year, on the Day of Atonement, one priest would go into the Most Holy Place.

On the Day of Atonement, there were sacrifices. There were three animals: one bull and two goats. The bull was just for the priest. Before he could offer a sacrifice on behalf of the people, he had to make a sacrifice for his own sins. After all, he was a sinner too. If he tried to go in and make a sacrifice for the sins of the people, while ignoring his own, he probably would have been

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struck dead too. So the bull was just for him and his house (Lev. 16:6). He would sacrifice the bull as a burnt offering, but save some of the blood.

But before going behind the curtain to the Most Holy Place, he was commanded to burn incense over some coals in order to make a cloud that would cover the mercy seat of the ark, so that he would not die (Lev. 16:12-13). Maybe he could see it a little bit, but not completely. So we're talking about some really serious stuff here. And the priest would sprinkle some of the blood on the front of the mercy seat, and then seven times in front of the mercy seat (Lev. 16:14). So he's sprinkling it right in front of the presence of Yahweh. All of that was just for his own sins.

Then he would go back out of the tabernacle and take one of the goats. The first one was the sin offering. He would kill it in front of the people. And he would take the blood of the goat back into the tabernacle and into the Most Holy Place. And he would sprinkle the blood of the goat over and in front of the mercy seat exactly as he had done with the blood of the bull. And this covered the sins of the people of Israel (Lev. 16:15).

Then he would go back out of the tent. And he would take some of the blood from both the bull and the goat, and he would put it on the horns of the altar, in order to cleanse it and consecrate it (Lev. 16:18-19). I suppose the idea there is that this altar was used for sacrifices every day. So this blood from the Day of Atonement extended Yahweh's forgiveness to all of those sacrifices.

Then you have the other goat. And I suppose by this time, that goat is thinking, *what are they going to do to me now?* The priest would lay his hands on the head of this goat and confess all the sins of the people. Then someone would lead this goat out into the wilderness and let him go free. Now I wonder, what's with the two goats? Why is one sacrificed, and why is one set free? We already know that all of this is supposed to be a prophetic picture of Jesus. So I think the deal is that one goat is not enough to capture the full picture of Jesus. I mean, a million goats isn't enough. But two gets us a lot closer than just one, because the first goat stays dead. So the second goat, the one that lives, fills in the rest. Our sins were laid, not on a Savior who was crucified and stayed dead, but upon one who was crucified and raised, so that he lives as our Savior from sin. Both goats reveal something about our Savior. He was sacrificed for our sin *and* he lives.

But it's more than just the goats that look forward to Jesus. The priest is also a prophetic picture of Jesus. And the tabernacle is a picture of heaven. So the whole scene on the Day of Atonement is a prophetic picture of Jesus making atonement for the sins of the world. It's like the priest is dramatizing, he's "pre-enacting," if you will, the passion of the Christ. And it's showing us the cosmic reality behind what could be seen with the naked eye. If we were there two thousand years ago as eyewitnesses, we would have seen Jesus crucified. And if we would have stuck around a few days, we would have seen him risen from the dead. But the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement give us a picture of what was going on in heaven.

The courtyard of the tabernacle is earth, where Jesus was publicly crucified. The tabernacle is heaven. The Most Holy Place is the throne room of heaven. The Ark of the Covenant is the throne of God. And Jesus, as both the sacrifice and our high priest, enters in before God the Father and sprinkles his holy and precious blood there in heaven. And we should understand this, not as some imaginative way of thinking about the atonement, but as the true reality of what really happened, that the Son of God went into the real heaven with real human blood—his own—and sprinkled it there in the Most Holy Place in all of heaven. So there is human blood in heaven, the blood of Jesus. The blood that he used to make atonement for your sin here on earth

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has been carried into heaven. And it was presented there, not as a sacrifice that needs to be repeated over and over again, but as the once-for-all atonement for your sins. That blood has been carried into heaven before you in order to prepare a place for you.

So I'm going to do something here that I don't usually do. I'm going to read this passage from Hebrews 9 again, because it's short, but very meaty, and I hope all this background of the Day of Atonement will enlighten this wondrous mystery of Jesus making atonement for our sin. Hebrews 9, starting at verse 24:

²⁴ For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Because Jesus has done this to make atonement for your sins, we should live with eager expectation for his return. And he will return. And this time, there will be no more sins to deal with. When we think of Jesus returning, and us standing before him, that might seem like a fearful thing. But be assured that he will not return to deal with sin. He already did that once and for all. Every sin has already been dealt with by his perfect atonement. When he returns, it will be to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. So fear not. Your Savior, the priest and victim, who made atonement for all sins, will appear again to save you from death and all evil. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.