

“Old Testament Fall Festivals: The Day of Atonement”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

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Hymns for Worship Video – September 13, 2020

“Blessed Assurance” #687 in the Book of Praise

Blessed assurance Jesus is mine
O what a foretaste of glory divine
Heir of salvation purchase of God
Born of His Spirit washed in His blood

Chorus

This is my story this is my song
Praising my Saviour all the day long
This is my story this is my song
Praising my Saviour all the day long

Perfect submission perfect delight
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight
Angels descending bring from above
Echoes of mercy whispers of love

Chorus

Perfect submission all is at rest
I in my Saviour am happy and blest
Watching and waiting looking above
Filled with His goodness lost in His love

Chorus

Fanny Jane Crosby | Phoebe Palmer Knapp

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“Come, Ye Disconsolate” #195 in the Book of Praise

Come ye disconsolate where'er ye languish
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel
Here bring your wounded hearts; here tell your anguish
Earth has no sorrow, that heav'n cannot heal

Joy of the desolate, light of the straying
Hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying
Earth has no sorrow, that heav'n cannot cure

Here see the bread of life, see the waters flowing
Forth from the throne of God, pure from above
Come to the feast of love; come ever knowing
Earth has no sorrow, but heav'n can remove

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“There is a Redeemer” #358 in the Book of Praise

There is a Redeemer, Jesus God's own Son
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah, Holy One

Chorus

Thank You O my Father for giving us Your Son
And leaving Your Spirit till the work on earth is done

Jesus my Redeemer, name above all names
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah, O for sinners slain

Chorus

When I stand in glory I will see His face
There I'll serve my King forever in that holy place

Chorus

Melody Green

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Introduction to the Scripture Reading

In the ninth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, the apostle reminds his readers of what used to be with regard to worship and sacrifice before Jesus came. There were strict regulations regarding worship in the earthly tabernacle, with two rooms – the outer room containing the consecrated bread and the inner room housing the ark of the covenant. Only the high priest could enter the inner room, the Most Holy Place, once a year, and not without a blood offering for his own sins and the sins of the people. But, the apostle writes, this did not clear the conscience of the worshipper.

But then Christ came and entered the Most Holy Place that is not of this world, and he entered by his own blood. His sacrifice cleanses the conscience of sinners. Those who believe receive the promise of redemption and life. Christ was sacrificed once, for many, and when he returns he will not bear sin, but will save those who are waiting for him.

We continue with the apostle's words to the Hebrews in chapter 10.

Scripture Text: Hebrews 10:1-25

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. ⁴ It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵ *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:*

*“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;*

⁶ *with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased.*

⁷ *Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—*

I have come to do your will, my God.’”

⁸ *First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them”—though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹ Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

¹¹ *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

¹⁵ *The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:*

¹⁶ *“This is the covenant I will make with them
after that time, says the Lord.*

*I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds.”*

¹⁷ *Then he adds:*

*“Their sins and lawless acts
I will remember no more.”*

¹⁸ *And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.*

¹⁹ *Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Meditation

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

Last week we began a series of three meditations on the Fall festivals of the Old Testament. We reflected on the Feast of Trumpets during which the people celebrate the beginning of creation, and take seriously the coming judgement on the behaviour of God's people. It is a time to be lauded with the blast of ram's horns, or trumpets, in acknowledgement of what God has done, is doing, and has promised. In the Christian church we acknowledge the same past, present and promise through the sacrament of the Lord's Table in which we give thanks for and are humbled by what God has done, is doing and has promised through the body and blood of Christ.

Today we are going to give our attention to another festival of the Old Testament, the Day of Atonement, also known as Yom Kippur.

“In the Old Testament preaching was a dangerous job; it fell to priests to stand in the gap between the holy God and the stained and defiled people. Priests entered into the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle. They trod on ground that others dared not. When the Lord God spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they approached the Lord (Lev. 16:2), he said, “Don't go there, lest you die.” When the high priests went into the Most Holy Place, they had a rope tied around their ankles so that they could safely be pulled out in case they were struck down.”¹

I can't imagine. Although I can picture how well it would turn out if I had a rope tied around my ankles every time I entered the pulpit. Preaching is risky enough without physical dangers. The emergency room would know me by my first name!

Jewish texts tell us that Yom Kippur was the one day on which the high priest was to enter the most holy place in the Tabernacle. The high priest was to perform a series of rituals that were to atone for the sins of the people so that he could ask for forgiveness for them. After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 A.D., Yom Kippur became a ritual for individual Rabbis and congregations in their synagogues. “Observant Jews consider Yom Kippur and the days leading up to it a time for prayer, good deeds, reflecting on past mistakes and making amends with others.” The Day of Atonement occurs ten days after the Feast of Trumpets. It is the highest of the Jewish holy days and is traditionally understood to be the day on which God decides each person's fate. Therefore, each one is to “make amends and ask forgiveness for sins committed during the past year.” This is followed by a twenty-five hour fast and a special traditional service.²

During the worship service, the Rabbi leads from a special book. “Five distinct prayer services take place on Yom Kippur, the first on the eve of the holiday and the last before sunset

¹ Reformedworship.org. Article “Sound the Trumpet: Celebrating the Old Testament Fall festivals.” By John F. Schuurman and Jane Tiemersma Vogel. September, 2001.

² All quotes and information in this paragraph found in an article on history.com, “Yom Kippur” by history.com editors. <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/yom-kippur-history>. A&E Television Networks. Originally published October 27, 2009. Updated October 8, 2019.

on the following day. One of the most important prayers specific to Yom Kippur describes the atonement ritual performed by high priests during ancient times.” As with the Feast of Trumpets, a long blast of the ram’s horn is to sound at the end of the final service to signal the end of the fasting period.³

The symbols of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement are the pre-Yom Kippur feast, the breaking of the fast with comfort foods, the wearing of white, and making donations or volunteering time with charity as a way to atone and seek God’s forgiveness.⁴ It is a rather elaborate observance, the most important one of the Jewish year, combined with Rosh Hashanah. What a beautiful way to keep the traditions handed down by ancestors in the faith.

