

Hebrews 10:5 When Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. ⁷Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.’ ”

⁸First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them” (although the law required them to be made). ⁹Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Dear Friends in Christ,

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS—FOR ONCE AND FOR ALL

What repetitive task do you dislike the most? Mowing the lawn? Laundry? Getting up in the morning? Some repetitive tasks add routine, structure, to life. On the other hand we all have some that, if we were independently wealthy, we would never *ever* do again. I have a theory—only a personal theory, so feel free to disagree—I have a theory that hatred for h tasks is the reason many people eat out much of the time, maybe even most of the people most of the time. I say that because it doesn’t save money to eat out, unless maybe you are ordering off the McDonald’s dollar menu and drinking water. It doesn’t save time; not really, unless you are ordering home delivery. It certainly doesn’t save the environment. Some say eating out is a social thing. I’m sure it often is, but an awful lot of people I see eating out together, are the same people who would be eating in together. There are many reasons. But I think one of the biggest is avoiding the drudgery of repetitious tasks: planning meals, shopping, cooking, cleaning up, and worst of all, washing the dishes.

I wonder what the priests of Old Testament Israel thought. By the time of Jesus there were so many priests that each only served two weeks out of the year at the temple. But centuries earlier, at the beginning, when Aaron and his two sons were Israel’s only priests, they were there at the temple making sacrifices 365 days a year, every year. Every morning they woke to slaughter a lamb, and another before every sunset. Every day! And there were Sabbath sacrifices, New Moon sacrifices, sacrifices for Israel’s religious feasts, sacrifices brought by individuals, and then there was the Passover with its ten of thousands of Passover lambs all sacrificed on the same afternoon.

You wonder if the priests, killing knife in hand, ever wondered, “What’s the point? How much blood do we need to shed? How many animals do we need to slaughter?” Our Word of God today seems to be reading such a mind. Right before our reading, Hebrews chapter 10 reflected, “[Can] the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship? If [they] could, would they not have stopped being offered?... But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is

impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Sacrificing animals was an endlessly repetitive task, and an unpleasant one at that, and it didn’t actually take away any sin! At the time of Jesus, it had been going on for 1,400 years, that’s half a million days! Half a million! What was the point of those Old Testament sacrifices?

This is where the book of the Bible our reading is from, Hebrews, is so special. The whole thing wrestles with the question: How do the Old Testament and New Testament fit together. It explores how the covenant made on Mt. Sinai meshes with the covenant made in Jesus’ blood on Mt. Calvary. In the chapters before our reading, Hebrews has about half a dozen mini-treatises on the old Sinai covenant. It treats Moses, the Lawgiver; the Sabbath day; the promised land; the temple priests; and, yes, the sacrifices. Hebrews spends a lot of time showing how that old way of doing things compares with the new way of doing things in Jesus Christ. In every case, Jesus is the superior answer. In about 60AD, when this book of the Bible was written, it was an important point because many Christians were former Jews who had been raised in the old ways. Now they wondered if they could go back to the old ways?

Hebrews is also an important book for any 21st century Christian who takes God’s word seriously. You and I, we treasure the Old Testament. We know the saga of the Israelites leaving the land of slavery for the promised land. The people of the Old Testament have grown near and dear to our hearts: Abraham and Sarah, Joseph and his brothers, Ruth and Boaz, King David. We look at how they lived their lives, even if it was thousands of years ago!, for clues about how to live our lives of faith. And what a treasure the prophets and psalms are! That’s all Old Testament. Was it all a mistake? A meaningless dead end?

The answer is, “No, but...” While sacrifices were not the answer to humanity’s sin problem, they were commanded. God said the Israelites were supposed to offer them. As to forgiveness, they were insufficient. But they served an important purpose. When animals were slaughtered, people became aware of how serious sin is before God. Sin doesn’t sound so serious when you just talk about it. But when you actually go out to your flock and pick one of the best animals, and sacrifice it to God—just all burned up—one begins to understand how our sins are a stench in God’s nostrils. It’s not just an issue of being “naughty.” It’s offending God. Sacrifices did something else. They directed people to trust God’s mercy, not their own holiness. It was a system that led the Israelites to realize that they needed a substitute for their sin. Not a sheep or goat, but someone greater, a coming Savior, who would be the adequate substitute for sin. The whole system of sacrifices wasn’t bad. It was incomplete and insufficient.

