

For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own.²⁶ Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.²⁷ Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:24-28)

Is Once Enough?

Is once enough? Last week, one of our teachers let me sample a bacon and maple cookie. I think one time will definitely be enough for me. When I was at the seminary, I ran a marathon. I spent well over a year training for it and I always hoped to do it again, but at this point in my life, I don't think my knees and ankles could take it. So one time is going to have to be enough. When I was in the army, I once went white water rafting on a mountain river in Austria. I always wanted to do it again, but it was probably twenty-five years before I had another chance. We did it last summer with our kids in Tennessee. Once wasn't really enough for me. Sometimes in our lives, once is enough. But often, it isn't. When it comes to Jesus, the Word of God that we have before us this morning tells that twice, that he only came once. **Is once enough?**

I.

For Jesus, it absolutely is. **One time was enough to do away with sin.** That's what the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus appeared to do. But how it gets there might be a little confusing. The reading starts by saying that Jesus did not enter a man-made sanctuary, rather he entered heaven and appeared in God's presence. It goes on to talk about the Jewish high priest entering the Most Holy Place every year with the blood of sacrifices. What is it talking about? A Jewish holiday that we know as Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

To understand that holiday, you have to understand the way God set up their worship facility. Our church borrows from it. We have what is sometimes called a "two room" sanctuary. There's the part where you sit, which is called the nave and there's this part up here behind the communion rail, which is called the chancel. Those are the two rooms. The Jewish tabernacle and later the temple was a three room sanctuary. There was the outer courtyard where they offered sacrifices on a large bronze altar. Many hundreds of people could stand there. There was an inner room called the Holy Place. There was an altar in there for incense and candle stands and various other things, something like what we have in the chancel. Only the priests could go in there. Then there was another room called the Most Holy Place. The Ark of Covenant was in there. The lid to the Ark was called the Atonement Cover. It was made of gold and had golden angels whose wings almost touched on top of it. God taught his people to think of him as hovering over that Atonement Cover. So coming into the Most Holy Place was like coming into the very presence of God. So only the high priest could go in there and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

All that was a picture of Christ. That's the point this morning. Jesus never went into the Most Holy Place in Jerusalem. He never actually even went into the Holy Place because he was not a priest. The farthest he ever got in that man-made structure was the courtyard that everyone else went into when they offered sacrifices. But that man-made sanctuary was a model of heaven. Jesus did enter heaven to offer to God the life that he sacrificed on the cross to pay for our sins. When did he do that? When he said on the cross, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit."

Jesus died for us. Every Old Testament sacrifice pointed to that fact. But there were two crucial differences. First of all, in every Old Testament sacrifice, certainly on every Day of Atonement, the high priest offered "**blood that [was] not his own,**" as our reading puts it. He didn't spill his own blood to go in. He killed a lamb. So, if you count the lamb as a person, there were two people involved. When Jesus offered his life and then went into the true presence of God to give that payment to his Father, there was only one person. He himself was the priest and he was the sacrifice. Remember how it all played out: the Jewish leaders didn't want to crucify Jesus during the Passover. But that was God's chosen time. So Jesus made it happen. Finally, no one actually killed Jesus. He gave up his spirit. He died when he was ready to die. The other two men who

were crucified with him lived for hours after that and had to have their legs broken to speed up the process. But Jesus was already dead. He himself offered his own life to pay for our sins.

There was one other crucial difference: Jesus only sacrificed himself once. There were roughly fifteen hundred Days of Atonement between the time God commanded this festival at Mt. Sinai and the day Jesus laid down his life for us there. Over and over again, the Jews offered sacrifices for their sins – and that’s not counting the thousands of other bloody sacrifices they offered every year. But we never offer a sacrifice for sin here. We never kill an animal. We never offer any kind of payment to God for sin here, because Jesus did it once, and now it’s done. It’s over. We are paid for.

The book of Hebrews says, **“But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.”** This sentence contains all kinds of things that are counterintuitive. In other words, they’re the opposite of what we would expect to be true. Life is full of things like that. For instance, is the sun closer to the earth during winter or summer? You would expect it to be summer, but the earth is actually closer to the sun during the winter. It’s just that the angle that the sun’s light and heat hits us at is more direct in the summer, so it’s warmer. That’s counterintuitive. It’s not what you would expect to be true.

