

“Through the Curtain”

Ecumenical Good Friday Service, St. Luke's Catholic Church

Matthew 27:45-54

Have you ever been separated from someone you loved? Maybe you've lost your child at the grocery store...or in our case, the Science Museum of Los Angeles. Maybe you've experienced a long-distance relationship. While my wife and I were dating, we were separated by the Atlantic Ocean.

Sometimes the separation is a physical barrier, like distance. Sometimes it is an emotional barrier. A harsh word spoken in anger that leads to the silent treatment. A grudge that settles in your heart, eats away at your soul, and causes you to block someone's phone number and unfriend them on Facebook. We've all lived there. We've all experienced separation.

In the case of our relationship with God, it is neither a physical barrier nor an emotional barrier that separates us. It is a spiritual barrier. Our sin is like an ocean that we can never cross to get back to God.

Yesterday as I watched “The Promise” at New Hope, a presentation of the Easter story, I was struck by the realization of the depth of the love of Jesus. It was hard enough to watch the crucifixion on a stage; I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like in real life. The sound of nails piercing human flesh. The intense darkness falling over the land. Hearing Jesus call out for God the Father. I still shudder at the thought of it all.

Matthew says Jesus cried out in a loud voice as he died. (Matthew 27:50) The gospel of John tells us his last words were, “It is finished.” (John 19:30) This was the most significant moment for humanity for all time. The moment when the Son of the Living God gave up his spirit and died. Matthew says, “At that

moment the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."

(Matthew 27:51)

Matthew was clearly writing to a Jewish audience. They knew about the curtain in the temple. It had been around for a long time, since Moses and the Israelites built the portable tabernacle in the wilderness. For forty years, they had to set up this massive, heavy curtain, taking it down every time they moved. We don't know how thick it was, but thick enough to block out anyone's view of the Most Holy Place, where the Seat of Mercy was. My guess is that the Hebrews were relieved when King Solomon finally finished the temple and they no longer had to carry the curtain around. For reference, Moses' original curtain was about 15 feet high and 15 feet wide. (Exodus 26:31-35) Solomon's was twice as big. (1 Kings 6:19-20)

This curtain was the stark, physical reminder of the people's emotional and spiritual separation from God. It was for their own good. God's holy, awesome presence would have consumed a mere human. But the curtain also represented the ache, the pain of an incomplete relationship. It was like God checking his phone, looking to see if he had any new messages from the people he loved, but sadly, there was no signal.

When Jesus died, this curtain, this 30-foot long impenetrable veil was torn. Significantly, it torn from top to bottom. Without a platform lift or a really high ladder, it would have been impossible to tear this curtain that way. Imagine someone climbing thirty feet in the air, and then descending with a very sharp knife. No way! That is exactly the point. The only way the curtain could have torn at that exact moment was if it was solely an act of God, not humans.

Jesus said, “It is finished.” The Bible says, “The curtain was torn.” What did Jesus really do for us that day on the cross? Jesus took away the sin that separated us from God. He opened the door to a relationship with the Author of Love. Jesus is our bridge over the ocean that separates us. It seems impossible that God could forgive the sins of the whole world, but through Jesus Christ on the cross, that is exactly what he did.

The book of Hebrews is extremely helpful to help us understand Jesus’ role in our salvation. From the story of Good Friday, we get the idea that Jesus was a sacrifice. But there is something else unique about Jesus; he was both the sacrifice and the priest. Listen to this passage in Hebrews 10:11-14

¹¹Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹²But when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

The amazing news is that by Jesus’ death, we are made holy. By offering his own life, Jesus simultaneously became both the priest and the sacrifice, for us. Nothing like this had ever been done before, and we will never see anything like it again. So what does this mean for us? Let me continue reading at verse 19.

¹⁹Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to

cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Jesus fulfilled two roles: as the sacrifice, he took the blame and the punishment we deserved. We had turned our backs on God. We fell victim to our own pride, our own selfishness. Forgiveness does NOT mean, it doesn't matter. It matters a great deal, so much, that our forgiveness was purchased with the life of Christ. Jesus was our sacrifice that won our freedom. But Jesus was also the priest, our go-between, our intercessor, our conduit of grace. The priest is the one the people trust to lead them to God, to lead by example, to lead them in worship and prayer and praise. Only Jesus could fulfill both roles for us.

I used to play hide-and-seek with my kids when they were younger. Sometimes I would hide behind the door or the shower curtain, and jump out and say, “Boo!” when they found me. It was a game, but it represented a real fear – that my children could be separated from me.

The good news is, thanks to Jesus, we do not have to be separated from God anymore. Hear these final words of encouragement from Hebrews 4:14-16.

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Do you know the amazing feeling of confidence that you can approach God’s throne of grace? It is because Jesus, our high priest, invites us. If you are hiding from God, come out into the light of God’s love. If you feel like God is hidden, read the story of the crucifixion again. The curtain is torn. The door is open. The bridge is built. The signal is amplified. Our sins are no longer held against us. At every moment, we can confess our sin, repent and be made whole again. In the name of Jesus Christ, there is no more separation from God.

May you look through the curtain and find the love of God which will never leave you or forsake, and may God never be hidden from you again. Amen.