

APPROACHING GOD WITH CONFIDENCE

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Text: Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “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.” For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Some animals, as you probably know, have a tendency to freeze in the face of danger. It’s like they’re literally scared stiff. I remember one time when I was a truck driver, a deer wandered out into my lane late at night and just stood there staring into my headlights. I had to swerve in order to avoid it, which is something you really don’t want to do in a tractor trailer.

Sometimes human beings freeze, too. Fear can grip us so hard we can’t move a muscle, even if our life depends on it. I once heard about a guy who was hit by a train at a railroad crossing and somehow survived. Later he told the police he saw the train coming, and he heard the whistle blow, but it was like his feet were cemented to the ground. He just couldn’t get out of the way.

But it’s not only physical dangers that can cause us to freeze. Emotional dangers can be just as paralyzing. Fear of rejection can keep us from asking someone out on a date. Fear of embarrassment can keep us from trying new things. Fear of conflict can keep us from sticking up for ourselves. And then there’s the kind of fear that’s behind the reading from Hebrews this morning—not fear of a physical danger, or fear of an emotional danger, but

fear of a spiritual danger. Fear of a God who's angry and wrathful. Fear of a God who holds our flaws and weaknesses against us. Fear of a God who punishes us for every little sin.

A lot of people live with that kind of fear, a lot of people feel deeply uncertain about their relationship with God, and it can be a real spiritual roadblock. It can keep them from ever getting anywhere in their spiritual lives—as if their feet are cemented to the ground. But there's good news in the reading from Hebrews this morning.

The writer tells us we don't have to worry about an angry God because in Jesus we have what he calls "a great priest"—the idea being that unlike a regular priest, who makes the same sacrifices over and over all day long in a hopeless effort to take away sin, Jesus, by dying on the cross, made a once-and-for-all sacrifice. He wiped the slate clean for everybody, so no one has to be frozen with fear anymore.

So let's go through the reading, and look at how this good news plays out in our spiritual lives—what it means for our relationship with God, and what it means for our relationship with one another.

First of all, it means we can approach God with confidence. In verse 20, the writer talks about Jesus opening a curtain for us, and he's referring to something specific. In the temple in Jerusalem back in Jesus' day, there was an inner chamber, called the Holy of Holies, where God was thought to dwell, and it was separated from the rest of the temple by a literal curtain. And the idea was, people stayed on one side of the curtain, and God stayed on the other; and the only person who could ever go through the curtain and enter the Holy of Holies and stand in God's presence was the high priest, and even he could only go in there on one special day of the year called the Day of Atonement.

So the writer of Hebrews is using that image of the curtain to say that Jesus has opened up our relationship with God by providing what he calls a "new and living way" to enter into God's presence. Through Jesus, God metaphorically reaches through the curtain and draws us in, so there's no longer any separation between us. And we don't have to be afraid of being close to God, we don't have to stand there like a deer in headlights, because, again, Jesus has played that priestly role for us. Our hearts have been "sprinkled clean," the writer says, and we've been given the green light to seek God out in our lives without anything holding us back.

So that's one thing the good news we hear in this letter means for us. We can approach God with confidence. Another thing it means is that we can hold fast to what the writer calls "the confession of our hope." The ultimate hope of Christian life boils down to two simple statements. Jesus rose from the dead, and someday Jesus will come again. These two statements are what we hang our hats on theologically, and the writer of Hebrews tells us we can do so because "he who has promised is faithful." Which basically means because God has been faithful to us in the past, we can count on God in the future. The God we meet in the pages of scripture is a God who's stuck by us through thick and thin and never

wavered in wanting to be with us. So when Jesus says he'll return, we can take those words to the bank.

So that's another thing the good news we hear in this letter means for us. It means we can trust that our lives are in good hands. And one more thing it means is that we should encourage one another to go out and live the Christian life, now that we're over our fear and looking ahead to the future. The last thing the writer says in this passage is "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching." In other words, let's think about how we can support and motivate each other. Let's think about how we spur each other on to acts of kindness and compassion. Or another way to put it is, let's think about how we can invest in each other.

Like when automobiles were first introduced and Americans fell in love with them. The love didn't last very long because the roads we had at the time weren't made for cars. They were made for horses and buggies. So people were constantly breaking down and getting stuck, until finally Henry Ford stepped in and launched a campaign to introduce paved roads. He hired work crews and provided them with equipment to pave what he called "seed miles" all across the country. The crews would go from town to town and pave a one-mile stretch of road, in the hopes that once people got a taste of driving on asphalt, it would lead to more and more roads being paved, and a whole new age of motoring would be born.

In the same way, we can pave spiritual seed miles right here in our church. We can do little things for each other that make a big difference. Like sitting with someone's who's new and making them feel welcome. Like praying with someone who's going through a difficult time. Like texting someone who's sick and asking if there's anything they need. Like affirming someone's gifts for ministry. Small investments like that can transform an entire community because once people receive encouragement, they'll encourage others, and that'll lead to more and more acts of loving service, and a whole new kind of energy and vitality will emerge.

So let me just wrap this up by giving all of you some encouragement. I think God is very much present in the life of Valley. I think we have a lot of confidence and hope for the future God is bringing. And all you have to do is look around to see the energy and vitality that's here—the spirit of friendship and joy on Sunday mornings; the Valley Music Series; the work the session is doing to open the church up to the wider community.

This is definitely not a place that's spiritually frozen. This is a place where things are happening, and people are living their faith. Amen.