

A New Age

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: The old saying “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks” isn’t about dogs; rather it’s a way of saying that we humans are resistant to change. It’s true: we are creatures of habit. We have our ways of doing things, our comfortable, well-worn ruts of routine and tradition, and we don’t like when someone or something disturbs them or tries to force us out of them. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than when it comes to our religious practices and traditions. We have the sense that there’s a right way to do it which just happens to be the way we’ve always done it. And don’t you dare mess with it. This applies straight across the board, but let me give you just one small example: we didn’t go caroling this year due to the weather and pandemic restrictions, but for years I’ve tried to add a few newer or different carols to the standard repertoire our groups sing – fool that I am. Nope, nope, nope, I’m told. *That* is *not* a song we use for caroling. There’s *Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Hark the Herald, Come Ye Faithful*, *What Child Is This*, *Silent Night*, maybe a couple of others, and, of course, *Joy to the World* (which, oddly enough, is not a song about Christmas but about Christ’s second coming in glory; so why it rates and some others I’ve proposed that actually *are* about Christmas don’t I’ll never understand). But that’s it. *No new carols allowed!*

Okay. That’s a very minor thing. Imagine how hard it would be to accept it if someone told you that you had to fundamentally change just about everything you did in your worship practice and tradition. That would be an awfully hard pill to swallow. But that’s exactly what first century Jews who came to faith in Christ had to do. It’s what the New Testament Book of Hebrews is about. In it the author is telling his fellow Jews that with the completion of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, we’ve entered a new age. Our old forms, our old ways, our old understanding of things – all this must change. Everything we did in worship was a picture, a foreshadow, a rehearsal of things that are now fulfilled by Christ Jesus. Now that he’s done his work for our salvation, we can’t go back to the past. We have to go forward into this new age.

In the little passage we heard from Hebrews today, the writer gets to the very heart of the matter. The center and focus around which all Old Testament worship rotated was the sacrifice of animals: sheep and goats mostly, the occasional calf, and small birds allowed for the very poor; but it was a bloody business. On most days the temple courts in Jerusalem would have looked to our modern eyes more like a slaughterhouse than a place of worship. But this worship that would offend our eyes was commonplace to the Jews back then. They couldn’t imagine worshipping the Lord in any other way. The only authorized way they could approach the presence of the Lord was through bloody sacrifice. They all knew that. It was written in the Scriptures, for goodness sake – written by Moses, the ultimate Law-giver, no less. And now the writer of Hebrews (along with the other Christian apostles and teachers) is trying to tell us otherwise. It doesn’t make sense. I mean, if God doesn’t want our sacrifices then why on earth did he tell us that he did? You see, for these Jews the sacrifices weren’t just a tradition they were resistant to let go of, it was a question of the authority of God’s Word. God told us to sacrifice. It’s what pleases him. How can we stop now?

Thus, in response to this objection, the author of Hebrews goes to the authority of Scripture to show that no, the Lord is not pleased with your sacrifices. Yes, he demanded them. But no, in no way was he pleased by them. Quoting David in the Psalm he cites, “Sacrifices

and offerings you have not desired" and "in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure."

This quotation, no doubt familiar to his Jewish audience, would have given them pause. It would have made them ask, "If the Lord isn't pleased by sacrifices, why did he tell us to offer them?" It's a good question. Virtually all the ancient peoples offered sacrifices; the Jews to the Lord God, and the pagans to their assorted gods and goddesses. But they didn't offer them for the same reason. The pagans did indeed offer sacrifices to please their gods in order to gain their favor or to appease their wrath when they were angry. Either way, it was to get on the good side of their gods. The basic thought was that the people were providing groceries for their gods' feasts on Mount Olympus or wherever it was their gods supposedly hung out.

The sacrifices the Lord God demanded served an entirely different purpose. What pleases the Lord is righteous behavior. He is pleased when we keep and obey his commandments. He likes it when we live and act according to his holy will. The problem is that we don't. We break the Lord's commands. We rebel against him. We think and act contrary to his will. We sin against the Lord and other people constantly. And for these violations we deserve his wrath and just punishment, which is death in time and in eternity – by which I mean eternal separation from him in the flames of hell.

