

The Priest Who Enables Us to Truly Worship
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, November 3, 2024
Hebrews 9:11-14
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship! This Sunday, we are invited to recognize those persons in our church family who have gone home to God in the past year. We celebrate their lives today, even though All Saints Day actually falls on November 1st, following All Hallows' Eve, which we know better as Halloween. We give thanks for the life and ministry of *Margaret Hostetter* and *Eleanor Beath* of Antioch, of *Donna Harrison* of Beckwith, and of *Bea Dryden* of Spedden. I hope you'll take some time this week to recall how these saints of God have touched your own life, give thanks for them, and let their families know how much they mean to you and to our church.

Today, we continue with our study of Hebrews by turning to chapter 9, verses 11-14. In Hebrews 9, the Preacher is describing the worship experience of the liberated Jewish slaves in the desert. Long before Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem, the people who journeyed with Moses worshiped in a portable tent, known as the Tabernacle. It was also referred to as the Tent of the Congregation or the Tent of Meeting.

At Mount Sinai, God instructed Moses to build the Tabernacle. We need not check out the blueprints today, but if you are interested in the detailed directions that Moses received from God, read Exodus 25 to 31 and 35. These chapters describe an inner sanctuary, known as the Holy of Holies, which was created by a veil suspended by four pillars. God also commanded specific pieces of furniture to be made. Made "by human hands" in about 1450 B.C., the Tabernacle accompanied the people wherever they went during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness.

This sanctuary contained the Ark of the Covenant, with its cherubim-covered mercy seat. The Ark was understood to be the earthly dwelling place of God. The Ark also contained the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. Over time, the location of the Ark has been lost, though Indiana Jones claimed it was stored in a government warehouse in Nevada!

It was in the sacred space of the Tabernacle that the priests offered sacrifices for themselves and for the people. On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies to burn incense and sprinkle sacrificial animal blood to atone for his sins and those of the people of Israel. He would enter alone. Imagining this scene can give

us some idea of the inaccessibility of this sacred space.

In today's passage from Hebrews 9:11-12, we see Jesus entering "this holy place." Instead of bringing the blood of a goat to atone for the sins of the people and the blood from a bull to atone for his own sins and those of his household, as the High Priest would customarily do, the unblemished Jesus had shed his own blood. In contrast to the sacrifices of the Levitical priests, who had to continually offer sacrifices, "Jesus entered once for all" (9:12). Also in contrast to the Levitical priests whose sacrifices could only purify the flesh, Jesus' blood is able to "purify our conscience from dead works" (9:14). These "dead works" are ones that believers repent of.

Scholar Amy Peeler raises some intriguing questions for us in contrasting the work of the Levitical priests with that of Jesus:

...Jesus' sacrifice opens another way. Jesus' sacrifice cleanses the external *and internal* so that we can offer our whole selves to God, just like he did. It is not really about what we do; the same action can be a dead work or a lively praise, but it is about surrender. We can ask ourselves..: Are you doing works just to do the work or are you doing them because you are surrendered to the living God? When we surrender ourselves as Jesus did, it becomes possible to serve the living God with a living faith. ("Working Preacher," November 4, 2012).

Dr. Peeler's question is a difficult one. What is our *real* motivation for doing works that serve God and neighbor? Are we just checking the boxes on our to-do list, hoping that God will see what we've done rather than question why we've done it? The old hymn reminds me that I am called to "surrender all" to Jesus. Sounds good, but do we really want to surrender our will completely to his? Let's be honest. Sure, we can tell ourselves that we're willing to give our all for Jesus, but when the time comes and the chips are down, are we truly willing to do that? Or, are we going to go so far and then decide that what Jesus is asking of us is a bridge too far? Do we really want to be *that* pure and holy? Maybe you can recall the Avis commercial from the early 1960s that admitted they were second in the car rental business. But because they were number two, they did try harder. Are you willing to try harder, or are you content to remain in second place? And if you are content in second place, are you really surrendering your all to serve the living Lord?

The last phrase of verse 14 clarifies that Christ has sacrificed himself in order to purify us so that we may "worship the living God." Now that's a very different purpose than that of the sacrifices of the priests. Their sacrifices could purify a body that had become ritually unclean, perhaps for

example, by touching a dead corpse. We need to understand the Greek word translated here as “worship” in a much broader sense than we think of worship. Here, we’re not just talking about gathering before God to sing, pray, praise, listen to a sermon, and participate in the sacraments. These are all worthwhile activities. But as we read in the NIV, the same word for “worship” is translated as “serve.” Yes, the Greek word does mean “worship,” as we would understand it, but it also includes the idea of service to God. Writing in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. X11, page 118). Dr. Fred Craddock explains:

...Christ’s offering of his life was the ultimate act of worship in order that we, with purified consciences, may “worship the living God.” What, then, is this worship if it is not the offering of ourselves in ways appropriate to the nature of God and the needs that present themselves to us? On this matter, the word of Hebrews is not unlike the urging of Paul to the Roman Christians: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12, NRSV).

