



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Hebrews 9:6-15, 24-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 6) Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent to carry out their ritual duties; (v. 7) but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people. (v. 8) By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary has not yet been disclosed as long as the first tent is still standing. (v. 9) This is a symbol of the present time, during which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, (v. 10) but deal only with food and drink and various baptisms, regulations for the body imposed until the time comes to set things right. (v. 11) 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), (v. 12) 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. (v. 13) 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, (v. 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 worship the living God! (v. 15) For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.

(v. 24) For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (v. 25) Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; (v. 26) for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The church recognizes today as Good Friday. The name “Good Friday” is to some an oxymoron, because this is the day that we recognize Jesus’ crucifixion (execution) at the hands of the state (Roman Government) yet it is called “Good” Friday. Those of us who understand the road that Christ had to travel understand why it is “Good” Friday. I say that Jesus was “executed at the hands of the state” because if Good Friday teaches us anything, it teaches us that we live in a world where injustices happen, trials are fixed, the applause of the people is fickle at best, and the “powers” will stop at nothing to achieve their objectives. Therefore, although it is Good Friday, we should not celebrate Good Friday as much as we should reflect on the injustices and mendacity that we face in our own world. Good Friday is not where your “breakthroughs” come but where you strengthen your faith.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Hebrews 9:6-15, 24-26

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I write this reflection almost a month after the execution of Troy Davis at the hands of the state of Georgia. Many faithful Christians support the death penalty. One of the main reasons for their support is the belief that if we (the state) can make someone pay for their crimes with their death, the family and society will be better off. We all would feel better knowing that the “criminal” would not have an opportunity to commit any other crimes. Our reading today, however, challenges that assumption. According to the Hebrew writer, there is only one death that will really make us better off—the death of Jesus.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

As a teacher of communications and rhetoric, I like the book of Hebrews because it reads as one sustained argument and a good example of what I call “rhetorical theology.”¹ Simply put, rhetorical theology is a public theology a person constructs within a certain context for a particular rhetorical situation. Moreover, since it is theology for a particular place and time, it is profoundly rhetorical because the writer or speaker must persuade the

audience of her or his position. In the book of Hebrews, the writer attempts to convince the audience of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ and the faith that they accepted against prevailing winds to the contrary. In short, the trials and tribulations of many in the writer's audiences tested their faith, and the "old" way of life (without Christ as Lord) had started looking good again.

Here in this passage the rhetorical aim for the writer is to persuade the audience that the "new covenant" they entered was much better than the old one. The writer starts by explaining the old ritual where the priests "go continually into the first tent" to "carry out ritual duties," but only the high priest was able to go into the second tent and only "once a year." While the high priest entered the tent, he took with him the "blood" that he offered for himself and for the sins committed "unintentionally by the people." However, according to the Hebrew writer, as long as the first tent was still standing, these actions could not "perfect the conscience of the worshipper"—it could only deal with matters limited to "ritual and behavior."

This provides the preacher with a "preaching moment." The preacher can talk about how many times when the going gets tough, the tough get going back to the old. We look back at people, places, and things that we trusted back then, only to find out that they were not sufficient and good for our well-being.

The writer then shifts the argument to Christ. The phrase "But when Christ came" opens the writer to make two strong arguments about the difference between the old covenant and the new. First, Christ came through a greater and perfect tent—one not made by hands and not of this creation. Second, when Christ entered, he did not have the blood of "goats and calves," but he entered with his own blood, thereby obtaining "eternal redemption." The arguments allow the writer to reason in verses 13-14, "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!"

After this reasoning, the writer claimed that Christ was the "mediator of the new covenant" and those who accepted Jesus as Savior received an "eternal inheritance." They received this "eternal inheritance" because "a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant." This redemption happened because Christ did not enter a "copy" of the sanctuary, but he entered "heaven itself" and appeared in the "presence of God on our behalf." The writer closed the argument by noting that this was a one-time event. Christ did not have to enter the sanctuary, as the high priest did, time and time again, but has appeared "once and for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself."

The understanding of the new covenant, the eternal inheritance and redemption are important parts of this text and the preacher should place emphasis on them. The preacher should remind the congregation that our Savior's death did not come without a cost and that faithful discipleship requires us humbly to acknowledge the agony and pain that

Christ endured. The good news in the text is that “Christ died once and for all to remove sin by sacrificing himself” and with that, we can approach the throne of grace and mercy finding refuge from our struggles but also forgiveness from our sins. For this reason, Good Friday is not an oxymoron for those who accept the invaluable death of Christ on the cross.

Challenge

A text like this can unleash in us the temptation to adopt a “scapegoat” theology. What I mean by this is that for many preachers, we preach Christ’s execution as one of redemptive suffering with the redemption of humans back unto God as the grand result. This could cause us to practice “cheap grace”—placing everything on Jesus while we do what it is we want to do. In addition, a scapegoat theology takes the execution of Jesus away from its original context. What I mean here is that if one thinks that the “powers” killed Jesus because they believed that Jesus would “rise on the third day to redeem humankind back unto God” one is sorely mistaken. They deemed Jesus a troublemaker and they thought they were getting rid of a problem.

If anything, the text reminds us that grace is not cheap—it cost, and it costs a lot. It is for this reason that we should on this day thank God for all God has done in our lives, but also reflect on the path of faithful discipleship. Good Friday and this passage remind us that the “powers” did get Jesus and if we desire to follow him, suffering awaits those who serve him, as well.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of these passages include:

Sounds: Animals being slaughtered as sacrifices;

Sights: Blood everywhere, on the priests and people; and

Smells: The smell of animals being burned.

III. Suggested Reading

Cone, James. [The Cross and the Lynching Tree](#). New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2011.

Note

Johnson, Andre E. “*The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and a Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology*.” [Black Theology Journal](#). 8.3, 2010 (266–285).