

*Hebrews 10:19-25 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,<sup>20</sup> by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,<sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God,<sup>22</sup> let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.<sup>23</sup> Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.<sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.<sup>25</sup> Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

If you were to start from scratch and build a church – money is no object – what would you be sure to include in the design?

I noticed that no one included in their design a death room. And by that don't mean a Fireside Room for funeral visitations. I mean a death room – a room that's all about death.

In these weeks of Lent you are going to hear a lot about Jesus our High Priest. But you're also going to hear a lot about the structure in which a high priest would serve: the original and temporary tabernacle (worship tent) that the Israelites used during their early years, as well as the later, slightly less temporary temples of brick and stone built in Jerusalem.

These places of worship, these houses of the Lord, were designed by him. And when the Lord designs a church you know that it will have everything in it that it should, including...yes, a death room. This room is better known as the Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place.

And what a place - a room set apart to hold the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the Ark were the stone tablets of the 10 commandments, the staff of the Aaron the High Priest (brother of Moses), as well a pot of manna, the food from heaven which sustained the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert. And covering all of these precious items was a lid known as the mercy seat over which gold angels spread

their wings. It must have been spectacular to see.

But unless the people were travelling (when the Ark was carried out front), no one was allowed to see it or even set foot into the room. You see, it was kept in the most Holy Place, a room off-limits to anyone but the High Priest and off limits to the High Priest except on one day of the year, the great Day of Atonement, that day which reminded the people that they were at one with their gracious God.

And yet, if anyone entered the Most Holy Place who shouldn't enter it, they would die. Yeah, like I said, a death room, huh? Yes, the Lord was so serious about this that he designed an inches-thick curtain to cover the entrance to the Most Holy Place to drive home the point that mere human beings like you and me dare not step into his holy presence or we, too, will die.

Now you might think, well, the High Priest got to go into the room once a year and he didn't die. And that's true. If he carried out his duties precisely as the Lord directed on the Day of Atonement, he wouldn't die. But as many of you know, there was still a lot of risk. In fact, we're told that the garments worn by the high priest had bells attached to his robe so that those outside the Most Holy Place knew that the High Priest was still alive while he was in there. And rabbinic tradition records that a rope was tied around his ankle while he was in there so that if something bad happened to him, they could at least drag him out.

Can you imagine going to church on a Sunday not sure if your pastor was going to survive the service? Can you imagine inviting a friend to church? "Hey, George. Want to come to church with me this Sunday? It may be the last time I can introduce you to my pastor." We just read in our text *spur one another on...not giv[ing] up meeting together*. I don't think that's what the writer to the Hebrews had in mind but it sure would give a sense of urgency to our church attendance.

As always, though, through this Most Holy Place, through this death room, the Lord is reminding us of two great truths: 1) What

incredible sinners we are; and 2) What an incredible savior we have.

Like every sinner before us, none of us sinners can enter the presence of our holy and righteous God. The curtain of sin has created a barrier before the door to heaven that not one of us could scale with our own efforts or break down by our own good work or slip past through our own cleverness. The prophet Isaiah has you and me in mind when he says, “***Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear***” (Isa 59:2 Enter the Most Holy place of God? No way!

And yet the writer to the Hebrews crafts astounding words. He writes ***we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place.*** How shocking these words must have been to his first listeners. They knew then just as we know now, there is only one hope to get through that heavy curtain of sin: a high priest.

That one hope was proclaimed every Day of Atonement when the high priest went behind the curtain with the blood of sacrificed animals and sprinkled that blood on the cover of the Ark to cover the sins of the people. Year after year the blood would be sacrificed. Year after year the High Priest would enter the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood before the Lord, knowing that ***without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness.*** (Hebrews 9:22) Year after year the people would be assured of peace between themselves and their Holy God. Yet year after year the curtain stayed in place. The Most Holy Place remained a room of death...all because the one death that truly mattered had yet to take place.

Remember the two great truths? The curtain remained to remind the people of the first great truth 1) What incredible sinners we are. Even after those animal sacrifices were offered it was a reminder to the people that the blood of animals could not give the guilty conscience peace before God or wash away sin's stain. But the ritual also proclaimed the second Great Truth 2) What an incredible savior we have.

God sent his own Son into the world to be the High Priest who would not shed and

sprinkle the blood of another. No, he would shed and sprinkle his own innocent blood to guarantee that blood would never need to be shed for sin again. ***He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.*** (Hebrews 9:12) Because Jesus Christ is Our Great High Priest, the barrier of sin is gone, the curtain removed. Just look at what happened after Jesus cried out from the cross, ***It is finished.*** We're told ***At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Matthew 27:51)***

Yes, my dear fellow redeemed brothers and sisters, because of him ***we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,***<sup>20</sup> ***by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body.*** There is one way to step into the presence of the Most Holy God, by the one and only High Priest, Jesus Christ. His body that once hung on a cross and was raised in glory, proves that Jesus was correct when he proclaimed himself to be ***the Way, the Truth, and the Life—that no one could come to the Father except through him.*** Jesus opens the way, inviting sinners to enter God's presence. ***“Come to me,” he says, “all you who are weary and burdened”*** (Mt 11:28). And he promises, ***“Whoever comes to me I will never drive away”*** (Jn 6:37). And ***as you come to him,*** Peter assures us ***... you also... are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2) Through him we ... have access to the Father by one Spirit.***

What incredible sinners we are.

What an incredible Savior we have.

***Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. Psalm 100***