Nothing about Jesus is what a human being would expect to be true. He appeared in Bethlehem when the Son of God was born as human child from the Virgin Mary. When the time was right, he was nailed to the cross outside of Jerusalem. On our own, no human being would expect that one death, one time would be enough to pay for all sin for all time. We expect that we have to balance off our sins with good deeds. Some churches try to make communion an unbloody sacrifice that pays for sin. But that’s not the point. Again and again, I hear people say that someone deserves to be forgiven. How can you deserve to have someone take away the punishment that you deserve? That’s just nonsense. But it stems from the idea that we can and must pay for our sins. But we can’t and we don’t have to. That sacrifice on the cross, which Jesus laid at his Father’s feet when he entered heaven, that sacrifice pays for you and for me and for all people who will ever live. It paid for the things you’ve said and done today that you already regret. It paid for all those things that you wish you could forget that still make you feel guilty. It paid for the sins that you dread tomorrow, the things that you wish you could break free of, the failures you know will come. Jesus died and paid for it all.

He did that at the end of the ages. What does that mean? It means that when Christ came, the last chapter of this world’s existence began. We’ve lived our whole lives in that last chapter, in what we can honestly call “the end times.” Now, two thousand years after Jesus died makes it seem like this has to be a different age. How can the end drag on for so long? But all this is God winding up this world. Judgment Day is right around the corner. And when it comes, we will all have to stand before the Lord. But because Jesus sacrificed himself, all our sin is gone. We will rejoice when that day comes.

II.

In 1962, John Glenn became the first American to achieve full orbit around the earth. That was his one space flight until 1998 when he was 77 years old and he flew again in the space shuttle. I imagine that for most of those thirty plus years, it seemed like once was going to have to be enough. But clearly, he wanted another shot at it. Is that the way it is for Jesus? He appeared once and left but he wants another shot at it? Not exactly. Jesus appeared once to die. He will not do that again, but he is going to make another appearance here, again to do something that will only happen once. **Is once enough?** Again, the writer to the Hebrews makes clear that it is. **One time is enough to bring salvation.**

The writer says, **“Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”** When Jesus appears on Judgment Day, it will be quite different from the first time he came. He won’t come in a manger. He won’t come as a baby. He won’t come with all his glory hidden so that angels had to tell the shepherds who and what that child was. This time, he will come in glory. This time, he will come at the head of the army of angels. And this time, he will come to judge, not to die.

But his purpose will still be the same. The first time Jesus came, he came to win salvation for us. The second time he will come to bring to us what he won. Yes, there will be judgment. All mankind will be gathered together. The dead will rise and the living will join them. The books will be opened and the believers and the unbelievers will be separated. The unbelievers will be condemned to eternal hell. But none of that is the real point of that day. Those are all things that have to happen so that the real point can happen: we will

enter eternal life. The heavens and the earth will be remade. All sin and sorrow will be wiped away forever. Our bodies will be transformed. They will be young and perfect. And most important of all, all sin will be erased from our hearts. We will truly be perfect and holy. And we will live with Jesus forever. We will see him face to face. We will rejoice in his love and sing his praises forever and ever and ever.

Jesus is coming to bring salvation. Right now, that salvation is a promise. It's bought and paid for, to be sure. But we still live in a scary world, where parents have all kinds of deep seated fears for their children, where all the signs of the end like wars and earthquakes and famines and floods chill our hearts. We still live in a painful world where sickness takes a toll and families have problems and marriages end. We still live in a divided world where political parties can't agree and nations can't get along and neighbors sometimes hate each other. We still live in a broken world where sinners die and sometimes it's a relief. In this world, salvation is ours, but it's like buying a car for a fourteen year old and storing it the garage until the kid has a driver's license. It's there. It's real. It's even his. But he can't take it out for a spin yet. Salvation is ours. It's there. It's real. But until we see Jesus, we cannot experience it. Even after we die and go to heaven, when all sin and suffering are done, even then we won't have all of it, because our bodies will still be down here rotting in the grave in this scary, broken, sinful world.

Only when Jesus comes do we get everything that God has been promising us all our lives. But when he comes, we do get it all. For you and me, Judgment Day is a day of joy. Do we think of it that way? So often, when we think of the end of the world, we think of all those scary things that Jesus said would happen in the end times. But recognize what Jesus was telling us. All that scary stuff comes first! It all comes now, in the end times. Judgment Day is when the scary stuff stops, for us at least. Judgment Day is when Jesus calls us holy and invites us into his kingdom. It's the day when we are at last free from everything that ever hurt, when every scar in our hearts and every terrible memory is healed. It's the day when we become perfect in every way.

We have all that because of Jesus. Because he did that amazing, counterintuitive thing, and he lived and died in our place. He paid and God accepted it. He was perfect and God calls us perfect. He came once and put an end to all searching, all sacrificing, all our desperate efforts to somehow make ourselves right with him. He came and we are free. And he only had to do it once. To put that greatest treasure into our hands, he only has to come back once. He is coming. Amen.