

KEEPING THE ROMANCE ALIVE

SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE



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Hebrews 10:19-25

Fifty-fourth Message

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My question for us to ponder this week is this: What is the best gift we can give another human being? Without thinking, most of us would be quick to answer “love” or “relationships.” That is what we say, but perhaps our actions reveal something quite different. As school graduations approach and we consider the amount of time and expense that parents sacrifice for their children, coupled with the acute pressure placed upon students to succeed, perhaps a more accurate answer would be “education.” Yet, the irony is that to achieve the goal, we often miss out on the prize by sacrificing our relationships with our children. It’s important to ask, When our children finally leave home, will they leave with an ache for intimacy?

As a young boy growing up in a household dominated by women, I had a longing to be around older men. Whenever one of my older sisters brought a date home, my heart would leap with excitement. I hoped for just a few moments of his time so that he could throw me a couple of passes with the football or play catch with a baseball before he would leave on his date. These rare moments were sweet memories during my elementary years. Then when I was 11, my mother needed some carpentry work done, and Bob Munson came into my life. With a flattop haircut and sidewall sideburns, this 6' 3" chiseled male was the complete package of a boy’s dream: a buff football player, experienced truck driver, precision cabinetmaker and adventurous fly fisherman and deer hunter, all rolled into one. He had two daughters but no sons, and he invited me to be his helper for his work stay at our home. For two weeks I stuck to his side like glue, fetching his lumber, writing down measurements, spilling his coffee and tripping over his tools. Each morning I would stare out our front window, waiting for his 1956 yellow Ford pickup to come into view. The appearance of that truck was the signal that my world as an 11 year-old was about to change, for when Bob Munson came into our home, my world got very large.

As the work went on I began to dread its completion, knowing that Bob would soon be leaving and my little universe would once again return to the commonplace and mundane. But to my surprise, before the work was finished, Bob told me that he would still come into my world, and better yet, he would take me into his world, the world of outdoor adventure. That summer his yellow pickup truck transported me out of the city, through the Mojave Desert to the Kern River, where Bob taught me how to camp and fish. In the fall he took me deer hunting, which we made an annual routine. After several years of our yearly hunting trek, we never had a shot at a deer, but I didn’t care. I was content just to be with Bob Munson in his world.

I’ll never forget those boyhood memories with the man who chose to enter my world. Bob did not give me money, education or travel; he gave me the very best gift of all, his “presence.” Years later I discovered that this was God’s greatest gift to mankind.

Last week as we examined Israel’s covenant ceremony with God at Mount Sinai we began to understand God’s passion to be “present” with his people. Today we will consider God’s provision of his real presence in the New Covenant, and how we can cultivate that intimacy on a regular basis and keep the romance alive. Our text comes from the letter to the Hebrews.

Though scholars are not sure of this letter’s destination or its author, some suggest that the recipients lived in Rome, where there was a large Jewish population, and where we find the first mention of the letter, by Clement of Rome, in 96 A.D.¹ From the letter itself we learn that the conversion of these former Jews did not come cheaply. Forsaking the legal protection of the synagogue and venturing into illegal house churches, many Jews suffered public ridicule, the seizure of their property and, in some cases, imprisonment (10:32-34). They are commended for such actions, because they knew that they “had better and lasting possessions” (10:34). But as the persecution heightened, many retreated back into the safe, protective shelter of the synagogue rather than risking everything and severing all ties with Judaism by making “an irrevocable commitment to the Christian way.”²

In the face of this retreat, the author of Hebrews solemnly warns them that to go back will be nothing short of spiritual suicide. In order to see the gravity of their choices, and to encourage them to continue to take the high road of suffering (“let us go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore” (13:13), the author brilliantly weaves together a tapestry of compelling arguments to display the absolute superiority of Christ and his work in establishing the New Covenant, over against the former dispensation of Moses and the Old Covenant.

In the opening verses of the writer’s letter, his passion for the glory of Christ rings out with the clarity of a church bell at high noon:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Heb 1:1-4 NIV)

In our text this morning (10:19-25), the writer sets forth the superior “access” which Christ gives us into God’s presence, over against the Old Covenant, and exhorts us to take full advantage of this privilege. This is followed by practical exhortations on how we as a New Covenant community are to cultivate God’s presence on a regular basis:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 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. Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 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. (Heb 10:19-25)

I. The Divine Provision for Access to God's Presence

Heb 10:19-20

A. The Door Is ALWAYS Open

The author tells us that because of Christ's blood that was shed on the cross, the door to heaven is now always open to us. No longer is the privilege to enter into God's presence given to the high priest alone, nor is restricted to a fixed time of the year, under rigorous conditions. But now "by a new and living way" we have obtained permanent access to God, which we are encouraged to avail ourselves of with surprising boldness and unrestrained freedom.

