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Sermon: “Once for All” (Hebrews 9:24-28)

November 8, 2009

Today I’m preaching from Hebrews 9:24-28, a powerful passage that addresses the heart of our Christian faith: the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for the sins of the world. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ “has appeared once for all... to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

Although it is not known who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews, it is known to whom and why this letter was written. The Letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish converts to Christianity, written to encourage them to persevere in their Christian faith in the midst of the persecution they were undergoing. For in the Roman Empire at that time, Judaism was legally recognized but Christianity was not, and so when people converted from Judaism to Christianity they came out from under the protective umbrella of the Roman Empire and made themselves vulnerable to persecution, persecution which ranged from harassment to physical harm and even torture and death.

Even today there are Christians around the world persecuted for their faith. And while this level of persecution does not occur very often in the United States, Christians are still often labeled and at times hated. A few months ago, right here in Charlottesville I was driving around and saw a bumper sticker that said, “Too many Christians, not enough lions.” That nearly made me sick, and it certainly hurt, and it was just a bumper sticker.

The persecution that early Christians endured involved much worse things than mean bumper stickers. Sometimes Christians were fed to hungry lions in the coliseum where crowds would get drunk and watch them get devoured. They were tied to posts and set on fire to provide illumination for the parties of the rich. In response to the persecution at the hand of the Romans many Christians persevered in their faith, even at the cost of their lives. There are many accounts in the early church of the deaths of these brave martyrs from the 86 year-old bishop Polycarp, martyred in 155, to the 22 year-old nursing mother, Perpetua, martyred in 203. But many Christians were not like Polycarp or Perpetua. Many responded to the persecution by renouncing their faith. In the case of the Jewish Christians addressed in the Letter to the Hebrews, they returned to Judaism. We tend to do the same thing in our lives when we find ourselves in dangerous and unfamiliar territory, we try to return to the safety of the familiar. It was to these Christians that the author wrote the Letter to the Hebrews to encourage them to persevere in their faith because of the “once for all” death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The “once for all” death of Jesus Christ supersedes the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament. In Hebrews 9 the writer makes reference to the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur),

described in Leviticus 16 as the annual day in Israel in which the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies with the sacrificial blood of a lamb in order to atone for the sins of himself and all of Israel. Only the high priest could do this, and, as one of the Christ Church fellows pointed out at the Men's Bible Study the other morning, he actually would have a rope tied to an ankle as he walked into the Holy of Holies so that if the glory of God proved too much for him and he died, he could be pulled out without anyone else entering the tent.

Each year Israel was to keep the Day of Atonement, and each year the sacrifices had to be repeated in order for the sins of the high priest and of Israel to be atoned. And each year when the high priest emerged from the Holy of Holies, atonement complete for that year, there was a great celebration in Israel, for their sin had been atoned, and they were fully reconciled with God. The problem was, this had to be done every single year, and so in the Letter to the Hebrews we see the superiority of Jesus' "once for all" death on the cross, as the author writes in today's passage:

"For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself" (9:24-26).

In the same way that only the high priest of Israel was able to enter the Holy of Holies and atone for the sin of Israel, only Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Great High Priest could make atonement for the sins of the world. And Jesus made atonement not with the blood of others, but with his own blood. This "once for all death is the turning point of all of human history," as Donald Hagner writes in his commentary, *Hebrews*: "Where sin has been definitively canceled, as it has in Christ, the eons have reached a turning point" (147).

This passage can give us comfort *right now*, because it reminds us that *right now* Jesus Christ is with God the Father in heaven appearing "on our behalf." We also see this in Paul's Letter to the Romans: "It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us" (8:34).

Jesus Christ is on our side. He atoned for our sins at the cross and He intercedes on our behalf with God the Father. As we pray in the Prayers of the People, Jesus Christ is indeed our "only Mediator and Advocate" (BCP 330). This is demonstrated by His atoning death on the cross for our sins, as we see in these comfortable words from the First Letter of John: "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:1-2).

One of my favorite things about serving at Christ Church is serving with the fellows in the Fellows program—an exceptional group in every respect. We’re working our way through Paul Zahl’s powerful book, *Who Will Deliver Us?* And this past week we talked about the following story from that book that helpfully illustrates what atonement looks like:

“I am like the duck hunter who was hunting with his friend in a wide-open barren of land in southeastern Georgia. Far away on the horizon he noticed a cloud of smoke. Soon he could hear the sound of cracking. A wind came up, and he realized the terrible truth: a brushfire was advancing his way. It was moving so fast that he and his friend could not outrun it. The hunter began to rifle through his pockets. Then he emptied all the contents of his knapsack. He soon found what he was looking for—a book of matches. To his friend’s amazement, he pulled out a match and struck it. He lit a small fire around the two of them. Soon they were standing in a circle of blackened earth, waiting for the fire to come. They did not have to wait long. They covered their mouths with their handkerchiefs and braced themselves. The fire came near—and swept over them. But they were completely unhurt. They weren’t even touched. Fire would not pass where fire had passed... The law is like the brushfire. I cannot escape it. But if I stand in the burned-over place, where the law has already burned its way through, then I will not be hurt. Not a hair of my head will be singed. The death of Christ is the burned-over place. There I huddle, hardly believing yet relieved. I believe in the atonement” (42-43).

