

Hebrews 10:15-25

You Are People of the *New* Covenant

Can you imagine how weird our worship would be for an Old Testament believer? From the fact that we actually go inside our place of worship instead of letting the priests do it for us, to the fact that we don't wash our feet or offer sacrifices before we go in, there's a whole lot that wouldn't fit with the view of worship they were used to.

But I imagine that the biggest shock for them would be the Lord's Supper. When they found out that somehow, miraculously, we will be coming into the very presence of God and eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, I imagine they'd freak out a little.

"You mean to say that God's physical presence is going to be sitting on that altar? Why is it out there for everyone to see? Don't you realize how dangerous that is? God is holy. He cannot tolerate sin. His holiness destroys any sinful thing it comes into contact with. Even the High Priest only gets to go into God's presence once a year, and before he goes in, he offers special sacrifices and does a total ceremonial washing. Even then he wears a rope around his ankle so they can pull his body out if something goes wrong. And you're going to just walk up to God's presence and handle it – eat it and drink it? Are you insane?"

Our Old Testament friend speaks the truth about God. He is holy. He can have nothing to do with sin. His will is that people be holy, too. Unless they are, they can't enter into his presence and experience his goodness. The problem is, we aren't. If you want proof, just look at the people and the world around you. Look inside yourself at all your own failures. Yes, you know that you and the rest of the human race are not holy.

But yet in the Old Testament, God gave his unholy, imperfect people a way to approach him. We call it the old covenant. If you've been to the Nexus Bible Study on Sunday mornings, you've been able to take a look at some of the things it involved: purity laws, sacrifices, festivals, and more. God told his people, "**If you are careful to do all these things**" and follow my system, "**then you will be my people and I will be your God.**" Then you will be able to come before me to worship and live in my presence.

God wanted his people to recognize that the covenant he made with them was a hugely gracious gift. He wanted them to be blown away that he wanted a relationship with them and then made it possible. He wanted his covenant to be the most valuable thing they had. But it didn't take long for the people to break and abandon that covenant. They decided that the system God had given them to have a relationship with him wasn't worth the trouble. They'd rather not commit the time, the resources, the effort.

Now, you're not under the old covenant. That covenant was broken, and God sent his son Jesus to replace it with a new covenant. You heard him use that phrase in our gospel lesson as he instituted the Lord's Supper. You are people of that new covenant in Jesus' blood, shed on the cross.

But even as people of that new covenant, do you ever fail to value the new covenant in the same way the Israelites did the old? Are you reluctant to commit the necessary time, effort, and concentration to your relationship with God?

Think about the ways God gives us to come to him: Prayer – we know we should be so persistent in prayer that we're almost worried about wearing God out with our nagging, if that were possible, but often we use prayer as a last resort. Bible Study – we know we should set specific time aside for it, but there are so many other things to get done. The Lord's Supper – we know it's a precious gift from God and we should come to his table recognizing our need for what we receive there, but how often doesn't it become just something you do because the ushers send you up?

When you act like coming before God is no big deal, you devalue your relationship with him. You're telling God that the ways he has given you to draw near to him are less important to you than your own schedule, concerns, and comfort. And the truth is, when you don't prioritize your access to God, God should take it away. This covenant should be broken, too.

But the amazing thing about the new covenant is that, no matter what we do or don't do, we can't break it. It isn't based on sacrifices or washings, our commitment, or anything we do. It's based on the forgiveness of sins in the blood of Jesus. It's based on the fact that because Jesus gave his body and blood on the cross, your sins are lifted away and you are holy in God's sight.

In our lesson from Hebrews, the writer uses a comparison between Christians and the Old Testament High Priest to show just how amazing the new covenant really is. The old covenant allowed only one man, the High Priest, to enter into God's presence in the Most Holy Place once a year, on the Day of Atonement. But the writer says that as people of the new covenant, you and I have a better relationship with God than any High Priest ever did. We can draw near to God and enter the Most Holy Place regularly – constantly – because the sacrifice and washing applied to us is greater than that of the High Priests.

For the High Priest of the old covenant, when he was about to enter the Most Holy Place, he first had to go through a ceremonial washing and put on special garments. Then, he sacrificed a bull to atone for his sins. Only then could he enter into the Most Holy Place. And every year, on the Day of Atonement, he would do the same washing and the same sacrifice for as long as he was High Priest.

But as people of the new covenant, you don't need to offer a sacrifice to enter into God's presence. In the new covenant, there is only one sacrifice – Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. When he died, he forgave your sin. **“Sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.”** By giving his body, his blood, his life, he opened a way for you to enter through the curtain into God's presence – quite literally, the curtain in the Temple in Jerusalem tore from top to bottom when he died. That's what we remember in the Lord's Supper: We participate in the new covenant in Jesus' blood as his sacrifice is applied to take away our personal sins.

And you don't need to take a bath every time you come before God, either. In fact, just as there's only one sacrifice in the new covenant, there's also only one washing: Baptism. In baptism, your

body was washed with water, but because that water was connected with the gospel message, it did more than get you wet or symbolize an inner change. It actually applied that atoning sacrifice of Jesus to you. In baptism, God made you holy. Now you can enter into his presence with confidence – you can **“draw near to God with a sincere heart,”** cleansed from all guilt, **“and with the full assurance that faith brings.”**

So do it! Take advantage of the access God gives you! Come here to worship to hear him speak to you. Go to him in prayer to tell him what’s in your heart. Draw near to this altar to receive Holy Communion for the strengthening of your faith. Gather with fellow Christians and feel his presence there, because **“wherever two or three gather together in [his] name, there [he is] with them.”** Do all those things gladly and freely because Jesus has forgiven your sins and made you holy in God’s sight.

And now that you can experience the blessing of coming before God, treat your access to him like he wants you to: like it’s the most important thing you have. **“Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.”** Don’t let anything stop you from exercising the right to approach God. Don’t let any sin, any person, any disaster – anything – shake you off the hope of heaven. Make your number one goal in life strengthening your hold on God’s promise of forgiveness.

And it’s to that end that the Holy Spirit tells you, **“Do not give up meeting together...but encourage one another.”** We all face things in our lives that try to knock our focus off the thing that really matters. Something always appears that seems more urgent or more important. And if you’re thinking that there isn’t anything right now, watch out! The devil loves to trick you into thinking you’re untouchable right before he strikes.

Alone, those things can get us. Alone, we can much more easily fall into the devil’s traps. But together as a congregation, as a Christian family, as a house built of living stones on the foundation of Christ our cornerstone – together we can help each other to stand on the hope we have, the hope of heaven.

God wants you to hold tightly to that hope until the Day that is approaching comes, so that then he can give you the reality of the heaven you hoped for. Take advantage of the encouragement of others here today and every time we worship. Be an encourager for the people around you – **“consider how you can spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”** Whether that’s sharing God’s Word, standing side-by-side at Communion, or simply signing the friendship register as it goes past, help each other to hold on to the hope you have because of Jesus. As people of his new covenant, may we always value and share the access to God he gives you. Amen.