Growing up I took great pride in being "the doctor's son." In the few times I visited my father at his busy office, he would always drop what he was doing and be glad to see me. Once when I was about 10, I entered his office. It was filled with patients waiting to see him, and I boldly marched past his new receptionist without saying a word. As I turned to go down the hallway, she let out a stern rebuke, "Young man, where do you think you're going?" Just then my dad appeared from behind the door. I turned to her and retorted, "I'm the doctor's son!" A bit flustered by the sight of my father, she responded, "My, how you've grown!" In same way as adopted "sons" in Christ, we are granted direct access to the presence of God and are encouraged to draw near with bold confidence.

At the giving of the law at Sinai, holy barriers had to be constructed to protect the people from the fiery holiness of God. These barriers were then replicated in the tabernacle, and later the temple, with a veil that separated the outer court from the holy place, and another separating the inner court from the holy of holies. But when Jesus cried out on the cross, "It is finished," and gave up his spirit, "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matt 27:51), signifying that in the rent body of Jesus, all barriers had been removed and the way of access to God has been thrown wide open.

The veil, which from one point of view kept God and man apart, can, from another point of view, be thought of as bringing them together; for it was one and the same veil which on one side was in contact with the glory of God and on other side with the need of men. So in our Lord Godhead and manhood were brought together. He is the true "daysman" or umpire who can lay his hand upon both because he shares the nature of both. And by his death, it could be added, the "veil" of his flesh was rent asunder and the new way consecrated through it by which man may come to God.³

Therefore, the writer urges us, in contrast to the Old Covenant we need not be timid, fearful or tentative in our approach to God. Now with bold confidence we can approach a holy God, "because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy..." Then he adds, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (10:14, 17-18). Therefore the door will always be open the Father's presence. We don't need an invitation; we don't even need to knock.

B. The Priest is ALWAYS Available

Not only are we given a "new and living way" of direct access to the God the Father, but to enhance our confidence in availing ourselves of this privilege we are told that Christ is seated there, serving in the role as our high priest, who "always lives to intercede" (7:25) for us. Though he is the Son of God, highly "exalted above the heavens" (7:26), we need not shrink back because of his glory or transcendence, because he also, being fully human, was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (4:15), and therefore he is thoroughly capable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, while at the same time giving us grace to endure.

It is difficult to approach and confide in someone who is not empathetic to our weaknesses. In another text the writer of Hebrews reminds us of Jesus' humanity as his rendezvous with death approached and the inner turmoil pushed him to the brink of desperation: "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death" (5:7). He understood to the core of his being what it was like to be horrified by what God requires. And, though he prayed to be spared from death, like so many of those who would follow him he was not saved from death.

The prophet Isaiah gives another look at the inner turmoil of our high priest through the voice of Israel's Suffering Servant. In the second of four songs, the Servant begins by reminding himself of his unique calling: that he will take Israel's role on the stage of history and "restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept" (Isa 49:6). But having spent himself to that end, he gives voice to the tension between God's promise and the reality he observes:

He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel,
in whom I will display my splendor."
But I said, "I have labored to no purpose;
I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing." (Isa 49:3-4)

The two terms "in vain" and "for nothing" are laden with meaning. The first, *tohu*, describes the pre-creative, chaotic state of the earth prior to God's creation (Gen 1:2). The second, *hebel*, is the theme word of Ecclesiastes. It ranges in meaning from "a puff of air," "a breath," "a vapor," to that which is "enigmatic," "absurd," or "meaningless." It is a comfort to my soul to observe how Jesus in his humanity gave voice to the tension that at the end of his life, at least from all outward appearances, the result of his labors looked to be nothing more than a *tohu* and a *hebel* (Mark 14:27). This is great encouragement to those of us who may have felt that the purposes for which we have labored as a husband, wife, parent, worker or servant in God's kingdom may appear to be void of result or meaningless. Yet, we indeed have a high priest who felt the pain more acutely than we will ever know.

Just as the work of Christ on the cross made the Aaronic priesthood and Israel's temple services obsolete, so now it cuts across any teaching that insists we need an ordained priesthood which is set apart to do what Christ has already done, namely to give humanity direct access to God. This is why in the New Testament the term "priest" is never used to describe one who is set aside for leadership in the church, as all believers are "a royal priesthood," who offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5, 9). It is a dangerous thing for leaders to give the impression that the presence of God within the flock is in any way dependent on their presence, or mediated solely by their leadership. And yet the institutional church easily falls into this error on every front, whether manifest in an official priesthood in Catholic or Orthodox settings, or by controlling leaders in Protestant settings who inhibit the ministry of the saints by requiring all to be done under their watchful eye or controlling hand.

