

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Saints & Holiness”
By Eric Howell
Hebrews 9:11-14
November 1, 2009

On a day when we are reminded, through litany, testimony, and powerful song (thank you, Jason and Robert) that when we become Christians, we are becoming part of something much, much bigger than ourselves, we are made aware of the rich soil from which we grow. That rich soil includes those who shared the faith with us: Sunday School teachers, youth ministers, grandparents, friends. These people should be remembered often as those to whom we owe a thank you, if nothing else. By someone else's faithfulness, each of us heard the good news of Christ and were invited to respond by faith to God's grace offered to us.

We are also thankful for those people who we don't know, whose faces we can't picture. Those saints from old who were faithful to Christ in hard times, in persecution they were people who kept the torch burning.

So, today, for the Sunday School teacher who used felt board to tell the story of Noah's Ark, we give thanks.

For every little old lady who scowled at the music that was too loud, the preacher who was too human, and money that was always wasted, but who would be the first to be at the bedside of a dying friend and the last to leave the side of a grieving spouse, we give thanks.

For every seeker who finally, reluctantly accepted a friend's persistent invitation to come,

For the broken and battered wife who tried to live with dignity and give her kids the joy she didn't have herself until she found the courage to seek the freedom they all needed,

For every student who tried desperately and passionately to reconcile the theology of his or her faith with the challenges of modern science, psychology, sociology, and philosophy,

For the engineer who designed one extra safety feature into the vehicle, the roll bar or air bag or weight distribution that saved the life of the family in the accident,

For the construction worker who hammered one more 16-penny nail into the frame of the closet that the family safely huddled in when the tornado came,

For every pastor whose wife and children took priority, and thus discovered an alternative to the breakneck pace of modern life,

For every Chinese Christian huddled in an underground church this morning,

For every African singing hymns under a shade tree,
For every Russian lighting a candle in a cathedral,
For my friend Khem, who carried his tattered Bible through the jungles of
Vietnam, sleeping in trees and caves as a refugee until he and his family were rescued,
We give thanks and join our voices to their worship today.

To Isaac and Hannah, who will be baptized in a few minutes outside in a cow
trough, surrounded by the love and support of one modest congregation, welcome. We
few here on the hillside around you will represent the thousands and millions of followers
all over the world and through the centuries of the one Man Jesus Christ. So, if we are all
following, where is he leading us?

Hebrews says of Jesus that, like the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies in
the Temple, He entered the greater and more perfect tent (or tabernacle). Jesus is a high
priest whose priestly work of prayer, intercession, and sacrifice goes beyond anything
that had been done before or has been done since. As Thomas Long helps us understand,
it's not about geography—that Jesus ascended to a heavenly temple to perform the
priestly rites there, as it is the transformation of everything regarding worship that is
temporary, provisional, and imperfect. Christians worship on Sunday mornings, Sunday
nights, Wednesday nights, sometimes Saturday nights. They worship in tiny wood-frame
chapels surrounded by fields; in cavernous cathedrals surrounded by porticos. In
storefronts surrounded by jiffy-lubes and donut shops, under highway bridges,
surrounded by passing cars and trucks. Despite the diversity, everything seems time
bound and contingent. The seasons change, the people come and go, the pews creek,
neighborhoods change, buildings crumble. Patriarchs and matriarchs of the church pass
away. Old church communities disband. New congregations spring up. Time goes on.

Nevertheless says the preacher, whenever and wherever the Christian community
gathers for worship, something amazing happens—by God's mystery it follows the Great
High Priest into the greater and perfect tent—into a sanctuary that will not decay—to join
a fellowship that will not perish—and to sing hymns of praise that will not cease to a God
whose mercy is everlasting (Tom Long). So, a hymn is not just a catchy tune; a prayer is
not just a few spoken words; bread is not just bread; the cup is not just juice; water is not
just water.

