

Hebrews 10:19-25

“The Priestly People of God”

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Advent III

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Hebrews 10:19-25. It also printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

*19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

One of the deepest questions of our lives - the question that resides behind so many of the questions we ask ourselves has to do with our fundamental purpose - the reason for our lives, our calling in this world.

*Who am I, and what is my life for?* We don’t always articulate that question in exactly that way, but in many ways it is the central question we must answer each day of my life.

The Bible speaks to this question, of course, and while there are different ways we could talk about that the Scriptures answer this question, probably the most fundamental answer that it gives is that the purpose of your life is that you might be a worshiper of the true God.

The purpose of your life is that you might worship God.

That's what you were made for. That's why, in Christ, you will live forever and be raised from the dead on the Last Day. That is the fundamental answer to every question of your identity and calling you might ask yourself.

And for those of us who are parents, this is the fundamental answer to the purpose for our children's lives as well. We aren't called primarily to raise children who are happy or well-adjusted or successful - no, primarily, we are called to raise children who worship God.

The centrality of worship for the purpose and calling of our lives can be shown from the Scriptures in many ways, but perhaps one of the most important is the story of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt.

Remember, when Moses, following the Lord's commands, appeared before Pharaoh, he didn't demand that Pharaoh release Israel from her slavery because that slavery was unjust (which it was) or because Pharaoh was murdering Israelite children (which he was), rather Moses demanded that Pharaoh release Israel from slavery so that she might go out into the wilderness and worship God.

The God of Israel went to war with Pharaoh, he rained down plagues on Egypt for this reason - that his name might glorified, and so that he would possess for himself a people who would worship him.

Worship was the fundamental reason for Israel's life as a whole, and it was the fundamental calling of each individual Israelite.

And indeed, the rest of Israel's life as a people is determined primarily by the extent to which she worships God faithfully or not.

During the time of Judges, Israel is afflicted by enslavement to other nations not because of adultery or murder or theft, but because she fails to worship God faithfully.

Indeed, when judgment finally falls on Jerusalem, and the temple is destroyed, the prophets make it very clear that the fundamental sin for which God's people are being judged is the sin of false worship.

You see, God delivered Israel from slavery, he constituted her as a people so that above all things, she might worship him, and despite her sin and her unfaithfulness, God continued to pursue true worshipers for himself — even sending his own Son in the flesh in order that sinners might be freed to worship him in Spirit and in truth.

Indeed, in John 4, Jesus describes God's desire for a people who would worship with these words: *"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."*

And this intention of God to made for himself true worshipers is then taken up by Apostles after Jesus' death and resurrection as they seek to define for the church its primary reason for existence.

Interestingly, the language that the Apostles often use to describe these true worshipers of God is the language of priesthood.

And this priesthood is not only for the "clergy," for the ordained person, no, it is the calling of every person who shares union with Jesus.

As Peter writes to baptized Christians of every race, gender and age:

*“You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...For you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.”*

And of course, if you know your Old Testament well, you know that this priesthood language for the whole people of God was no New Testament innovation, but rather something God himself started.

For, after the Exodus the Lord himself spoke to Israel and described to them the purpose for which he had saved them, saying: *“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

So beloved, in case the point I’m making isn’t clear, here’s what I’m trying to say. The fundamental purpose for your existence, the answer to the question *Who am I, and what is my life for?* is simply this: You were made to worship God. Your identity is a priestly identity. Your calling is a priestly calling. That is who you are, above all things.

More essential than your calling as a spouse or a parent or a brother or sister or a student or a banker or a real estate agent or a teacher or whatever else you might be is your calling to worship God as part of his priestly people.

And, as those who are in Christ Jesus, our passage this morning describes our priestly calling in perhaps the clearest manner in all of the Scriptures.

This morning, as we unpack this rich passage in Hebrews 10:19-25, I want to talk first about the gift of our priestly calling, and then secondly about the task of our priestly calling.

