

The sounds of the temple are more like a barn with hundreds of animals close by to provide for the people. Each and every day the same thing happens. The priest takes the animal the individual provides and kills it. To be humane to the animal he's got the method down that brings death quickly. But he also must be quick. There are probably a hundred more animals to be sacrificed today. Often I'm thinking the priest wondered when the sacrificing might stop.

Thankfully I don't have to offer sacrifices for all of you every day all day. The time needed to do that, the facilities to store them, the facilities to dispose of them, the logistics are a nightmare. But even without animals we still offer sacrifices. We might think the money we throw in the plate is our sacrifice, the time we spend here each Sunday, or our home devotions. Those are the things we do to show God we're worthy of being in his presence.

Today we look to the letter to the Hebrews for guidance. If we think our sacrifices get us right with God we need some. The whole letter to the Hebrews is proof there's something better than the sacrifices of the Jews. Every sacrifice pointed ahead to something. And on this last Sunday of Advent we behold...

**The greater sacrifice is here
A sacrifice like no animal
A sacrifice to make us holy**

As the water kept rising there was no escaping the feeling they hadn't done enough. It seemed no amount of sandbags would stop it. As the water topped the sand wall they realized they'd lost the battle. The floodwaters couldn't be beat. The Jews lived under laws of God that required them to offer sacrifices. Every animal killed was like another sandbag in a wall trying to protect them from their sins and keep them close to God. But they kept committing sins, and the floodwater of their sin kept rising. More sacrifices were made to build the wall higher. But the sins kept coming, so more sacrifices. It was never ending and it seemed no amount of sacrifices would ever be enough.

It was true that God had commanded these animal sacrifices be made. Yet anyone paying attention would realize that these animals weren't really doing anything to actually take away guilt and sin. **"Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them (although the law required them to be made)."** At the same time God held them accountable for each and every sin, he also didn't need the sacrifices. They simply showed that shedding blood was necessary because of sin. Better the animal's blood rather than their own. Yet the people still got the sense that something bigger was coming, something better than all these animals.

As much as we might gripe about the laws we live under, they make it pretty easy to measure how well we're living. If I pay my taxes, don't kill anyone, and don't steal I know I'm being a good citizen. Living under laws allows me to not wonder if I'm obeying or not. It feels natural. Where I'm asked to obey God's laws I naturally think the same things. God must be pretty happy with me if I keep his laws. It must make me a good heavenly citizen. I don't need to go back to animal sacrifices to please God. But trying to work our way into God's good favor is the same thing. Our sacrifices of time and money aren't worth any more than ram's blood or a grain offering.

A river of blood or a mountain of animal carcasses can't add up to the greater sacrifice that's here. He's a sacrifice like no animal because he took on human flesh. **"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me."** Christmas is about Jesus taking on a body so he could do what needed to be done for us. In the body of Jesus the crushing weight of the world's sins would be paid. His body carried the bribes of a charity donation we offered God or the time we thought staying faithful to our spouse earned us points with God. Jesus paid for the sins we didn't even know were sins with his death on the cross.

Now that our eyes have seen Christ we can't go back. We sing with Mary, **"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."** God is my Savior which makes my attempt at sacrifices foolish. We move forward with our eyes fixed on the greater sacrifice. With thankful hearts offerings pour out for church and others in need. Offerings that display a growing faith to the world. We can give more and more away because it's God's gift to us in the first place. We serve others with a deeper love and humility, not because God commands it but because he invites us to show others love as he has showed us in Jesus.

How long was it before the Jews got sick of the sacrifices every day, week, and year? They kept their thoughts centered on the promises God made that someone greater was coming. I don't think though that they thought God would send a really special goat or sheep, or some really great ram or dove. God had more in mind. From the very beginning God's plans were to send someone like us in every way except one. He wouldn't have what causes us such great hurt. He would be without sin. Now this greater sacrifice could make us holy.

If you've made cookies at anytime this Christmas season you probably couldn't help but taste test one or two. Like me maybe you look for one with an especially large amount of frosting and set it aside. That's the special one you'll eat first. Setting aside something and marking it as special is exactly what God's will was for Jesus. In Jesus God **"set aside the first to establish the second."** Animal sacrifices were out and the blood of the greater sacrifice was in. Just like a Christmas cookie set aside as a special treat to enjoy first, so Jesus was set apart and established as the greater sacrifice to make people holy.

Do you think you have what it takes to be holy? Holiness or perfection is what it's going to take to make it to heaven on your own. Maybe you think Christ got things started paying for sin, but every sin you commit every day still needs to be paid for. Is that where you can get involved and help pave your own way to heaven? You think you can balance out the scales and pay down the debt of your sin with a few extra good works. They aren't enough. Those good works couldn't be perfect so they leave you worse off than when you started.

God's end goal was to get people to heaven. He put into motion the method to make it happen. **"By that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."** God's will was that a perfect sacrifice be offered on the cross that would supersede all previous sacrifices made. Jesus presented himself as that sacrifice for sins because his will perfectly aligned with God the Father. Now you and I are set aside as special, marked as holy ones of God because of God's grace. He declared us not guilty before him because of Jesus and the only perfect sacrifice ever made.

Having been declared not guilty of our sins by Jesus' blood we are holy. Holy ones of God wait for his return with patience. We prepare ourselves every day for Christ to appear, returning to the Scriptures for details on what to watch for and how to be ready. We behold the Savior born in Bethlehem and acknowledge this baby will save us by his death. We repent of sins and turn in faith to Christ for forgiveness. Then we respond with gladness and thanks. We serve both God and each other in love.

The animals often were chosen long before they were used for sacrifice. This meant the family grew to love and care for the animal and when it was killed it actually felt like a sacrifice, like something was being taken away. We like to think the money that we give from our paychecks or the not getting a Christmas gift for myself but instead for my kids feels like a sacrifice. But no amount of sacrifice can make up for sin. We need a sacrifice like no animal and one that can make us holy. There's only one who can do that, the greater sacrifice who's here, our Savior Jesus.