By His “once for all” death on the cross Jesus atoned for our sins, all of them, every one of them. As Peter wrote in his first letter: “Christ also suffered for sins *once for all*, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God” (3:18a, italics added). Jesus did this because of the grace of God, because of the unearned, one-way love of God. This love changes lives.

A few weeks ago Mitch Albom’s latest book, *Have a Little Faith*, was released. I was excited, because Albom is one of my favorite writers, and I actually bought it the day of its release. It’s an inspiring account of what we can learn from two religious leaders, a rabbi named Albert and an inner city pastor named Henry. Henry is a former drug-dealer, who spent much time in jail. The love of God in Jesus Christ changed his heart and he eventually began a ministry to the homeless in Detroit. Every day Pastor Henry ministers to hundreds of homeless people, providing meals and clothes and shelter—all of it free of charge. Mitch Albom relates the following from a conversation he had with Pastor Henry:

Pastor Henry: “Mitch, I am an awful person. The things I have done in my life, they can never be erased. I have broken every one of the Ten Commandments.” Mitch: Come on. Every one? “When I was younger, in some ways, yes, every one.” Stealing? False witness? Coveting? “Yes.” Adultery? “Umm-hmm.” Murder? ... “I was involved in murder.”... “I deserve hell,” he whispered. “The things I’ve done, God would be

justified.”... His eyes were teary now... “You can’t work your way into heaven. Anytime you try and justify yourself with works, you disqualify yourself with works. What I do here, every day, for the rest of my life, is only my way of saying, ‘Lord, regardless of what eternity holds for me, let me give something back to you’...Lord, I’m at your mercy” (218-221).

Pastor Henry gets it. It is not our works that save us. It is the mercy of God. And the ultimate demonstration of the mercy of God is the death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Great High Priest, whose death made atonement “once for all” for the sins of the whole world. Jesus atoned for the sins of all—those who have broken a few of the Ten Commandments and those, like Pastor Henry (and like all of us in some ways) who have broken all ten.

God loves us that much.

And it gets even better. Jesus is not done with us. He is coming back someday, just as He promised. As it says in today’s passage: Jesus “will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (9:28).

The phrase, “eagerly waiting,” here is helpful. “Eagerly waiting” is not impatiently waiting. Impatiently waiting is what I saw at the DMV on Friday morning when I took my daughter, Becky, to get her learner’s permit. (Although I wasn’t impatiently waiting because hanging out with Becky is a blast). “Eagerly waiting” is what happened when you were a kid on Christmas Eve—staying up late, counting down the hours, knowing that the best was yet to come.

“Eagerly waiting” is what the New York Yankees and their fans were doing late Wednesday night as Mariano Rivera was working on saving the clinching game of the World Series. There was a great camera shot of the pitchers in the bullpen jumping up and down grinning as they eagerly waited for the last out. And when the Yankees got that last out, thousands and thousands of fans erupted in celebration. I loved the camera shots of each Yankee on the field and of the dugout as the final out was made—each with his individual reaction of joy.

When Jesus returns on the last Great Day all the redeemed of the Lord will erupt in a celebration that will never end. God’s great work of redemption will be completed. The “once for all” death of Jesus Christ on the cross ensures our salvation, and each of the untold number of those rejoicing will erupt with joy in their individual way.

So what about you today? Maybe like those addressed in the Letter to the Hebrews, things have become difficult in your faith in Christ and you’re considering reverting to the familiar. Maybe like Pastor Henry you’ve broken every one of the Ten Commandments, or most of them anyway. Maybe like the annoyed people at the DMV you’re impatiently waiting for God to act in your life, rather than eagerly awaiting Jesus’ return. The good news is that Jesus has atoned for our

sins, that Jesus will return, and that the best is yet to come. And right now the same Jesus who willingly gave His life for us is interceding for us in the presence of God the Father.

Today's scripture gives us encouragement and comfort. God has had mercy on us. Jesus Christ has atoned for our sins—big sins, little sins, besetting sins, every evil thought, every twisted motive, every skeleton in our closets. Because of the “once for all” atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world, including yours and mine, we can huddle at the foot of the cross where the wrath of God has already burned, “hardly believing, and yet relieved,” eagerly waiting for His return.

Let us pray.