Worship is the door by which we enter God's time, encounter God's space,
experience God's presence, and enjoy God's people. It is the entrance into a reality that
is unbounded by space and time. Several years ago, I worshipped with an Armenian
Orthodox Church in the heart of the old city of Jerusalem. Entering an orthodox church
is much different than entering most protestant worship spaces. Ours tend to be sanitized.
Orthodox worship space has a smell to it, a texture, an ambiance. And most importantly,
an image. On every wall, in every space are icons of saints from the Bible and the history
of the church. So on the walls around you as you sing and pray, kneel, and listen are
images of St. Paul and Timothy, John and Luke, and nearby is St. Jerome, and
Athanasius, and Cyril. Every space on the walls is covered by these images. When
asked why this is so, one of the priests responds, when you come to worship, you are not

the most important person here. They are. Their worship, pictured by the opening chapters of Revelation, is unchanging. We simply, humbly join our voice to their unending praise, “Holy, holy, holy, heaven and earth are full of your glory” (Revelation 4). Revelation says the incense in the bowls of the worshippers in heaven is the prayers of the saints—our prayers (Revelation 5:8).

We all have access to holiness here and now. It was not always the case. The Jewish soil from which the entire church springs is one of priests and sacrifices, taking with utmost seriousness the categories of sin and holiness, of the far distance between God and man that can only be bridged in one moment when the carefully constructed pyramid of human effort and religious purification stacked high enough that the tallest point barely touched the basest floor of heaven.

In the worldview that Jesus entered, the world is created good and holy. The holiest land in the world is Israel. The holiest city in Israel is Jerusalem. And the holiest place in Jerusalem is the Temple. And the holiest space in the Temple is the Holy of Holies, the inner room of the temple, where there was no furniture, but there was the Ark of the Covenant, the tablets of the Ten Commandments.

And they understood there to be 70 peoples in the world (7 x 10). And the holiest of the people were the people of Israel. And the holiest of the people of Israel were the tribe of Levi. And the holiest of the tribe of Levi was the high priest.

And they understood there to be 354 days in the Lunar year. And the holidays were the holiest of the days. But the Sabbaths were holier still. And the holiest of the Sabbath days was the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

And there were 70 languages in the world. The holiest of the languages was Hebrew. Holier than all else in this language is the Torah, and in the Torah the holiest part is the Ten Commandments. And in the Ten Commandments the holiest of all the words is the divine name.

And only once during the year at a certain hour, these four supreme sanctities came together: place, person, time, word were joined with one another. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies and there utter the name of God. Because this moment was beyond measure holy and awesome, it was the time of utmost peril not only for the high priest, but the whole of Israel. If in this hour, there had entered the mind of the high priest a false or sinful thought, the entire world would have been destroyed (Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*). It is said that a rope was tied around the ankle of the high priest before he went in. Should the priest be struck dead, he could be pulled out by the others.

Jesus is a high priest who enters not the Holy of Holies here on earth, but the throne room of heaven, not every year on the day of atonement, but once for all, not just representing one people, but for all people everywhere for all time. He did not just bring a sacrifice with Him, He became the sacrifice. There was no rope to save Him. He entered and died. At His death, the gospel tells us that the curtain of the temple, separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of creation, the high priest from the rest of the people, the day of atonement from the rest of the days, Israel from the rest of the people

was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45). Jesus is the High Priest who does not just enter the Holy of Holies on our behalf, but explodes the Holy of Holies into all places, everywhere for all people. Everywhere is the place to call on the name of God. Every hour is the time to make atonement for our sins. Every sinner is someone who can be made holy by the blood of this sacrifice. Every moment, bound by space and time is also a moment of God's eternal, holy now. Every moment is a moment of prayer, to find the door to the inner sanctum of the richness of God's grace and beauty all around us. Holiness is the air we breathe. We redeemed sinners, we fallen, broken, temporal, double-minded creatures, find that what has been transformed into the holy is not just space, time, words, but even we ourselves. Church: You are beautiful and magnificent. You are holy.

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