

“The Torn Curtain”

Date: April 9, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 27:45-54

Occasion: Good Friday

Themes: Cross and Curtain; God’s availability and mystery revealed

Plagued on every side by loss, suffering and sorrow, Job, a righteous man cried out, “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!” (Job 23:3) Job wanted to know where he could find God. It’s a question that many people who suffer want to know – “Where is God? Where is a God when I need him most?” It’s a question that is especially poignant during the Coronavirus Pandemic, isn’t it?

The Hebrew people believed they had the answer to Job’s question. They said that God’s dwelling was in Jerusalem, in a special room in the Temple there. Or course they believed God was everywhere, but in a special way, a *mysterious* way, God’s presence could be found in this room

This room was only a small part of the Temple complex, but it was the most important part. There were steps leading up to it from the place where sacrifices were made on a daily basis. That place itself was a holy place, but this room was the most holy place. It was called the Holy of Holies.

Yet, so far as human activity was concerned, it was a seldom-used room. The only person who could enter the Holy of Holies was the High Priest, and he could enter it only one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, now called Yom Kippur.

Originally the Ark of the Covenant had been placed in this room. It was also a holy representation of the presence of God. But the ark had been lost when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in 587 B.C. The significance of the ark explains why the Holy of Holies was so important.

The ark was a small portable box, with handles for carrying and with a cover made of gold and called “the mercy seat.” This ark represented the presence of God, and the room in which it was placed was thought of as the special dwelling place of God.

God was not to be approached in this most holy place by ordinary people. The High Priest, the only person who could approach God there, did so as the representative of the people. He came with sacrifices for them, seeking divine forgiveness for them. He and his people could be assured of God’s forgiveness and blessing, if the rites were carried out properly.

It was always a momentous occasion when the Day of Atonement came and the High Priest, in his splendid robes, ascended to the Holy of Holies. But something separated him from the inside of that room. It was a fine, linen curtain of blue, purple and scarlet colors, hanging over the entrance to the room,

The curtain shut out the light and obscured everyone’s view of the inside of it. It was there as a warning against intruding upon the privacy of God, and as a symbol of the division that existed between God and people.

Three of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – mention this curtain in connection with the crucifixion of Jesus. They say there was darkness over the land, and that as Jesus breathed his last breath, “the curtain was torn in two, from the top to the bottom.”

Whether we understand this as an actual historical occurrence, or as a theological statement, we must not miss the good news in it – the good news of the torn curtain! It speaks to us of an unconfined God. It speaks to us about an illumined God. And it speaks to us about an accessible God. Let’s look at each one of those statements in turn.

The torn curtain speaks to us of an unconfined God. It is a paradox that the Jewish people had a belief that God was both everywhere and also found in a room. King Solomon, at the dedication of the first Temple prayed, “Even the heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built.” (1 Kings 8:27-30) Yet, it was believed that God’s presence was found uniquely in the Holy of Holies.

At the time of Jesus’s crucifixion, there were several million people who would have answered the question ‘Where can we find God?’ by saying, “In Jerusalem, in the Temple in Jerusalem.”

But where would you say that God was on that awful day? There was quietness in that innermost room of the Temple. Surely that was a good place for God to hide out – there was so much noise and confusion and pain and heartache happening on a hill across the way.

But for Christians, we believe that God was also present at another place that day. It was a place of ugliness and pain and death. We believe God was with Jesus. One of the soldiers who was there, participating in the crucifixion said this, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Matthew 27:54)

Too often we think that God resides in holy places, like Temples and churches. But the crucifixion proclaims that God is not confined to buildings. God chose to participate in the suffering and pain of His son. That is the mystery we proclaim, this Good Friday.

That means God is also with all of the suffering people of the world. God is not confined to nice, clean places. God is also found in the dirty messes of life. God is on the hospital floor of the dying coronavirus patients. God is with the suffering homeless who live on the street. God is with the cancer patient and with those who mourn. Our God is not confined to a building, but has chosen to share in the suffering of His people.

God is not confined to a place, or to a creed, or to a particular set of circumstances. The torn curtain tells us of an unconfined God.

The torn curtain also symbolizes for us the illumination of the mystery of God. Into the dark room of the Holy of Holies, light came streaming in when the curtain was torn. Light illuminated that dark room.

Mystery had surrounded that little room, just as human understanding of who God is had been a thing of mystery. There are many questions about the nature of God. Some even say that if you can understand who God is, then *that* thing wouldn't really be God after all.

But there is such a thing as mystery being illuminated, and that is what happened at the cross. The torn curtain symbolizes light being shined upon the mystery of God's being. The mystery is still there, but light has been thrown upon it.

Nothing in all of history so illumines the being of God as does that Cross. To see and to know the heart of God is revealed by Christ on the cross. God is not distant and uncaring; God enters into the mystery of human suffering. God took on flesh and shares the human experience.

What comforting news in this time of COVID-19. Our God is not far off and uncaring. Our God is with us; Jesus revealed *that* on the cross. God enters the human condition, takes on flesh, and shares in our suffering. God cares about what happens to us, because God has shared our existence. I don't fully understand it, but light has been thrown on the mystery.

Finally, the torn curtain speaks of an accessible God, one who can be approached by any person in the world. Jesus himself never entered the Holy of Holies. If he had tried, he would have been put to death. That was too holy of a place for an ordinary person to enter.

It was both the condition of humanity and the nature of God that forbade this. Humankind was too sinful, and the holiness of God made sin repugnant in God's eyes. God's distaste for sin was so great that something had to be done to make persons acceptable to God. That was the function of the high priest, to carry the people's sacrifices into the Holy of Holies and offer them to God on the Day of Atonement.

It is our Christian belief that Jesus put an end to the need for continual sacrifices. By his death, we affirm, Christ has defeated the powers of sin and death, and opened access to God for everyone. Jesus' death on the cross showed God in a new light. God was not off in some distant heaven waiting for people to offer the proper sacrifice.

Now, God was coming to meet persons, as a father running to meet a prodigal son. Instead of blood sacrifices, God was and is seeking a broken and contrite heart, sincere for one's sin, and seeking to have the broken relationship restored.

We are still not supposed to think lightly of our sins, or to downplay the holiness of God. But we can approach God with confidence, assured of God's forgiveness, grace and acceptance. God is now accessible, because the curtain was torn at the time of Jesus' crucifixion.

That Temple curtain was no longer appropriate after Jesus died on the cross. It had symbolized a separated God, an unapproachable God. But the cross speaks of a seeking God, a suffering God, an accessible God. Thank God for the torn Temple curtain. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from Herchel Sheets' book *An Idle Tale Becomes Good News*; CSS Publishing Company: Lima Ohio, 2002. "The Torn Curtain," pp. 79-85