Of course, you know the reality to what the Old Testament people had a picture of, a shadow of in those sacrifices. It is the one we wait for so expectantly this last Sunday before Christmas.

This Sunday before Christmas, we had three readings like we usually do. I don’t know if you heard it, but in each of them there a sense that something is about to happen, like week 39 of a pregnancy. Each reading is on edge, waiting. And here’s the interesting thing: Each of the three readings looks at the moment before Christmas from a different perspective.

Micah's prophecy, the first reading, is the view from the audience. It's where we stand. The prophet directs us to an unfolding drama on stage. He tells us to watch the curtain lift on an insignificant little place, a village called Bethlehem in an area called Ephrathah. He speaks in that mystical prophet language, expecting one *"whose origins are from of old."* This promised one will be our peace. And so we respectfully take our seats to watch the spectacle, just as we will here on Christmas Eve.

The Gospel reading takes another perspective. It puts us on stage. It is not the Messiah himself, but Mary, most blessed of women, who would have a special motherly relationship to the Messiah. In Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth, she acts, she speaks. Young Mary speaks like someone as familiar with God's word as any pastor you will ever meet: *"The Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name."* She carries the promised Messiah. She is not worried, but boldly proclaims God's goodness. *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant."* She rejoices to be part of God's plan, however inconvenient it might be in her young life, because something new and wonderful, far more wonderful than any ordinary birth, is about to happen. She can't wait!

And finally we get to our reading from Hebrews. It's almost—if I am allowed to speak this way—almost as if we are hearing Jesus' last conversation before walking out heaven's door to take up residence in a womb and then be born in a stable and laid in a manger. ***"When Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.'"*** Our reading, for the sake of us time-bound people, puts the eternal God in the moment before the first Christmas. It's like a conversation between God the Son and God the Father. The system of repetitive animal sacrifices was not enough to appease God's justice regarding our sins: ***"With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased."*** So Jesus says to the Father, ***"A body you prepared for me."*** The Son of God is about to descend from heaven to take on a human body that *will* somehow satisfy God's justice. He will do what animal sacrifices could not. But like them, his blood will have to be spilled. That will be his life's mission, it's entire mission. His life will lack freedom. He won't die his death on his own terms. Yet he looks forward to it. He's not bitter, but determined. Again, Christ Jesus speaks in our reading, ***"I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.'"*** He comes to obey God perfectly. He will live every moment for others.

This reading for the Sunday before Christmas looks at the moments before Christmas from God's perspective. It tells us what God the Father and Son were communicating as Jesus was conceived and then carried by Mary for those nine months. This was a plan, planned out from beginning to end. It was not a life with endless possibilities and choices, but with one possibility and one end. Its end was chosen, not for Jesus' good, but for our good. Even as we expect this one innocent sinless baby, we know the gruesome death on a cross that awaits him thirty-three years down the road. Yet we view it not as tragedy (not as something right gone wrong), but as triumph, as God's goal, as Jesus' intention even before he was born. And we are humbled by what his impending birth means for him and us.

So, whether from our perspective as audience with the prophet Micah, or the intimate

perspective of the Savior's mother, or even from the perspective of heaven itself as in Hebrews, the days before Christmas are a time of eager waiting for what all creation had been waiting for and God himself planning! Not a gift under a Christmas tree or a family gathering (though those are to be counted as blessings), but something bigger. It is about to fix what the endless repetitive sacrifice of animals could not do. It is about to fix what no amount of human sorrow or efforts to do better could do. Jesus did it all!

This whole Christmas pageant gives us rest and it gives us confidence. Our wait during Advent is not something that *needs* to be reenacted year after year like the sacrifices of long ago. We relive this season annually, not to perform something necessary, but to remember the moment that solved all our problems: ***“[Christ] sets aside the first [covenant] to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”***

“We have been made holy” and ***“Once for all”*** should be repeated. It is so empowering. Our holiness before God has been accomplished by Jesus Christ. Complete. There is nothing else we have to do, or even can do. And, Jesus' sacrifice for sin is all sufficient, for all sin of all people of all time.

Because of Jesus' ***“once for all”*** sacrifice, we Christians have a special joy whenever speak about Jesus. We do not say to others, “If you believe, God will forgive you your sins.” Instead we say, “In Jesus' sacrifice, God has forgiven all the sins of the world. That includes yours and mine! Simply believe it because it is true!” That's why Christmas such a big deal. That's what makes the waiting of Advent so special. We relive that moment when all our problems began to get fixed, for once and for all. Amen.