

## Season after Pentecost

Hebrews: Week 4

August 29 & 30, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Hebrews 9: 1-14

*"The Barriers Are Gone"*

*Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen*

In the beginning, Genesis tells us, all of creation was in harmony with God and one another. One of my favorite verses in Genesis is in chapter 3: "They [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze."

(Gen. 3: 8a) It seems like a snapshot of an everyday occurrence in which the Lord and the humans get together to hash out the day, check on the well-being of the rest of creation and simply enjoy one another's company. It's a lovely description of how close and loving that relationship between God and us was intended to be. Can you imagine? Sitting on the patio, porch, your favorite easy chair, utterly content as you enjoy time with the Lord over coffee, wine, a beer, or iced tea, equally at ease in conversation and in silences.

The rest of that verse from Genesis is one of the saddest. "And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees." It's both sad and tragic. Humanity hid from the LORD who created them, loved them wholly and fully, provided for their immediate needs and for more than they knew they needed. Even then it says, "But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" Can't you hear God's heart breaking, knowing Adam and Eve have themselves created something new, something terrible that will forever alter the course of their relationships and creation. What we humans created was sin — turning away from God, hurting one another, creating barriers of shame and divisions of pain that still get in the way. In that sinfulness, we humans even twisted the story around to let ourselves believe it was God who broke the relationship and cast up the divisions rather than us.

Take this Genesis truth into the pictures the Preacher of Hebrews draws in the reading we heard today. When wandering in the wilderness, the people of God had an elaborate, two-chambered tent for particular rituals of worship. It reminded them that God was with them. When they moved, the tent sanctuary moved as well. Within it there were particular items to remind them of God and the covenant and history they had with the Lord. Later, when the Israelites were living in the Promised land that tent would be reconstructed as the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple had space that the average, male Jew could enter, but still there were inner chambers only open to priests.

Imagine an area in front of our altar and the altar itself surrounded by curtains as thick as walls. Think of those curtain barriers as the separation our sin has placed

between ourselves and God. The Preacher of Hebrews wants us to notice that access to the most holy places, the areas considered most close to the actual presence of God were reserved for priests. What would it communicate to you to be sitting in the pews, unable to see or enter those places where God is thought to be most present? How might it affect your feelings and relationship with God to know it was your sin that held in place those barriers between you and the Lord? Yes, once a year the high priest only would enter the most inner chamber, the Holy of Holies, to offer the blood of sacrificed animals as atonement for sin, to cleanse the Temple and restore the “at-one-ment” between God and God’s people. Yet, the curtains remained in place, still separating all but the priests from the known presence of God.

Pastor Thomas Long puts it this way: “The Preacher [ of Hebrews] knows that his congregation, like many others, often feels burdened by the toil of the Christian faith, but shut out of its joy and peace. Like all other human beings, what the members of the Preacher’s congregation really need and want is an encounter with the living God; they want to go into the holiest sanctuary, to have access to God’s mercy and forgiveness, but.... People are trapped in the vestibule, and they cannot get what they seek.” They are busy and bustling with activity and church work but still did not feel they had — “access to the living and healing God.”<sup>1</sup> The people hearing the Hebrew Preacher were weary and wondering if it was worth it to continue in their new Jewish-Christian faith. Many Christians today battle the same feelings. And many outside the Christian faith aren’t sure they will find God in the practices and organization of churches. Again Long expresses it well: “Everybody hungers for access to the holy, but under the old regime only the high priest could go in; everybody need God’s mercy and help every day, but the high priest could approach the holy but once a year [on the Feast of the Atonement;] humanity thirsts for freedom from guilt, [for] a fresh start, a healed spirit, but the blood sacrifices of the old high priest could not “perfect [make whole] the conscience of the worshiper” (Hebrews 9:9)<sup>2</sup>

The Preacher of Hebrews then figuratively pulls back the curtain to the Holy of Holies for us all to see, Jesus, our own high priest “who is not a frightened sinner, but a Son, an heir, one who is at home in the Holy of Holies and who can boldly and permanently pull back the great curtain that shuts us out from God and can invite us all, as brothers and sisters, to come in, to enter into intimacy with the living God.”<sup>3</sup> Matthew, Mark and Luke pointed to this when they report that upon Jesus’ death “the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” The sin that had created those barriers in our relationship with God was forever removed by our high priest and sacrifice, Jesus. There are no impediments to our approaching our Lord. While it was we humans who created the

sin and the separation, it was God, through Jesus, who acted “to restore [those] relationships, which human sins have closed off.”<sup>4</sup> The reconciliation was initiated and completed by the One whose heart was broken by our betrayal and who never stopped seeking that reunion. As it was in the beginning, God wants nothing to come between our Lord and us and all of creation. Reaching toward a God who can’t be grasped, our God reaches back in Jesus to take our hands. No barriers, only a new covenant promising a “lasting relationship with a living God.”<sup>5</sup>

No more curtains. No more walls of shame. No shrouds of fear or fear of rejection between us and our Lord. Now what? We worship every week where we are freely offered forgiveness and fresh starts. Each week we are invited to approach the altar to receive the gift of life from God. In Jesus the dynamics of the human relationship with God has been forever opened wide. Even when we slam doors, God is already knocking, asking us to open up and come home. What will be your response to such incredible grace and love? What will be mine? Ours? It’s not just religious activity and busyness God desires, as good and useful as such work may be. God wants **us**. The Creator-Savior-Advocate wants to walk in our lives like God did everyday in that first garden with our first ancestors. “Do not hide,” the Lord implores. Are you hiding? Are you taking such a Lord for granted? Are you ready to put down the burden of guilt or shame?

What will you do today, what will you do tomorrow to place yourself in the presence of such an awesome Lord from whom you have an eternal welcome, the Lord who wants nothing more than to give you all you need for faithful, joyful living? (Make suggestions)  
The curtains are down. No barriers between us and God.

**Now** is the time to again approach our relationship with our Lord  
which fuels the faith  
that makes it possible for each of us and this community  
to be the light that draws others to our awesome God. Are you with me?

Linda M Alessandri 8/29/15

## ENDNOTES

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1. Thomas G. Long Interpretation: Hebrews Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997 p 95
  2. Thomas G. Long Interpretation: Hebrews Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997 p 96
  3. Long, p. 96
  4. Craig R. Koester, “Commentary on Hebrews 9: 1-14” as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  5. Frances Taylor Gench, Hebrews and James Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996 p. 54