

SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Into the Fire: Offered in the Spirit”

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But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, 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 worship the living God!

Hebrews 9:11-14

For the past five weeks in this season of Lent, we’ve been in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, going bit by bit through Christ’s temptations in the wilderness and then, as we explored, how those trials continued into the beginning of his ministry in Galilee and even his hometown of Nazareth. We’ve called this series “Into the Fire,” a reference to that old phrase, “out of the frying pan and into the fire,” because it seems like Jesus just went from one trial to the next: into the wilderness, where he was tempted; then out of the wilderness and into public ministry, where I’d say he was tempted further and also where he faced trial and hardship. And the whole time as we’ve gone through that fourth chapter of Luke, we’ve been picking up on how Jesus is showing us just what kind of a Messiah he would be, with one point coming in loud and clear: he was not going to take the easy way out. That’s been a big part of understanding Jesus’s actions and teachings these past five weeks: he wasn’t going to take the easy way out.

Today, on this Palm Sunday (and kind of a Passion Sunday too), we leave the Gospel of Luke and go to this short passage in the Book of Hebrews, which is all about where that road of hardship ultimately led for Jesus, and why it matters for us now. Fair warning, the Book of Hebrews is notoriously dense and maybe even a bit tedious to read and hear, but underneath it is a beautiful vision of how Jesus have paved a way to a life in the Lord, a life in himself, that surpasses anything we could have possibly imagined on our own. Let’s go to God’s Word.

[Read passage.] Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If you knew then how things would turn out, would you still have gone down the road you’re on now? That’s one of those hypothetical questions that gets asks sometimes, especially

if you're facing a hard time in life. I guess it might come during a moment of reflection or a deep conversation with a friend, but it usually sounds about like that: "If you knew how things would turn out, would you have still gone down the road you're on now?"

Sometimes that answer's no. Sometimes wherever you are now isn't where you wanted to be, you regret whatever happened to you or whatever decision you made and you wish you could have changed things.

But then sometimes the answer's yes. Yes, it's been a hard time—whatever that might mean—but even if I knew then what a hard time it would be, I still wouldn't give up the road that brought me to it. Sometimes that answer's yes.

Throughout this whole Season of Lent, we've seen how Jesus has never wavered from the road he was on, even though it seems he's quite aware of where his road would take him. He could've made it easier on himself, could've done a lot of things to lighten the load a little bit. But he didn't. Why?

In a dense, maybe even convoluted way, this passage in Hebrews speaks to the "why." It speaks about where Jesus's road ultimately led.

So be honest with yourselves, you don't have to raise your hands or anything, but be honest with yourselves. How many of you when you heard that passage, talking about high priests and bulls and goats and sprinkling of ashes and blood, were like, "What is this talking about? Is this one of those parts of the Bible I'd probably better skip over?" If that's what's you're thinking, it's okay. The Book of Hebrews is dense stuff, but hang in there. I'd like to focus more on that last verse, v. 14, but let me offer first a little bit of what I hope will help us make sense of these first three verses.

Big thing in the Book of Hebrews is over and over putting the earthly and the heavenly right next to each other and seeing just how much the heavenly surpasses the earthly every single time. There's an earthly high priest, but Jesus is a heavenly high priest. There's an earthly tabernacle, but Jesus brings about a heavenly tabernacle. There's earthly sacrifice, but Jesus is a heavenly sacrifice. That's what vv. 11-13 are talking about. In an atoning sacrifice for sin, Jesus offers himself, rather than an earthly sacrifice like a bull or a goat according to Jewish law, and therefore obtains "eternal redemption," as v. 12 puts it. And all of it is referring to just what was accomplished in Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Too often we can get caught into thinking of the cross of Christ as a tragic death or a sad story, but that doesn't even begin to capture the sheer cosmic, eternal scope of what was going on when Jesus hanged there crucified. It was our sinfulness, and our bondage to it, that were confronted and dealt with. And the Book of Hebrews gets into just why Christ's sacrifice looms so large for those who follow him.

As v. 14 puts it, “how much more will the blood of Christ,” with “how much more” referring to the blood of earthly sacrifices by comparison, “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 worship the living God!” Just in those few words, this verse is telling us that Christ died that we might be purified, made clean, from our sinfulness, and that we might worship him, that we might be in his presence. In other words, Christ died, Christ gave himself, so that we might be made right and be with the Lord.

It might seem like an obvious point, but maybe one that we can overlook or forget: but this is saying that the reason Christ went to the cross, the reason Christ gave himself up, the reason Christ endured all of the hardship and trials and temptations was so that you might be with the Lord. Sometimes we can talk about it in terms of what kind of Messiah he would be, or what kind of a kingdom he was ushering in, and that’s all true too, but when we ask what kind of Messiah or what kind of kingdom he would usher in, may we never lose sight that that kingdom is one that is grounded on the fact, the certainty, that its king came into his kingdom by losing his life for you.

So should that same question of, if you knew then how things would turn out, would you still have gone through with it, would you still have gone down the road you’re on, should that same question have been asked of Jesus, the answer is and always has been yes. Not because he wanted it for himself, but because of his love for you, to make things right for you, to bring you to himself, to bring you into the very presence of God.

I hope that as we come into this week, this Holy Week, that truth stays with you, that every step Jesus took toward the cross was a step he intended to take and always intended to take, so that you might be with him in glory forever, and he calls us to follow him into that life.

It’s no small thing, to say you would follow Jesus. In some circles, it might be easier for us to just say I believe in Jesus so I’m going to heaven, but I’m not sure that captures it. Jesus calls us to follow him, and the path he took was never an easy one either. Truly, that’s what we’ve seen this whole series. He goes into temptation, he goes into trial, he goes into rejection, and he goes to his death. And in some respects, he goes in our place and for our sake, while in other respects he goes because his path is the one he calls all of us to go down as well. It’s the path and the life that won’t take the easy way out either. It’s the path and the life that would give of yourself for another. It’s the path and the life that would look another person with grace and love no matter what they might do.

Now you might think, well, why would I sign on for that? What if I would prefer the easy way out? And that’s a good question. Why would you sign on for that? And that’s the question that has come before every Christian since the first disciples: why would I sign on for a life that

would be faced with hardship because of faith? Why would I sign on for a life where I give myself rather than shore myself up? Why would I sign on for a life of taking up a cross? If those are questions you have right now, the answer is that life, true life doesn't come by gathering unto yourself, but by giving yourself up. Christ is showing us that way.

And if you don't believe it, or if you're skeptical, my hope is that you take comfort in what our Confirmands did earlier this morning. When they professed their faith in Jesus, they're not just saying yeah, God makes me feel better when I'm sad, so this is easy. They're saying their faith leads them to follow Jesus, even knowing that a life of faith may at times be hard, because they've seen the life that it points to.

That great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis once spoke of the same thing: why we come to faith in Christ. He said this, "As you perhaps know, I haven't always been a Christian. I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

Friends, our Lord showed us that the path to life, true life, eternal life, was never one that took the easy way out. The path he took was one of hardship, and he never shied away from it, because he was going to the cross for us. But in calling us to follow him, we go on the same path, not because we have to save ourselves, but because Christ has saved us from a life that only looks out for ourselves, a life instead of sacrifice, of giving of ourselves, and in that faith, he brings us into the presence of God if we would follow him.

Now why on earth would anyone want to do that?

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