But the Lord in his infinite love and mercy doesn't want to give us what we justly deserve. So, he prepared another way – a way that would to some degree fulfill his Law that decrees "the soul that sins must die", while preserving the sinner's life, and cause the sinner to witness up close and personal the terrible consequence of their sin. Through the ministry of the priests, the Lord said, I'll let you transfer your sins to certain animals, and I will accept its life for yours. The animal will pay the debt of sin you owe. You are to trust me that for the sake of its death on your behalf, I forgive your sins. So, you see the sacrifices weren't offered to please the Lord. They were to show those who had not and could not please the Lord the destructive consequences of their sin and at the same time give them something tangible on which to hang their trust in the Lord's forgiving mercy. In Lutheran parlance, it's a Law and Gospel thing.

As stated earlier, however, these sacrifices – like all Old Testament worship directives – find their fulfillment in Jesus. They are pictures and foreshadows of him and his death for our sin. This is what the author of Hebrews is stressing when he quotes the Psalm: "When Christ came into the world he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me'." We heard a bit about the Lord's preparation of that body in today's Gospel reading. It's the body of Jesus, God's Son, being formed in his virgin mother's womb. Mary is about four weeks into her pregnancy when she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. It means the growing body of the Lord Jesus is at this point about the size of a poppy seed. What will be his head, chest and abdomen can be clearly distinguished, along with four little buds that will grow into his arms and legs. And yet, in that tiny, poppy seed sized speck of humanity, all the fullness of the Godhead is dwelling bodily. This is the mystery of the incarnation: that in Christ Jesus God the eternal Son, begotten of his Father 'ere the world began to be, has become fully human just like us.

The quote from the Psalm continues, "In burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book'." Here we get to the reason for the incarnation of God's Son. The spirit of Jesus, speaking through David, declares it: "I have come to do your will, O God." In his case, this will of God is twofold. First, as stated before, it is God's will that we keep his commandments. We can't; but Jesus, born without the taint of sin, can – and he does. He lives

the perfectly righteous life that pleases God on our behalf. And then, fulfilling the second part of God's will for him, he offers that perfect life as the ultimate sacrifice for the sin of all humankind. Animals can't die for human sins. Those sacrifices only served as illustrations. Only a real human in a real human body can pay that price. But the exchange rate there is one for one. If, on the other hand, that human is also God in the flesh, well, then the exchange rate leaps to an infinite number for one.

This is what the author of Hebrews is driving home to his Jewish audience. Speaking of those things the Jews held central to their worship, he says of the Lord, "He abolishes the first [that is, the sacrifices of animals for sin] to establish the second [the fulfillment of God's will by Jesus]. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus, once for all." Thus to show those reluctant to depart from God's Word on worship, the author uses God's Word to show them that now in this new age that follows the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that they must. To be sure, to continue to offer sacrifices in this new age would amount to a denial of the accomplished work of Jesus on the cross.

Still, it would have been a difficult adjustment. We humans are notoriously resistant to change. We can only hope that by God's grace and the power of his Spirit and Word, these fellow believers came to understand and to see the superiority of the New Testament covenant, and how the all things they used to do in worship are fulfilled in Jesus the Savior. With time and perseverance, they likely did; and with the Christian Church they began to accept and cherish the prescribed practices we hold dear, like Baptism, the Lord's Supper, Confession and Absolution, and the hearing and exposition of God's Word. And also the traditions we follow: the changing seasons of the church year in which we rehearse the life and ministry of Jesus: his Advent, his birth at Christmas, his self-disclosure in Epiphany, his steady march to Jerusalem in Lent, his passion and death in Holy Week, his victorious resurrection at Easter, his Ascension forty days later, and his sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. All these belong to the sacred things of Jesus that we, for the time being, are resistant to change.

But one day we will have to. We are looking forward to yet another new age for the faithful. When that age comes, when Christ our Lord comes again in his glory, our worship will change. There will be no more baptisms. We won't celebrate Lord's Supper as we know it for we will be enjoying the fullness of the feast of salvation. There will be no more confession and absolution. You won't have any sins to confess and so won't need to be absolved. My favorite: there will be no more funerals because death will be no more. In that new age we will not worship Christ our Lord as he comes to us hidden in his Word and Sacraments; but we will see him face to face as we offer him our grateful praise. And like him, we will gladly and perfectly please the Lord by always doing his will – which is that we love him and one another. May God in his mercy keep us in his grace and bring us safely to that new age. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!