

Pastor T.C. Arnold
1st Sunday in Lent
Hebrews 4:14-16
March 5th, 2017

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession...”

The Day of Atonement, also known as Yom Kippur, was the most solemn holy day for the people of Israel. On that day, the high priest was to perform elaborate rituals to atone for the sins of the people described in Leviticus 16. The atonement ritual began with Aaron, or subsequent high priests of Israel, coming into the holy of holies. The solemnity of the day was emphasized by God telling Moses to warn Aaron not to come into the Most Holy Place whenever he felt like it, only on this special day once a year, lest he die (v. 2).

Before there was a temple in Jerusalem there was a tabernacle in the wilderness. Before Aaron was to enter the Holy of Holies, he was to bathe and put on special garments (v. 4), then sacrifice a bull for a sin offering for himself and his family (v. 6, 11). The blood of the bull was to be sprinkled on the Ark of the Covenant. Then Aaron was to bring two goats, one to be sacrificed *“because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been”* (v. 16), and its blood was sprinkled on the Ark of the Covenant. The other goat was used as a scapegoat. Aaron placed his hands on its head, confessed over it the rebellion and wickedness of the Israelites, and sent the goat out with an appointed man who released it into the wilderness (v. 21). The goat carried on itself all the sins of the people, which were forgiven for another year (v. 30).

Now remember it was only the high priest who could enter the Holy of Holies and perform this solemn and important act. With that, it could only be done once a year. There was only one who could do it. But now, as we hear in Hebrews, there is a new high priest. His name is Jesus. He has passed through heaven – the holy of holies – to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world. You see, here is the truth... Jesus is the high priest. Not only that, He is more. Jesus is also the sacrifice in the temple. And yet, there is more... Jesus is the scapegoat as well. He is all three. So, let’s look at Jesus as being priest, the sacrifice in the Temple, and the scapegoat.

Sometimes our Roman Catholic friends call their clergymen priests. What that term actually means is mediator. A “go between” between God and man. Jesus is priest because He is our advocate, in His name our prayers are brought forth to the Heavenly Father. The Father in heaven sees us in light of the great High Priest Jesus... and thankfully so. In faith the Heavenly Father sees the righteousness of His Son and not our horrible sinfulness which we possess. To have a high priest is important. Like in the Old Testament, he would stand in the place of the people and accomplish righteousness on their behalf. These acts of sacrifice by an earthly priest no longer are necessary because our high priest Jesus accomplished the greatest sacrifice of all – dying on the cross for you. So, you can see, that Jesus is the High Priest – and also the sacrifice in the Temple...

The Temple is considered a pure and holy place. Blood was put in the temple as a result of a sacrifice. Everything revolved around purification. The Temple on Good Friday was a hill called Calvary. From that altar the most righteous and pure blood was spilt for the sake of the people. We don’t need to spend a whole lot of time this morning talking about how Jesus is our sacrifice. I don’t think any of us here would dispute that very fact.

Now we get to that other sacrifice – the scapegoat. Remember, the High Priest would place his hands on the scapegoat, transferred the sins of the people to it, and send it to Azazel – or sometimes referred to as the inaccessible region. This was the opposite of the Temple. This

sacrifice would not be in a pure and holy place but rather in the demonic desert – separated from the people. As the scapegoat was led out to Azazel the people would line up to hurl insults at it and spit on the goat as if they were placing their iniquities on it. The goat would be led to a place where it could not return – deep in the wilderness. There it would die with the sins of all that were placed on it.

It is no accident that Jesus, our great High Priest, our sacrifice in the Temple, and our scapegoat, was delivered out into the wilderness. That He was tempted by Satan to take for Himself the kingdom of earth – as if this belonged to Satan in the first place. It's no accident that Jesus went to that wilderness that we heard about in the Gospel text for today – for the sacrifice for the sins of the world would be found there, just as the Bible said He would.

We might think it's strange to find Jesus in the desert or wilderness being tempted by the devil. But as you can see from God's Word, it's not. When we know what happened for us on the Day of Atonement, we know where to find Jesus. He was in the most barren place. He was in the desert with a demon – Satan himself. He was there keeping the law for you and for me. He was there knowing what He was doing... sacrificing for you.

There is no way we are going to the desert. There is no way we are going to the barren places of the earth. I say that while a number of our members are visiting Arizona this very day. Also, I have two siblings that live in the desert. I was stuck in the desert once. True story. Our car broke down about 5 miles off the beaten path out in the middle of a desert scenic area. We walked quite a ways before finally finding help. We were scared. It was hot. It wasn't the place we wanted to be – as you can imagine.

We were scared because we were separated from that which is essential for life – water, food, protection from harm and shelter from the elements. You see, our sins put us in a desert. They put us in a place left to die. Our sins separate us from our Lord. They have us pay no attention to God's means to keep us alive. When we think we don't need Him... when we live as if God does not matter... when we put our own pleasures and desires before God's will... we put ourselves in the desert – separated from His life-giving means. This is the danger-zone. Don't go to the desert. Repent and return to the Lord. He provides the means of life for you.

Okay, you can go to the desert – Arizona that is. Just come back. Come back and gather with your brothers and sister in Christ around His Word. Come back and hear our children sing. Come back and gather around His Word and Sacraments. Come back home. This is where you belong. This is your family with our Father as the head. Here is where He provides the priestly blessing and the forgiveness through sacrifice on a cross at Calvary's holy mountain – which, for us, is both the Temple and the wilderness. Both places where we see Jesus.

Here we go... together in this journey called Lent. From the desert wilderness to the world, to Jerusalem and then to Calvary, we set out together. He will bless you on this journey. Take this journey with us. Make Wednesday evenings a part of your Lenten journey. I know it's hard. We are busy people. The kids have things to do. I implore you to add something a little extra to your Lenten journey this year. Be with your family – from the wilderness to the cross – to the grave and then to life. Come with us. You will not be disappointed. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.