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PRESIDENT'S LETTER - MARCH 05

"And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:50-53).

We are once again in the middle of a busy and solemn Lenten season. The extra midweek services give us and our people a chance to quietly meditate upon the meaning of the cross and the wonder of the Gospel. We are reminded that we preach Christ crucified. Lent and Easter are the heart and soul of the God's message of reconciliation. As pastors, we need to spend extra personal time at the foot of the cross so that we can proclaim the wonders God has done.

In the Matthew 27 passage above, which event would you consider to be the most meaningful and powerful - the veil of temple being torn in two, the earthquake, the graves opening, or the saints coming out of the graves after Jesus resurrection? I consider the splitting of the temple veil God's Good Friday sermon revealing the meaning of Jesus' death and God's message of reconciliation.

The Old Testament worship life laid out in Exodus and Leviticus was a shadow picture or type of God's great act of redemption. All the blood sacrifices, the clean and unclean provisions of the law, and the work of the high priest all pointed to the work of the coming Messiah, the Lamb of God. The great Day of Atonement was the culmination of the Old Testament shadow-picture of how God would atone for the sins of the entire world through the scapegoat and the mercy-seat in the Most Holy Place.

What is sometimes not realized by New Testament Christians is the frustration of the Old Testament worship system. God was with His people with His saving presence. Jehovah was not only near in the sense that God is everywhere, but God was near His people in a very tangible way. As the Children of Israel left Egypt, God was near them with His protecting presence as visualized with the cloud of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night. The Lord then gave directions for the construction of the tabernacle (the Tent of Meeting). It was in the Most Holy Place that the ark of the covenant was placed with its mercy-seat. The ark was partitioned off by the "veil of the covering" (Exodus 40:21). "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34). When the cloud was lifted up from above the tent, then Israel would move forward. The presence of God was with the Children of Israel in a very real way.

What was frustrating was that God's Old Testament people could not come into God's presence. Not even Moses could enter the tabernacle of meeting because the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. The tabernacle emphasized the consequences of the sinfulness of God's people and contrasted their sinfulness with God's holiness. The very worship of Old Testament Israel emphasized the gulf between God and man.

First of all, there was the tent curtain which encircled the tabernacle. Only the descendants of Abraham could enter into this courtyard through the east gate. Once inside the fence, only the priests could enter the Holy Place to offer incense as the prayers of the people. This is what Zachariah was doing when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. And only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Of the millions of Israelites of the Old Testament, only a handful were able to enter the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement. God was near His people, but they could not come into His presence.

All of this changed when Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. Now the way to God is open for all who believe in Jesus. This was powerfully symbolized when that veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The place where the glory of God resided was open to all people through Jesus. This was revealed in the incarnation, "And the Word became flesh and "tabernacled or tented" among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Be glad this Lenten season that you do not have to go through all the ritualistic cleansing of the Old Testament High Priest. Share with your people the joy that they do not need a priest to go to God on their behalf. God is not only near His people with His saving presence, His people can come into His holy presence and live. You and your children can touch the altar in your church and live. Every believer is a priest and king. The veil is split in two. The way to the mercy-seat is open. There is no need for the Old Testament sacrifices and rituals. Do not take for granted the wonder of being able to come into God's holy presence through Jesus Christ.

Peter rejoiced in this in his first letter to Christians scattered because of persecution. "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The whole concept of worship and sacrifice changed when Jesus died and the veil was split in two. "You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

The great veil was torn asunder,
Earth did quake mid roars of thunder,
Boulders, boulders, into bits were breaking;
Sainted, sainted dead from death were waking.

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May you and your people come into the presence of God this Lenten season with joy and praise.

John Schierenbeck