So, the gift of our priestly calling, and then the task. First, the gift.

The gift of our priestly calling is summed up in the beginning of our passage in verses 19-20. Listen to what the Apostle says:

*19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh.*

The gift of our priestly calling is simply this.

It is that we have confidence to enter the holy places of God.

And of course, we know from the context of Hebrews 9-10 that the holy place described here is not found in Jerusalem, in the temple courts, but the holy place that we have the confidence to enter is heaven itself, the very dwelling place of the presence of the living God.

It's remarkable to the magnitude of this gift that is given to us as the priestly people of God.

We are not just *permitted* to enter God's presence, sort of hugging the wall and hanging our heads and looking for the closest exits, but we have *confidence* to come in, *boldness* to walk right in and stand unashamed before God's face.

And of course, this gift is given in and through and with our Lord Jesus Christ, for it is by his blood that this confidence to access God's is given to us.

Indeed, as the Apostle says, we now worship God as his priestly people by the new and living way that Jesus has opened for us through the curtain - that is, through his flesh.

In the Old Covenant everyone, even the High Priest, was kept out of the holy presence of God by the thick curtain that hung to guard the holy of holies.

But in the death of Christ, that curtain was torn from top to bottom, and Jesus, having ascended to heaven in his resurrected body, and now in his flesh is a kind of living bridge into the very presence of his Father.

The Father, as Jesus told the Samaritan woman is seeking true worshipers, and in Jesus that desire is definitively accomplished, for we ascend into the presence of God and worship him in boldness and confidence through our union with his eternal Son.

To worship God, to reside in his presence securely and safely was the hope of all Old Testament religion, and now in Christ, this gift of a priestly calling has been shared not only with a few, but with all who have been baptized in Jesus' name.

The Psalmist writes, *"My soul longs, yes, faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God"* - and now, in Christ, we possess what the Psalmist could only dream of.

For we are those who receive the gift of a priestly calling, we are those who worship the Father in Spirit and truth through the one who is, as verse 21 describes him, the Great Priest over the House of God.

So if this is the gift of our priestly calling, then what is our task? What is we are actually meant to do with this gift, this identity we possess as full members of the priestly people of God? If the purpose of our existence is to worship God, then what does it mean to steward our priestly gift well?

Our passage focuses on three priestly tasks that are given to us in verses 22-25.

The first is described in verse 22. Since we have been give access and boldness to enter the presence of God through Jesus, *“Let us draw near,”* the Apostle says, *“with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”*

*Draw near.* That’s the first task of a priest. To not stand outside, to not be distracted by other things, but to come close, to go into God’s presence with a heart of integrity and confidence, knowing that our hearts have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus and our bodies have been washed by the Holy Spirit in baptism.

During the week, Monday through Saturday, we primarily fulfill this priestly task of drawing near to God’s presence in the personal or corporate act of prayer.

It’s important for each one of us to wrestle with this reality - prayer, in the Christian life, is not just something we are offered in case we get in trouble and we need it, no - prayer is actually a holy calling, a priestly calling.

And so when you pray, throughout the week, for a co-worker or a friend or a family member, you are serving as a priest for them. You are going into God’s presence on their behalf. This is your priestly task. This is your calling.

To draw near to the throne of grace through Jesus not only for your own sake, but also for others, and use the confidence and boldness you have been given to the presence of God to intercede for your spouse, your parent, your child, your friend, for your neighbor, for the world.

And of course, this priestly task of drawing near to the presence of God culminates each week on the Lord’s Day, as we publicly assemble and draw near into God’s presence together, confessing our sins, interceding for the world, hearing God’s word, and feasting in God’s presence together.

It's important for you to contemplate, that the reason you come to church every week isn't to get some kind of spiritual nugget that will give you some insight into God, and isn't to fulfill some kind of moral checklist.

