

From Religion to Faith to Sight

Sunday, November 7, 2021

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

Pastor James Haun

Hebrews 9:24-28

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so 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 just a few weeks we will reach the end of the Church year. The Church calendar, which follows the progression of God's saving work, ends with the Sunday of the Reign of Christ—and then what? Where shall we go from there? The first answer is that we go back to the beginning of the calendar which is the beloved seasons of Advent and Christmas. We like the thought of a new beginning, and we *really* like Christmas, and so we have little trouble making this transition to another year. But there is something misleading about the tradition of the Church calendar as it leads us to think in terms of an endless cycle—of ever returning to the beginning and never ending—and this is *not* God's plan for history. There is only one direction for the Christian and that is forward! The Book of Hebrews is a book about moving forward and was written to a congregation of Hebrew believers who were tempted to go backward and return to their old ways. As we read this exhortation to move forward, we are tempted to see these Hebrews as people in a unique situation far removed from our own, but the appeal to always look and move forward has much more to do with ourselves and with today that we might imagine! Let us take a closer look.

Hebrews was written to a Jewish congregation of Christians who were feeling the pressures and pains of persecution. I think of these people as being under a double persecution, for they were looked upon with suspicion by the world around them for

holding to this new religion, and they were ridiculed by the Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah who felt that these Hebrew Christians had betrayed their Jewish heritage. They were experiencing real and painful pressure and were tempted to reject Jesus, or at least play down His significance in their lives and beliefs, and to move back to the traditions and ways of Judaism. Some are quick to criticize any religious rituals and traditions and see them as a substitute for a more genuine faith, but Hebrews is not so critical. These laws and traditions are presented as being rich in meaning and symbolism and full of blessing to the Christian who studies them, but Hebrews also makes it clear that these traditions are now obsolete because of Jesus, and the observance of these rituals no longer constitutes a full and saving faith.

The Book of Hebrews, which can be just a little confusing for the Gentile who is not familiar with Jewish religious traditions, is full of lengthy explanations of these religious practices, and they are all presented as prophecies and symbols of Jesus who was to come. Here in chapter nine, we find an explanation of the Temple priests and their sacrifices which were made to cover the sins of the people. While this practice of Temple sacrifices went on for centuries, it was not meant to be a permanent practice, but a symbol of something greater to come, and that is the ministry of Jesus Christ. *For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world.* The priests and their sacrifices reminded us that we are sinners whose sins require a payment. When Jesus came, He made a full and final sacrifice by giving His own life for us. This was done in the presence of God on our behalf.

The writer is emphatic that this was done, *once for all*. The age of sacrifice is over as Christ has made the great sacrifice and the debt of our sins has been paid in full! We are told, *But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself*. The debt is paid and there is no going back! Note how Jesus' coming and His sacrifice brought *the end of the age*. The work of the Temple priests was full of meaning and hope in its time, but that era is now over. That age has ended and there is no going back! One could say that religion has become obsolete and has been replaced by faith. These Jewish believers are being urged to move beyond the religion and ritual from which they have come and there is no going back, for to return to a Christ-less Judaism would be a denial of the Savior.

A religion of symbols and rituals has been replaced by the real and living Savior, and we are now to walk by faith with that loving Lord. Ours is to be a glad walk with the one who has stood in our place. As Hebrews explains, *And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so 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. Jesus lived as we live, and died as we shall all die, and by doing so he disarmed the power of death and of punishment. Now we await Christ's return in glory. In the meantime, we are to walk in faith, trusting in God's promises and believing that Jesus is always with us.

Faith is a wonderful thing as it is a personal and loving relationship with the Living God! We delight to sing "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear," for this is precisely who Jesus is and what He does for us! But having celebrated the sweetness of faith, we must also recognize the difficulties which faith can cause. It is not always easy to believe in and to follow an unseen friend. In times of worship, fellowship or Bible study we may feel Jesus' presence and power, but that feeling often fades away and doubts arise. Does God really love me? Does God really hear me and care? God's will can be hard to follow, and we often wonder if the walk of faith is worth all the struggle.

We rightly speak of the *walk* of faith, for faith is to be a forward pilgrimage. While we may not be tempted to turn away from Jesus, we can very easily become lazy and reluctant in that walk, such that it becomes not a walk but a sit or a lying down! Like these weary Hebrews we can easily fall into the habit of looking back to earlier days and clinging to practices and traditions of old, rather than moving onward with Jesus. We need to be a forward-looking people. It is easy to read Hebrews and speak critically of these faltering people, but we too can become weary in our walk of faith. Our faith can quickly become a weak or empty religion, full of traditions and rituals, but short on the love, communication and obedience which makes for a real faith relationship.

The Hebrews were being urged to look ahead and not back to an old era. We too are being called to do likewise. And just as the age of the Jewish religion came to a close and these Jewish believers were to look beyond that era, so we are to look ahead, beyond the age of faith! Sadly, it must be confessed that Churches are not generally good at looking ahead. The popular notion of a church is of a place where all is focused in the past, to Biblical events of long ago and traditions from the centuries since, and the future is seen as foreign territory to the Church and its people. But God has called us to be a forward-looking people, and our looking ahead should be so focused that we regularly visualize and celebrate the end of the age of faith. Do we even notice the wonderful words of the writer as he calls us to look beyond. For *Jesus will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.* Christ will come again. This doctrine should be obvious to us as we weekly confess that he will "come again to judge the living and the dead," as we recite the Apostles' Creed, but this is a teaching of our faith which we generally ignore. We are told that when Jesus returns it will not be to deal with our sins, for they will already have been

erased. This next time Jesus will be establishing the Kingdom in its fullness. Suffering will become a thing of the past and injustice will be no more.

In this passage we find an odd phrase used to describe the Church—or at least it has become an odd sounding phrase in our time and place—for we are called *those who are eagerly waiting*. Are we? Truth be told, we are more a comfortable people who hope that our present comfortable existence won't be disturbed than we are a suffering and anticipating people. We need to get better at worshiping, praising and dreaming of what lies ahead. We spend too little time thinking of our destiny, glorious as it is.

It seems that the modern Western Church is divided into two groups regarding our final destiny. The fundamentalists frequently engage in all kinds of speculations as to how and when Christ shall return. We hear teachings of a secret rapture when the true believers will be taken away suddenly into heaven, and predictions of the great battle of Armageddon which will end our age. The liberal wing of the Church looks with disdain upon such speculations, and while there is plenty of reason to criticize such predictions, they go on to commit an error which is just as bad, if not worse. The liberal wing of the Church doesn't even speak or think of the return of Christ. Though the Creed may be recited stating that Christ shall come again to judge the living and the dead, little actual thought is given to this doctrine. Many are more trusting in their own efforts to bring justice to the world. We do well to avoid both errors. Let us get into the habit of joyful anticipation and eager waiting, while avoiding the temptation to speculations on the details. We can leave that to God.

In all things let us be, as the Hebrews were urged to be, a forward-looking people. As the Hebrews were urged to go beyond obsolete **religion** and ritual to a life of **faith**, let us seek that active and living relationship. And then let us go a step farther. May we continue in this walk of faith, but let us be energized by our hope in the day when we will no longer walk by faith but by **sight**! It is no wonder that we often feel aimless in this life, for we spend so little energy considering our destiny. On this Sunday of All Saints, let us rediscover the joy of looking ahead. Let us look ahead to the Father's House where Jesus has prepared a place for us. (John 14) A contemporary Christian song from a few years back sang of the Father's House, "With a big, big table, with lots and lots of food" and "with a big, big yard, where we can play football." The song is joyfully silly, but not irreverent, as it captures the delight which we should have as we consider that wonderful place and the dwelling reserved for us. What is irreverent is when we fail to even consider or celebrate this gift now being prepared for us!

In ancient times death was referred to as one *being gathered to their fathers*, and though this struck me as odd in my younger days, I have come to deeply appreciate

this phrase. From an earthly perspective death is a great separation, but from a heavenly perspective it is a matter of reunion, and what a joyous reunion that shall be. In a few moments we will read through the “Roll Call of the Saints” as we remember those who have left us over this past year. This time is like a final formal time of grieving for these loved ones, and therefore there is real sadness in this moment. But can we also embrace this time with a sense of deep hope and even joy, for our future is glorious?

I close with some words from an evangelist which I heard in my college days. I was working with a youth ministry at a weekend retreat and a very gifted speaker was presenting to the high school youth the Good News of life in Christ. Faith came alive for many of the young people on that weekend. At the close of the event this evangelist offered a farewell which has stayed with me. “If I don’t see you again on this earth, I will see you at the big party at the end.” Well said. Let us learn to live with that kind of eager anticipation.