Because of Christ's perfect sacrifice the door to heaven is always open and our high priest is always available. If these divine mysteries seem too difficult to comprehend, the writer assures us that their application is not. In three exhortations ("draw near," "remain focused" and "stay connected"), we are given some simple but profound ways we are to cultivate the presence of God here on earth. The good news is that we don't have to wait until we die to experience heaven. Our task is to build colonies of heaven while we are making our pilgrimage here on earth.

II. Cultivating God's Presence Heb 10:22-25

A. Draw Near – the past has been forgiven! 10:22

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. (10:22)

Before we can cultivate God's presence in the present we have to deal faithfully and honestly with our past. Nothing inhibits our ability to draw near to God more than a guilty conscience or shameful heart arising from sinful habits. Thus the writer to the Hebrews urges us to make certain that whenever we approach heaven we enter through the correct doorway – the cross of Christ. That way we will be certain that we are dressed in the proper attire, wearing Christ's robes of righteousness. We should never try and scale heaven's eerie heights wearing the filthy rags of our own good works, or attempt to stand before the throne of God based on our meager promises of renewal or painful pleas of penance. Like Adam and Eve's attempts to sew fig leaves to cover their shame and guilt, these are grossly insufficient to cover our sin. Christ's blood alone is sufficient to cleanse us from all guilt, and we cannot add anything to it. And amazing at it may seem, his blood never loses its power to cleanse, no matter how often we sin.

It is our faith that applies the reality of Christ's blood to bring both inner and outward cleansing, something which was symbolized by "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean" (9:13). The phrase, "having our bodies washed with pure water," may be a reference to the priest's act of bathing himself with water before he placed the undergarments next to his body (Lev 16:4); then he was considered "ritually clean" to enter into the presence of God. The present reality of this water that is more pure and effective than any outward washing is what Ezekiel promised as the powerful cleansing that God promised to perform within his people after he had gathered them from all the nations after their exile: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean" (Ezek 36:25). After this inner cleansing, God said he would then give them a "new heart and a new spirit" (Ezek 36:26) that would enable them to keep God's laws from within. This two-step process of cleansing and renewal is what the Holy Spirit does in the life of every believer. Jesus explained this to Nicodemus as "being born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5) and Paul describes it as "the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5b-6).

Therefore when we approach God, we don't have to deny our sins, hide our sins or rationalize our sins; rather we can freely and openly make a full confession of our sins in all their ugly hues and then leave them where they belong, at the foot of the cross. This is what the writer of Hebrews means by drawing near with sincere hearts, as only the "pure in heart will see God," and "in full assurance," trusting in God's word concerning Christ's sacrifice. If we are worried that a dreaded voice from the past will resurrect a shameful deed and deliver it to the devil to be read in full detail in the heavenly court, the good news is that our high priest will refuse to hear it. With this High Priest as your advocate, you will never be haunted by old voices from the past. All such accusations are inadmissible!

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. (Rom 8:33-34)

So there is nothing in our past that prevents us from drawing near to God if we enter through the shed blood of Christ on the cross. We are clean by virtue of Christ's righteousness, and will never be any cleaner. So the first step to experiencing the presence of God is to draw near to throne of God through the doorway of the cross.

B. Remain Focused – The future is secure! 10:23

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

Before we can focus on the present, we not only need a clean conscience regarding our past, but also a steadfast hope as we face the future. If we are anxious about our future, it will be next to impossible to enjoy the presence of God in the present. So the writer to the Hebrews encourages the Hebrew Christians to remain steadfast, fixing the certainty of their hope in Christ and nothing else.

When Bob Munson promised me that he was going to take me deer hunting in one year's time, that promise ignited my young imagination and changed the outlook of my world. I spent several weekends in Bob's garage, working alongside him as we built a gun box and shortened the stock of my new rifle. While we worked, Bob would "story" me, saturating my imagination with images of our future before it arrived. He explained how he would be at my home in his yellow pickup on a Friday morning in late September precisely at 3 a.m. Then we would travel north through the San Fernando Valley, journey through the Mojave desert, take the turn off at Lake Isabella and drive alongside the Kern River to Johnsondale lumber camp, where we would stop to eat with the loggers. He warned me that these loggers were big, hungry and mean, so if I wanted anything to eat, I had better be aggressive and eat fast, or else they would eat everything in sight. After eating, we would climb up a steep and windy logging road, which dead-ended at a beautiful meadow in the Sequoias. At one end of the meadow stood an old abandoned cowboy cabin, complete with beds and a potbelly stove. This is where we would make our home. At 4 a.m. we would set out on the hunt, hiking without a sound to his favorite spot where an old tree stump and boulder would shield us as we overlooked the deer trail. Bob's stories shaped my imaginative world and allowed me to embrace the future while still living in the present.