No, the reason we gather each week is so that we might fulfill our priestly calling together - we come together to do what we were made for, what the purpose of our life actually is - to worship God as a priestly people, for he has called us out of the darkness and into the light for this very purpose - that we might assemble before him and render to him our holy service.

This, by the way, is why so much of our worship service is corporate in nature - corporate prayers, corporate readings, corporate hymns, corporate creeds, corporate responses - it's because you're not supposed to just show up on Sunday to watch someone else do something - no, beloved, you are called into the priestly work yourself - you are invited to come in and draw near through Jesus and fulfill the purpose of your very existence - to be a member of God's priestly people, worshiping in the house of God.

In verse 23, we find the second priestly task.

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope, the Apostle says, without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.*

I think it's fascinating that one of the things we are called to as a part of this royal, priestly nation is to hold fast to our confession of Hope.

From "big-picture" perspective, to hold fast to our confession of hope means that we are not to be dominated in our hearts by the roller coaster of news that we tempted to ride each day as political winds blow this way and that, as the stock market rises and falls, as the economy goes up and down, as viruses spread from one part of the world to another, as experts try to read the tea leaves and predict what's coming next.

No, friends, if you're a priest, if you're a worshiper of God, you're called to confess your hope without wavering, because your hope is based on something fundamental, something stable, something fixed - the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, who rules and reigns over all these things and more.

And of course, the winds of turmoil and change that we see from a "big-picture" perspective applies also to the details of our lives as well.

If there's one thing that's certain about our lives it's that nothing stays the same. Everything is always changing, all the time. None of it stays still.

We get older, year by year. We deal with sickness, illness, threats to our health. Sometimes our financial situation seems solid. Sometimes it's not good at all.

Sometimes our emotions are easily managed. And sometimes we just feel sad all the time and we don't even know why. Our marriages go through good seasons and hard seasons. Our relationship to our children changes. Friendships wax and wane.

But in all these things, one of our priestly tasks is to hold on to something outside of ourselves, something that is constant and steadfast, to hold to hope itself, for our hope is founded in the indestructible life and unchanging reality of our high priest, Jesus Christ.

Our third priestly task is described in verses 24-25. Interestingly, it's not something we do for ourselves, but for one another.

The Apostle writes: *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

Beloved, do you know that one of your priestly tasks is to stir up your fellow believer, your fellow saint, your fellow church member to love and good works? That phrase, "stir up," isn't really even strong enough. In the Greek, a more literal translation is "provoke."

We are meant to provoke one another in this very room to love and good works.

And one of most fundamental ways you do this is by not neglecting to meet together, which is undoubtedly a reference to the gathered worship of the church on the Lord's Day.

Friends, what this means is that your physical, literal participation in worship each Sunday isn't just for yourself, but it's also for your fellow church member.

It's so hard, as Americans, to not think about our decisions individualistically. *"I've just gotta do what's best for me and my family,"* we say, and everyone just reflexively nods and accepts that kind of statement as incontestable.

And we justify a million different things with kind of logic - many of which, by the way, are not actually best for us and our family.

But what if I suggested to you, friend, that the argument that you've just gotta do what's best for you and your family is not something that's found in the Christian Scriptures anywhere at all?

No, friends, if you are in Christ, then the lens through which you are invited to think about your life is the lens of participation in the body of Christ, and you are invited to say, *I've just gotta do what's best not for me and my family, but what's best for this living community of saints to which you belong.*

And a fundamental aspect of doing what's best for the body, what's best for your brothers and sisters in Jesus is doing your part to not neglect to meet together when the church gathers Lord's Day by Lord's Day to worship God.

Beloved, as we close this morning, I want you to hear again the words of Jesus, who says this:

*"The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."*

Friends, this is a description of your life's calling. This is who you are in Jesus Christ. You are member of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people for God's own possession.

And this is a description of your life as you take up your role as a member of the priestly people of God.

*19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

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