One of the ways Yom Kippur is described is that it is the Sabbath of Sabbaths. “Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax, one of the most famous Jewish athletes in American sports, made national headlines when he refused to pitch in the first game of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur. When Koufax’s replacement Don Drysdale was pulled from the game for poor performance, he told the Los Angeles Dodgers’ manager Walter Alton, ‘I bet you wish I was Jewish, too.’”⁵

Such a level of commitment to this expression of faith. This is the level to which Jesus calls us in our discipleship, worship and service. But do we commit to that level? Do we make it our highest, life-guiding priority?

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another...

Unswervingly. The words brings to mind several car advertisements – the ones for vehicles with alerts for when you are veering out of your lane when you don’t mean to. If you leave your lane, the car beeps at you and draws your attention back to what you’re supposed to be doing – driving – instead of whatever has distracted you. The mother looking in her rear view mirror telling her kids in the back seat to settle down is one I’ve seen most recently. “Unswervingly” means we are steady, unremitting, solidly committed. The author of Hebrews tells us to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, because the One in whom we find that hope is unswervingly faithful to us. The author also says we are to encourage one another in loving and in doing good, and that we are not to give up meeting together as apparently some in the community had done. You see, right from the first century, a commitment to the church is a habit easily broken. I recently heard of a church leader who brought an end to online services as the church reopened because people said they wouldn’t bother going out to worship if they could stay home and watch. I must admit, I will miss sitting with my family with a cup of coffee to watch worship on Sunday mornings. I could have told the Session I was not comfortable going back to the sanctuary so I could continue to enjoy those times, but that would have been abusive of my position as Moderator of the Session and a Minister of Word and Sacrament. It would also

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

have shown terrible disrespect toward those whose reason for continuing to worship at home is a legitimate health concern, either for themselves or for their families, in this uncertain time of pandemic. I have no reason not to be physically present with others at worship. Some of our church family have very good reasons, and I dare say would like very much to be in the sanctuary again on Sunday mornings. But that isn't what the author of Hebrews is talking about. He is talking about those who have simply stopped gathering for worship. They have "given up" as if they were breaking a habit.

One of my favourite preachers and theologians, Thomas Long, wrote an article about atonement in the book of Hebrews. He begins by telling the story of what he calls his first failure in ministry, right after he unpacked his books. A woman came to him declaring her disbelief that God could forgive her, that God stood in constant judgement of her. There was no specific sin she had committed that had led her to this conclusion. Long tried everything he had been taught in seminary to help her see the grace of God's forgiveness assured through faith in Christ, but to no avail. She simply could not believe she could be forgiven. Years later, as Long was writing a commentary on Hebrews, he remembered the woman, and realized that this was just the kind of person for whom the author of the letter, or rather sermon, had written these words. The author was "a preacher and pastor labouring to provide care and comfort to a congregation worn down by a religion that does not seem to heal; fatigued by the burdens of a conscience that will not be cleansed; exhausted by a Jesus who appears unable to help."⁶ This community has a very real problem of conscience and needs to feel they are forgiven, not just know it intellectually. This author's goal is to preach the gospel so that it communicates God's grace that atones. "This is a congregation of people growing weary of the Christian life, becoming tired of church and the demands of discipleship."⁷ They have become apathetic and have drifted away. Perhaps some have paid a social or economic price for their commitment. Attendance is down. Theological understanding is ebbing away and they are exhausted. They are giving up. All of the work they are doing, the rules they are following are not assuring them of the forgiveness they seek. They cannot rest. They have lost the joy of faith in God.

The same can happen in the lives of Christian people today, in churches today. People wear themselves out for Jesus because they feel they have to, but it doesn't bring the peace they seek. It doesn't renew their joy. Long tells another story of a minister that made the observation that congregations seeking a new minister were including in the list of qualifications, a good sense of humour. He wondered why the need to state something so obvious? Who wants a minister that doesn't laugh? Perhaps, it was wondered, it was because someone witty with a "light touch and a smile could be the last line of defense against a doleful faith, a fearsome view of God, and a missing sense of genuine gladness at the heart of worship and discipleship. If we cannot be joyful, at least we can grin."⁸

⁶ "Bold in the Presence of God: Atonement in Hebrews" By Thomas G. Long. Published in Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology, Volume 52, No. 1. Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond VA, January, 1998. Pg. 55. (Canadian spelling mine)

⁷ Ibid. Pg. 58.

⁸ Ibid. Pp. 59-60.

The Jewish Day of Atonement has its focus placed on repentance and forgiveness. The many traditions and rituals to mark this day have reminded God's people of the need for forgiveness for generations. As the Christian Church, we are regularly reminded of this need as we confess our sins and are assured of God's forgiveness through the sacrifice Christ made once, for all, for those who would believe. We do not need to perform elaborate rituals to know this, we need to read the Gospel, and be reminded by the New Testament writers that we do not live our lives in guilt because Christ has transformed our guilt into hope. He's dealt with it. Done. Forever. For believers. The level of commitment we see in the Jewish community on the Day of Atonement is an example we can follow every day as we acknowledge our sins before God and receive forgiveness through Christ. It takes work. It takes a high level of commitment. But when we live as those who live within that hope, the habit becomes pretty easy to keep. We do not give up, because God does not give up on us, through our faith in Christ. Amen.