

## Going to Church

Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Samuel 4:19-22

Sunday, November 14, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- **Introduction: Our need for the glory of God**

When I began preparing this sermon, I planned to focus on the end of the passage in Hebrews: the part that tells us to be steadfast in gathering together, as is the habit of some, in order to encourage each other, especially as we see the day approaching. The "day" meaning the time that we finally see Jesus face to face. That is usually what I find myself concentrating upon when I read this passage. This time was different. I found that a key motivating factor to coming to church is in the nineteenth verse: "Therefore, brethren, having boldness (or confidence) to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus." This could apply to private worship and prayer, but easily also to corporate gathering as a community to present ourselves to the Lord, that is, to come to church. I find my view of coming to church deepens when I consider what it means to "enter the holiest".

- **"Entering the holiest" in the Old Testament**

### *Fort Knox*

One of the most secure locations that I know is Fort Knox, Kentucky, which houses the nation's gold reserves. It is surrounded by a steel fence, with armed guards. Rumor has it that the grounds are laced to land mines. The building is made of granite and concrete and the guards are sharpshooters with orders to shoot first and ask questions later. Getting into Fort Knox would be exceedingly difficult and few ever get the opportunity.

### *The Holy of Holies*

In the Old Testament, first as part of the Tabernacle when Israel wandered, and later as the heart of the Temple in Jerusalem, the

Holy of Holies had a reputation similar to Ft. Knox. In it included the Ark of the Covenant and access was extremely limited. Every generation of Israeli men had a priesthood (and only men, so women are already excluded) and of all those priests there was one head priest. That priest, the head priest, with very careful preparation and sacrifices for his sins, would enter the Holy of Holies to sprinkle the blood of sacrifice on the Mercy Seat in the center of the Ark of the Covenant and every action and word would be scripted and rehearsed to make sure that he made no mistake. Mistakes could be fatal. Being anyone other than the High Priest in that location could be fatal, and even the High Priest could only enter once a year during the Day of Atonement. If he entered at any other time, it could be fatal. I've read that the other priests tied a stout cord around the ankle of the High Priest before he entered the Holy of Holies and it was for two reasons. First, the Presence of God would be so wonderful that the High Priest would never want to leave and might have to be pulled out of the site once he was finished. Second, if he made a mistake and fell dead, no one could go in to carry him out without risking his own life. Few, if anyone, would even dream of entering the Holy of Holies. It was Israel's point of contact with heaven. It was the most sacred place on the planet. The Glory, the Presence of God, was in the Holy of Holies.

- **You must have the Presence**

This was why the events recorded in 1 Samuel 4:19-22 were such an unmitigated disaster. The only way that the enemies of Israel could take the Ark of the Covenant away was if the Presence of God left, as judgment against the sins of the people. There was no survival without the Presence of God and, as far as the people in that passage were concerned, the Presence was gone. Jesus said that their attitude was correct when He maintained that without Him we could do nothing, but with Him nothing was impossible. We have to have the Presence of God.

- **Take another look at verse nineteen**

So, with that as background, let's take another look at verse nineteen. It mentions "entering the Holiest", and Hebrews 9:3 makes it clear that the writer is referring to the Holy of Holies, that same Holy of Holies that allowed only the High Priest to enter once a year. The Holy of Holies that represented the very Presence of God, without which life would be impossible. That Holy of Holies. But it does mention the ability of Jesus to enter the Holy of Holies, rather, it mentions us. We are the ones to have boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus. It is hard for me to imagine the gravitas this truth brings to prayer and to worship, to going to church. When we pray, when we gather for worship, we enter the Holiest. Since we have never actually seen this, it is hard to imagine, but try. Try to imagine being able to simply march into the most sacred of locations, encouraged to do so by the Lord Jesus, who is already there waiting for you. From the perspective of Jesus, this is what we do when we pray and when we worship together. From our perspective, it seems all so simple and often a matter of routine. From Christ's perspective, we enter into the very Holy of Holies when we gather to worship and to pray.

- **Applications**

*Going to church is a life-changing privilege*

One application is to try to use your imagination to view gathering for worship from the perspective of our Savior, to see it as the march into the Holiest, the most sublime of privileges. Quite different from our perspective, I concede, but that is what this verse says. I've noticed that this truth, this sublime contact with the infinite, shows up in people's attitude and stories. Having worked as a spiritual care volunteer here in Marshalltown and as a student chaplain in Toledo, Ohio, it is amazing how many people who don't go to church and don't express any deep devotion to Jesus Christ will welcome prayer

in times of trial. For all the people who stay away from church in this day and age, prayer chains thrive across the country. People have an intuitive sense that prayer is valuable.

*The habit of going to church changes people*

Another application is that going to church changes people for the better. I remember one man's story probably because I've heard several others that were similar. He was not raised in a family that ever bothered with church and, as an adult, sort of stumbled in a small Lutheran church in Ohio. Not really knowing why, he continued to go and when asked why, he mentioned that he had changed. Not overnight, but over time he became less stressful and anxious. His anger issues diminished. Situations and issues that used to overwhelm him did not do so any more. I've heard many variations of that story. In a profound sense, we enter the Holy of Holies in worship and in prayer and we cannot come out quite the same as when we went in.

- **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the ancient High Priest in Jerusalem entered into the Holy of Holies, alone, only once a year. Because of Jesus, His death on the cross and His Resurrection, we dare to enter the Holy of Holies every time we pray, every time we gathering in this Sanctuary to worship. That is Christ's perspective of what we do here, and we will spend eternity pondering the wonder of the great privilege of going to church to pray.