In the same way, the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to fix their minds steadfast on their future hope. What does our hope consist of? It is described in various ways, but basically it is the consummation of Christ's kingdom, which Paul calls "the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). And with Christ's appearing will come all the blessings of God's covenantal promises: nothing short of a New Heavens and a New Earth. And the fulfillment of these promises is not based on our faithful obedience to the covenant, as it was with the Old Covenant: "All that the LORD has spoken we will faithfully do!" (Exod 24:7 JPS). In the New Covenant, Christ has taken our place and kept covenant perfectly, therefore the blessings of the covenant are secure and "can never perish, spoil or fade" (1 Pet 1:4).

The recipients of the letter had begun well, but after years of persecution they had lost their focus of the age to come and with it the hope of eternal life. As a result, many had withdrawn from fellowship in the house churches and were retreating to the safety of the synagogues. If they did so out of fear, their fears were well grounded. In the summer of A.D. 64, a fire broke out in the city of Rome: "Of the fourteen districts into which the city was divided, only four were spared; three were completely destroyed and the remaining seven received sever damage. The imperial palace itself on the Palatine hill, was burned out."⁴ Nero placed the blame on the Christians, igniting a fiery persecution throughout Rome and the empire. To be baptized into Christ now meant taking on a death sentence, as F. F. Bruce describes in his *New Testament History*: "Their execution was an occasion for popular entertainment; Nero's gardens were thrown open

for the occasion. According to Tacitus, some were crucified, some were sewn up in the skins of animals and hunted down by dogs, some were covered with pitch and set alight to serve as living torches when darkness fell.”⁵

And yet, even as the world seemed to be spinning out of control by a fiery chaos, the writer to the Hebrews could confidently assert, “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (12:28-29). Even when all the physical evidence in the world seemed contrary, these Christians are encouraged to remain steadfast and focused on a hope that is secure and certain, “for he who promised is faithful.”

Our Lord and High Priest had to learn this through the things he suffered (5:8). Looking back to Isaiah’s second song of the Servant, we find that after the Servant gives voice to his feeling, that he had spent his “strength in vain and for nothing,” he fixes his hope solely on the faithful Lord: “Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God” (Isa 49:4b). As he fixes his hope secure in God alone, his Father grants him a greater vision of his role on earth: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6). May God so enlarge our vision of his purposes that he is preparing for us.

With our past clean and future secure, the writer to the Hebrews now turns our attention to the present, where he exhorts his listeners to stay connected in community, for the time is now!

C. Stay Connected – The time is now! 10:24-25

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 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. (10:24-25)

Sometimes when we long to experience God’s real presence, we dream about being like Moses and fleeing to a secluded mountaintop to seek a life-changing encounter with the holy. Such experiences do happen, but they are rare, and we cannot create or sustain them. What the writer of Hebrews calls us to do instead is to actively regularly engage with a community of believers. This does not simply mean attending a church service and listening to a sermon, but engaging at a more intimate level that so that spiritual gifts are ignited and become channels of the love of Christ to one another. Like the early church, we must place ourselves in an intimate setting where we can take time to know each other and serve each other with the manifold spiritual gifts that Christ has generously endowed us.

As Peter Enns observes, “Musing privately about the metaphysical reality of God and asking abstract theological questions usually does not get us very far. God has set things up so that we see him through the love of others, his church, those whom he as re-created to bear his image.”⁶ How often have you felt the presence of God in a timely word from a friend, a card when you were discouraged or a meal when you were sick?

The term “spur” is a strong one; it means “to provoke.” This suggests that though all believers have the Holy Spirit residing within them, it is easy to drift and to allow that Holy life within to become dormant. As Paul’s words to Timothy reveal, not even leaders are immune from passivity that can arise from weariness or timidity. They also need encouragement to “be filled with the Spirit,” like everyone else.

I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2 Tim 1:6-7)

As the apostle John so clearly states, it simply comes down to love. Whenever we actively engage in community and love one another, the unseen God becomes visible.

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:12)

I would like to conclude this series on the Book of the Covenant with a pastoral exhortation. It is for this very purpose of experiencing the presence of God in a New Covenant community that the elders have unanimously set out to plant a new church in Willow Glenn. It is not our desire to be a mega-church, with more and more spectators listening to a few leaders, but to create a stage where more and more people can use their gifts and another generation of leaders can be discipled in intimate settings. This was the great blessing that came about when PBC Cupertino was founded in 1985, having been sent out by our mother church, PBC Palo Alto. Now after twenty-two years it is time to divide again. More than ever before we need all of you to pray for us and be willing to serve in new ways, as the task seems a bit overwhelming. At this critical time in our church’s history we need to take the words of this letter to heart, and “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...and all the more as we see the Day approaching.” Amen.

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), xxxiv.

² Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, xxx.

³ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 247.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1972), 399.

⁵ Bruce, *New Testament History*, 401.

⁶ Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 505.