Suddenly, the practice of “worship” rises to a whole new level of engagement. We can’t just “park it in the pew” on Sunday morning and assume we’ve done all that we need to do, but we must be ready to serve those who God puts in our path. We definitely cannot be all things to all people, but we can be ready to take up our cross and serve as God calls us.

Let’s use this phrase “worship the living God” to delve more deeply into what we mean when we talk about “worship.” Perhaps the first question we need to ask is, “Who are you worshipping?” A story is told that hits this nail on the head:

During the tenure of the great orator Henry Ward Beecher, a visiting minister (Beecher’s brother) once substituted for the popular pastor. A large audience had already assembled to hear Beecher, and when the substitute pastor stepped into the pulpit, several disappointed listeners began to move toward the exits. That’s when the minister stood and said loudly, “All who have come here today to *worship* Henry Ward Beecher may now withdraw from the church. All who have come to *worship* God keep your seats!” (*Today in the Word*, April, 1989, p. 22).

Two important questions are: Do you limit your worship to a church service? If so, what happens when you leave? Tony Evans suggests that if you do limit your worship to a place, then when you exit, you will leave your

attitude of worship behind like a crumpled-up church bulletin.

Well, we certainly don't want to do that. I wonder how often we attend worship simply because we are attracted to one aspect of the service. Perhaps the music is outstanding or the prayers are meaningful. Of course, our intention should always be to worship the living God, for God is worthy to be glorified and praised. I hope that most, if not all, of you can say that you regularly sense the presence of the living God in worship. But I know that at times folks are like the little boy who knelt to pray at bedtime on Sunday and said, "Dear God, we had a good time at church today—but I wish you had been there!" We may know intellectually that God was with us, but somehow we don't experience the awe and wonder that a close encounter with God will bring.

The truth of the matter is that God is there, but somehow we get distracted. Maybe we're sitting in our pew wondering if the roast is getting overdone, or if we'll be finished in time to make it to a concert, or game, or whatever we had lined up for the afternoon. We're so busy checking our watches that we don't open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and meet God who is present with us. Worship becomes perfunctory, because we have to race home to do something else. If that's happening on a regular basis, perhaps we need to realign our calendars so that worship becomes a priority.

Maybe the problem is not the service itself, but rather, people's expectations...perhaps your own expectations. Some of you may be familiar with George Barna's work. He is the founder of The Barna Group, a highly respected market research firm that specializes in studying the religious beliefs and behaviors of Americans. In his book, *Experience God in Worship*, Barna claims:

that the main reason millions of people in America go to church every week is not to *worship* God, but is instead to have a pleasing experience. He goes on to say that "most Americans go to church to satisfy or please themselves, not to honor or please God." Amazingly, few of the people that Barna's research team interviewed said that *worship* is something that they do primarily for God. Instead a much larger percentage of those who attend worship services on a regular basis claim that they do so for personal benefit and pleasure. This is something that has got to change. We must forget about ourselves and concentrate on Him! He must be the primary focus of our *worship*. (*Lou Nicholes - Missionary/Author*).

How true is this! God must be our focus! You may notice that before we

leave the sanctuary, I urge you to “go in peace and serve the Lord.” I trust that you continue worshiping God by serving others. And if that hasn’t been your practice, may I encourage you to make it so.

Your challenge this week is to ponder your own attitudes toward worship. What do you hope to experience while you’re here? What do you do during the week to live out worship as service to others in Jesus’ name?

I really want to thank you all for hanging with me through another deep dive into Hebrews. This is an important biblical book, but I think we can understand why we don’t hear about it too often. For your patience, I thought you deserved a fun story about worship to conclude:

There is a story about a church that had a man in the choir who couldn’t sing. Others tried to help him find other places of ministry in the church but he insisted on being in the choir. The choir director became so desperate that he went to the pastor. “Pastor, you have to do something with brother Jones. If you can’t persuade him to leave the choir then I quit and most of the choir will quit too. Help us!” The pastor went to the man and suggested that he leave the choir. “Why should I leave?”

“Several people have told me you can’t sing.” “That’s nothing. Fifty have told me you can’t preach and you are still here.”

I hope you noticed that I waited to tell this story until after Charge Conference, where Rev. Davis, our District Superintendent, told the group that he’d be reappointing me to the Choptank Charge in July. I’m pleased to still be here and hope that feeling is mutual. I don’t hold the future, but if things go according to plan and the wishes of our Pastor-Parish Committee, I should be here until July of 2026. But God is full of surprises, so we’ll see!

Love, Nan