



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 25

November 10, 2024

Hebrews 9:24-28

Matthew 5:1-12

²⁴For 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. ²⁵Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶for 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. ²⁷And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸so 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.

In the days of our text, it was incumbent upon the High Priest once a year – on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement – to enter the Most Holy Place to make sacrifice by shedding the blood of a bull and two goats, ostensibly cleansing himself and the people from their sins. This Most Holy Place – the Holy of Holies – was a special room within the Temple, just beyond and adjacent to the Holy Place. It housed the Ark of the Covenant, the cover of which was called the Mercy Seat, where the blood of the sacrifice would be poured out before the presence of God. The Temple, the Most Holy Place, even the Ark of the Covenant, were constructed by human hands according to the instructions given by God. Like Noah and his sons, who built the giant ark at the time of the Great Flood, and the workers who built the Tabernacle and all of its furnishings, those who built the Temple received directions from God through His servants, and they carried them out. God commanded, and His human servants obeyed.

Likewise, the priests carried out the services of worship in the House of God, as prescribed through His servant Moses – not only on *Yom Kippur*, but throughout the year. The sacrificial system by which and through which the people of God repented of their sins and asked for forgiveness, was itself a prescription given to them by God through Moses. Thus, they were human hands that made the structure, fashioned the utensils, and then utilized them in offering the sacrifices God had commanded them to make. Indeed, human hands were used in each and every aspect of the worship of God and the proclamation of His grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

In the ninth chapter of his letter, the writer to the Hebrews makes a comparison between the work of the Temple priests and the work of Jesus, God's Son. And what he says to them would have shaken the very pillars of their faith.



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For millennia, the recipients of this letter had lived under the sacrificial system, which they came to understand – wrongly – to be a system of *doing* by which they gained God’s favor. Bring the appropriate sacrifice, hand it over to the priests, go and join those singing in the House of God, offer praises, and await the work of atonement made by the priest on your behalf. And when you return to your home, follow the Ten Commandments, observe the daily ritual, train your children to do everything you learned to do from your parents. This sacrificial system was never intended by God to be the means by which they would be saved – they were saved the same way we are, by the grace of God, who would send Messiah to save them – but throughout the centuries after the promise in Genesis 3, they had come to see this system as an end in itself, which it was never meant to be.

Then, after thousands of years of misunderstanding, along came John the Baptist, who told them that they must repent. Repent of what? they must have wondered. Repent of doing, doing, doing. Repent of finding their solace and salvation in doing. But the Law of the covenant, they would have objected. There is a new covenant coming, says John. He is Messiah, the anointed one, whose sandals I am not worthy even to untie. Messiah . . . yes, Messiah. The Deliverer, the new Moses, the Son of David. We know of Him. A prophet foretold in the scriptures. It is our desire to serve Him! But how?

So a great crowd of them came to the Jordan River to hear this John preach and to be baptized in repentance of their sins. Is it any wonder, however, that people asked what they should do? They were used to *doing* in order to find favor with God. Bear fruit in keeping with repentance, John told them. Well, how? The crowds asked him, the tax collectors, the soldiers. And later on there was the rich young man, who posed the same question to Jesus. They all wanted to know what to do. All John could do was point them back to the promise and tell them to expect Messiah, for he himself was not Messiah, he was not the Christ. But the Christ was coming.

In fact, he pointed Him out one day. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He must increase, I must decrease. And so he sent his own disciples to follow this Christ, this Jesus of Nazareth, the grown child of Mary and the adopted son of Joseph.

But Jesus, too, had to continually direct His hearers away from their own doing. Is it any wonder, after millennia of thinking that it was all about the system of sacrifices, that they were confused when they were told to put their faith in this Son of Man for their salvation? They didn’t understand. So Jesus taught them and showed them who He was: not just the Son of Man, but the Son of God. He did remarkable things, impossible things, things only God could do. Healing the sick, deaf, mute, and blind. Even raising the dead.

But they still didn’t understand. Some did, kind of. They recognized there was something different about Him. His mother, of course, and her husband, Joseph; they knew, for sure. But also Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night for fear of being ridiculed by his fellow Jews. Joseph of Arimathea, who would eventually assist in removing Jesus’



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body from the cross and provide a temporary burying place for the three days Jesus spent in the tomb. The apostles, who had left their former lives to follow Jesus, most of whom eventually gave up their lives for preaching the gospel. Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. So, there were some who had begun to understand.

But others got angry with Jesus for claiming to be what He really was. Why were they angry? Because they didn't understand.

So Jesus, knowing the time was right, knowing what He had to do, did what no one had ever done, what only He could do.

Jesus took the place of the High Priest, and entered, not a holy place made by human hands, which, as the writer says, is only a copy of the real Holy Place, but He entered into heaven itself. Nor did He stand in the presence of God the way the High Priest did, the way you and I do, through means, through mediation, through words and actions, but into God's very own personal presence, face to face. No means, no mediation. Directly, eyeball to eyeball. And there He offered Himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. The blood He offered was not the blood of bulls or goats, but His own blood poured out for us on the cross.

Never was it heard of that a god would make sacrifice for humans. It's always been the other way, hasn't it – that people offer sacrifices to God. But here, God, in the person of His own Son, offered Himself in payment for sins that were not His, so that the people He loved would become His forever.

Nor was this a sacrifice that had to be repeated year after year, like the sacrifice offered by the priest. This sacrifice would cover sins for all time. Nor was this a mere patch to cover over a blemish, but this one sacrifice would take away – take up and carry away – the sins of many – your sins, my sins. As the writer says, He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. Beloved, your sins, which are many, have been borne by the perfect High Priest, who not only offered up the perfect sacrifice, but was that very sacrifice for you and for me.

At the time of our text, the High Priest, when offering up the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, would make three appearances – once before the people to present the bull and goats as a sin offering; then in the presence of God, as he offered the blood of the sacrifice on the altar; and then before the people again to offer the flesh of the sacrifice as a burnt offering to God, who cleansed them of their sins. Jesus, as the ultimate High Priest, also makes three appearances in atoning for our sins – first, in His incarnate appearance on earth as a man to nullify sin once and for all by His sacrifice on the cross; then appearing in His body and blood on our behalf to bring us face-to-face with God the Father in the Sacrament of the Altar; and then in His visible reappearance on the Last Day



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for our final deliverance from sin and death. For Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear yet again, not to deal with sin – your sin has already been dealt with in His suffering, death, and resurrection – but to save those who eagerly await His coming.

There is no longer any need, therefore, of a sacrificial system. Christ, the Lamb of God, has been sacrificed for us – the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Instead, we enjoy a sacramental system by which Jesus offers to us His body broken and His blood poured out – the very same body and blood which He sacrificed on the cross for us and for our salvation.

Beloved, as we approach the end of the Church Year, with its emphasis on the return of our Savior, realize that soon – very soon – He will appear again for the last time, and you, who have been saved by grace through faith in Him, will receive the full glory of your salvation, when you see Him face to face. Let us, therefore, live the sacramental life, receiving Him now as He comes to us in the Divine Service, and awaiting His final appearance with eagerness, for He is our Savior, indeed He is our very Salvation for now and for always. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen