

Hebrews 9:1-14

“Welcomed Into the Heart of All Things”

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Ordinary Time

Our sermon text today comes from Hebrews 9:1-14.

I invite you now listen again carefully to God’s holy and inerrant word, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

*Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. 2 For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, 4 having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. 5 Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.*

*6 These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, 7 but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. 8 By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, 10 but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.*

*11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means*

*of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

It seems to me that one of the great forces of energy and ambition in human life is the desire to be seen, to be noticed, to be known, to be acknowledged, to be included.

Or, to put it negatively, we might say that one of the greatest anxieties and even terrors in human life is the fear of not being seen, of not being known, of not being acknowledged, of being left out.

I say this because I have at least some sense of the movements of my own heart, and how, even after 41 years of life, I am still haunted at times by these compulsive desires and these difficult fears.

And I say this also because I know how many of you talk about these desires and fears with me. It's striking how often these kinds of topics have come up in conversations I'd had over the years with men and women over the years.

Questions like: "Does anyone really know me? Does my work actually matter? Am I wasting my life?" Statements like: "I feel invisible. I'm lonely. No one else seems to really care. I always seem to be left out."

This fear of missing out, of being unseen, of not being fully known or appreciated by others is, I think, a more or less universal experience for human beings.

In other words, if you feel this way, if you have some sense of what I'm talking about, then it's not just you. You're not alone. In fact, you are surrounded by men and women who are haunted by similar fears, driven by similar desires.

And I think a big part of understanding this dynamic in our own hearts is just reckoning with who we are actually are, biblically speaking.

I mean, the Bible teaches us that we are made in the image of the eternal, living God.

And we were made, in the garden, for perfect and full communion with him and with others human beings made in his likeness.

We were made for glory. And so we long to be glorious. We long to be seen, to be acknowledged, to be known.

But we live in a world where our relationship with the God with whom we were made to commune has been fractured. And our relationships with everyone around us is fractured as well.

And so, very often we feel like we are on the outside looking in, because we have a sense for how huge the gap is between what we were made for in terms of glory and how much glory we actually seem to experience.

And so what do we do with these tensions, with this gap between our desires and our experience?

We can turn our dissatisfaction outward in envy, uncontrollable anger, and even, in extreme cases, violence.

James writes in his epistle about this connection: *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”*

And certainly, it seems like this fear of being unacknowledged, unappreciated, left out is what actually motivates the first murder in human history, as Cain observes his own sacrifice being rejected by God while his brother Abel’s is accepted, and this disappointment drives Cain to put his brother to death.

But our dissatisfaction with our experience in this life, our sense of being unknown, unappreciated, left out, can also drive us inward in cycles of self-condemnation, self-loathing, and ultimately, different forms of addiction and disassociation from our very selves.

In others words, we can learn to numb ourselves because our unfulfilled desires for connection and communion hurt us too much.

The Presbyterian theologian Francis Schaefer, reflecting on this dynamic that I am describing, said that to be human is to be a “glorious ruin.” And I think that phrase sums up our experience very well.

Beloved, what I am trying to say to you is that it is a very difficult thing to be made for glory and to live in this fallen world.

It has the potential, quite literally, to drive us mad - that gap between what we were made for and what we experience.

It’s fascinating to me that, in this context of our desire to be inside, to not be left out, God very clearly communicates that one of the primary effects of our sin is that we would be on the outside looking in.

This is demonstrated first of all in the experience of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.

The garden was a place of communion with God and communion with one another - to be naked together and unashamed, to walk with God in the cool of the day.

And yet, after their sin, Adam and Eve are clothed in animal skins - they are no longer capable of being truly naked with one another - and they are driven out of the garden by God, the writer of Genesis tells us, and God places an angelic warrior and a flaming sword at the entrance of the garden to ensure that Adam and Eve cannot return to this place of communion with him.

And this very pattern of being *kept out* of the place where we might actually be fully known and content and happy - the presence of God - is enacted in the very structure of the tabernacle, as the writer to the Hebrews describes in the first 10 verses of our passage this morning.

And remember - the design of the tabernacle was intentionally patterned itself on the garden of Eden.

The tabernacle, and later, the temple, was to be a new garden, a new meeting place with God, and at its center was the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat that was set on top of the ark, with the winged cherubim made of gold.

In Exodus 25, God describes the purpose and role of the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat: *“And you shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of testimony, I will speak with you.”*

Now, in many ways, the construction of the tabernacle and the temple was an enormous gift from God to Israel. God told them to build him a house, right in their midst, so that he could again dwell with his people. It was truly glorious.

But still, right at the heart of this glorious gift from God, there was also this mandate - the design of the tabernacle was also meant, in a very intentional way, to keep people *out* of God's actual presence.

*As the writer to the Hebrews puts it in verse 7-9: But into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. 8 By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age).*

What I want you to see, beloved, is that the tabernacle was the most important place in all of creation - it was a deliberate evocation of the garden of Eden - it was the place that contained, in some strange way that we can't fully understand, the presence of the living God - and even in the life of Israel, the Most Holy Place was a place where humanity was not welcome.

In the construction of the Tabernacle, God's presence was a place where we were deliberately kept out - just as Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden in Genesis 3.

And further, I would argue that it is this estrangement from the presence of God that is at the heart of all human restlessness and discontentment.

All the ways that we long to be known and loved and appreciated and seen — without having those desires actually fulfilled — are rooted in this fundamental distance from the God who made us, who loved us, who designed us to commune with him in a way that can only be described as glorious beyond our imagining.

And it is that context that the words of verses 11-14 in our passage this morning take on their full beauty and power.

*Listen to what the Apostle says: 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

Beloved, do you see what the Apostle is arguing here? He is saying that, for the first time since Adam and Eve, a human being has got back in to dwell in the presence of the living God.

And Jesus has gone into God's presence not once a year for an hour or two, to splash some blood on the ark so that our sins would be atoned, but Jesus has gone in forever - for eternity he dwells in the presence of the living God, who dwells in unapproachable light.

Because, as Hebrews puts it, Jesus did not go into the created tabernacle that was only a dim reflection of God's living presence, but he went into God's actual presence.

Yes, friends, I tell you this mystery: Jesus of Nazareth, a man whose feet walked the dusty roads of Galilee two thousand years ago, a man whose body was crucified outside of Jerusalem as a common criminal - this man, Jesus of Nazareth, at this very moment, beholds the very face of God, and he does not die.

And Jesus of Nazareth, the apostle argues, dwells before God's face not only for himself, but has gone into the presence of God "once for all," so that all those who are united with him actually dwell in some very real way not *outside* but *inside* - inside with Jesus, welcomed with him in the presence of God.

And yes, I understand, all of this is kind of complicated, and maybe seems a little abstract. I understand that all of this is something that we experience by faith and not by sight, and sometimes it can seem not deeply related to your every day experience of life in this fallen world.

But, as the Scriptures argue again and again — because something exists by faith and not sight actually makes it more real, not less.

What I am trying to say to you, beloved, is that Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, has gone in to the presence of God - he enjoys full and unending and perfect communion with his Father and the Holy Spirit, and the thing that is most true about your life is not that you wake up every morning and eat your breakfast and do your work and eat your supper and go to sleep - no, the truest thing about you as a person is that you are actually a full and real participant in the eternal communion of Jesus with God.

This is why the Apostle Paul writes these words, words that will change your life more completely and utterly than anything else if you will only listen and believe them:

*"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory."*

Beloved, what Paul is saying is that the truest thing about you is not what is happening to you here on earth, but what is happening to you in heaven.



Yes, it may be true that in your life on earth you feel unseen, unacknowledged, unappreciated, left out. But that is not your true experience.

In fact, the only way Paul knows to talk about how substantially your present earthly life is not your true experience is to say bluntly: *You have died.*

And, more than that, as Paul says: *Your true life, your real life is hidden with Christ in God.*

This morning, friends, I don't want to so much try to persuade you that these things are true.

Rather, as a representative of Jesus, I declare to you that they are.

And I want to tell you that for to experience the kind of joy and contentment and peace that God intends for you to have in this world is directly connected to the extent to which you believe that what God says is real and important is actually real and important. And, in this way, to live by faith, and not by sight.

And what God says is real and important is this.

Christ has entered *once for all* into the holy presence of God as your high priest - your helper, your intercessor, your servant.

For you, friend, have died. And your life is hidden with Christ in God.

And the only satisfaction for all your desires to be known and loved and seen and accepted is found in this truth regarding the hiddenness of your life with God and Jesus' life on your behalf in the presence of your heavenly Father.

C. S. Lewis reflected wisely on these things, on the haunting desire we have to be included, to be seen, to be acknowledged, when he wrote these words in his essay "The Weight of Glory." And I love the way he puts it here (this quote is printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read it):

*"We should hardly dare to ask that any notice be taken of ourselves. But we pine. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last."*

Beloved, as we close this morning, I just want to encourage you with this. What I am describing this morning, what the writer to the Hebrews describes, what Lewis describes - it really is enough for you.

I know that your hearts may feel dangerous and scary places more often than not.

I know that your desires may sometimes feel like a bottomless pit that will never be filled.

But I promise you. If you will live by faith and not by sight and orient your heart toward the reality that Jesus has gone into God's presence for you, and your life is truly hidden with Christ in God, then this promise will be enough.

Your union with the risen, ascended Christ really will give you joy and peace and contentment that no one can take away.

Your union with Christ really will free you to live in this world without being overwhelmed by fear or anxiety.

Your union with Christ really is the door to abundant life.

For Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has invited to you share with him the fruits of his resurrection.

As he told Mary in the garden, standing outside the tomb:

“I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

What Jesus has won he shares with you, his brothers and sisters. And he invites you to receive all that he has done for you this morning, and to say simply — I don't know everything.

But I know this. And it is enough: “I have died. And my life is hidden with Christ in God.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.