

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 18, 2018, The 26th Sunday After Pentecost/The 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

I Samuel 2:1-10, Hebrew 10:11-14, 19-25

TORN OPEN

Introduction to Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Today's New Testament Lesson is from selected verses of Hebrews 10, found on page 224 of your pew Bibles in the New Testament if you would like to follow along. This passage in Hebrews comes in the middle of a longer teaching. The author is referring to the Temple priests who would go day after day into the Temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. One time each year the high priest would go behind the curtain into the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the Temple, to offer sacrifices for his sins and the sins of the people.

The author of Hebrews has created an argument showing that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was for one time only and in that one time he forgave our sins forever. So, through Jesus there is no curtain that divides us from God. Listen for the Word of God, beginning at verse 11.

On this Sunday morning before Thanksgiving we are given an amazing gift in our reading from Hebrews.

This is a part of our story of faith that is especially for us in those times we find it hard to feel close to God.

It is a message for us when we feel like God will never forgive us for past mistakes, no matter what the Bible says.

It is a message for us when we wonder if God even cares about us.

It is a message for us when we feel that we will never be good enough to talk to God, and wish someone else could do it for us.

From the years of wilderness wandering forward the Israelites had watched Moses, and then the priests, go to meet God in the Tent of Meeting, and later the Temple.

Moses, and then the priests, always went to God on behalf of the people.

Day by day they gave offerings to God in the name of God's people.

Then, once a year, the high priest for that year would enter the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of Covenant, that held the 10 commandments, was kept.

The Holy of Holies was kept in darkness throughout the year, until the High Priest entered bringing in light.

The high priest would bring sacrifices to ask God to forgive him and all the people for their sins of the past year, on this Day of Atonement.

There was a curtain that divided the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple, and the places of worship and sacrifices.

For over 1,200 years this was the way God's people worshiped and came before God and were forgiven by God.

But Jesus changed all of that from the moment of his death on the cross. Matthew's gospel

tells this part of Jesus' story from the cross with these words: "Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.
The earth shook, and the rocks were split." (Matthew 27:50-51)

The curtain to the Holy of Holies was torn in two. The great curtain that had separated God and God's people was gone forever.

The darkness of the Holy of Holies was banished by the light of the Temple flooding into that place of separateness.

There was never again need for sacrifices to be made day by day for the people.

There was never again the need for the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies once a year to make sure everyone was free of sin.

Jesus Christ, in his death on the cross, brought forgiveness of sins to all peoples, in all times and places, forever. Once and for all time Jesus destroyed the power of sin and death and offered each of us new life in him.

In 1999 I was invited to participate in a pastor's tour of Israel, sponsored by the Knights Templar of the Masons.

There were many events in those eleven days that strengthened my faith and changed my faith. One of these took place in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, in the Old City of Jerusalem.

This church was built on the sight of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection.

As you approach the shrine that now rests at the sight of Jesus' crucifixion, you will see a heavy clear glass or plastic covering what would have been the rocks at the base of the cross.

As you walk closer to the shrine you are actually walking over Golgotha, or the place of the Skull where Jesus was crucified.

In that rock, there is a large crack that extends out until it disappears under the flooring of the church.

Our guide explained to us that this fissure in the rock extends from the sight of the crucifixion in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, across the Old City of Jerusalem, to the place on the Temple Mount where the Temple stood in Jesus' day.

This crack, or fissure, in the rock, starts at the cross and ends at the place where the Holy of Holies was once located, until that day that the curtain of the Temple was torn in two.

Jesus death on the cross tore apart everything that keeps us from God!

Jesus death and resurrection tore open the Holy of Holies and invited us to come into God's presence!

We need no one else to stand up for us, or stand in for us, when we come to God.

Jesus tore the curtain open and cleared the path for us!

Or as the author of Hebrews puts it: "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

The apostle Paul put it another way in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 8:31-39 selected, (CEV)

“What can we say about all this?

If God is on our side, can anyone be against us?

God did not keep back his own Son, but he gave him for us.

If God did this, won't God freely give us everything else?

If God says his chosen ones are acceptable to him,
can anyone bring charges against them?

Or can anyone condemn them?

No indeed! Christ died and was raised to life, and now he is at God's right side,
speaking to God for us.

Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?

Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death?

In everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us.

I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love—

not life or death,

not angels or spirits,

not the present or the future,

and not powers above or powers below.

Nothing in all creation can separate us from
God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!”

This is the day to imagine the sound of the curtain in the Temple being torn from top to bottom,
ending the separation between God and all of God's people,
ending the separation between God and ourselves.

The sound of the curtain tearing is a sound we need to hear in our heart of hearts,

a sound we need to feel in the core of our being,

a sound we need to know as a basic sound of faith.

The sound of that curtain tearing is the sound of the love of God pouring out for each of us.

The sound of that curtain tearing is the sound of all barriers being torn down by God.

The sound of that curtain tearing is the sound of light flooding into all the shadowed places.

The sound of that curtain tearing is the sound of forgiveness for absolutely everything we've
ever done...no matter what it was or is.

On this Sunday before Thanksgiving we are remembering and giving thanks for the gift we
have been given, that comes at the cost of Jesus' death on the cross and Jesus' three days in the
tomb,

Because of Jesus' sacrifice, for all time, for all of us, God knows no divisions between our
hearts and God's heart. There is nothing that can make God stop loving each of us completely.

We have been given an incredible gift, paid for at the highest cost. And we have a
responsibility as people of faith to ask ourselves if we are really receiving this gift of love.

In Jesus' death on the cross God tore the curtain of the Holy of Holies apart for all time.
 God has no barriers up between us and God, but what about us?

This is the day to ask ourselves: what are the curtains that we keep between ourselves and God?

What are the barriers we've erected, so that God won't know everything?

What are broken places within ourselves that we hold tightly to, vowing we'll never forgive God for what happened?

What are the past mistakes, the past sins, the past destructions,
 that we have been a part of, that we keep between ourselves and God,
 believing that nothing could even cause God to forgive us, or to heal us, or
 to love us completely after what we did?

We are missing out on the true meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection with every curtain and barrier we keep in place.

This is a day to tear down those curtains, those barriers, those lies we've told ourselves.
 Because we are called to believe and live the Good News that nothing can separate us
 from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

When we know our freedom in Jesus Christ,

When we accept that we are loved, no matter what,

When we let the light of Christ flood into the back recesses of our hearts, our
 minds, our psyches and our souls, then we can truly take the next step that the
 author of Hebrews sets before us with these words:

First: "let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,
 for Jesus who has promised is faithful."

Second, once we are holding onto hope

let us consider how to "provoke one another to love and good deeds."

No quiet nudging here, no subtle hints to one another....but a good strong provoking of
 each other...

But not in a negative sense....but provoking each other to love and good deeds!

Third, we are to go to church!

Even in the early church there were those who in the author's words:

"were neglecting to meet together, and had made it a habit to not go to church...."

Finally, because of the Good News of Jesus Christ, we are to encourage each other!

God's heart is open wide to you and to me

The Light of the resurrected Jesus floods into our lives with love,

So let us open wide our hearts and our lives to our Savior Jesus Christ, with great thankfulness
 for the gift of love that has been given to us all for all time!