

Stirring Up

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[0 : 00] Our sermon text for today is Hebrews 10, 19-25 that Claire just read for us. It's a pivot point and something of a summary point in the book of Hebrews.

Back in chapter 4, the writer began this very long argument with the words, since then we have a great high priest, let us hold fast our confession. And then they spend the next six chapters explaining what that means, to say Jesus is our great high priest, the one who welcomes us into God's presence.

And all of that wraps up here in 10-21 with the repetition of what we heard in chapter 4. So if you've got a pew Bible with you, it would be helpful to turn to that. That's page 1007, I believe.

So, the chapters immediately after this pivot, they focus on the life of faith that responds to the good news of what Jesus has accomplished as our high priest.

So in this short passage, we've actually got two sections. The first section, verses 19-21, it summarizes what we have in Christ. We can call that holy habitation, the benefits of relationship with him through his life, death, and resurrection.

[1 : 13] The second section, verses 22-25, we're going to call those holy habits. We get three exhortations to faithful living. Let us draw near, let us hold fast, let us consider.

And that's precisely the right order of things. Because God reveals himself, we respond. Holy habitation, being in God's presence, leads to holy habits.

So we start at the start. What do we have in Christ? Now, if you look at verses 19-21, two things jump out. We have confidence to enter the holy places, and we have a great priest ministering over those holy places.

Now, what exactly does that mean? We'll come at it with an illustration. Some years back, I was living in Germany. And near the end of my time there, I decided to do a bicycle tour along the Danube.

I thought it would be a nice way to wrap things up. The trip started wonderfully in the foothills of Swabia, and I progressed into the rolling hills of Bavaria. I got to see the cathedral at Regensburg, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

[2 : 25] I ate massive pieces of schnitzel. At one point, I crossed the border into Austria at Passau, and the weather took a terrible turn for the worse.

I got three days of riding, ten hours a day, in torrential downpour in the middle of July. It was quite disheartening. And I can remember very vividly, on one particular day, I came to a city called Linz, and I decided to make a stop at a coffee shop that had been recommended to me.

So I found the shop, I locked up my bike, I secured my bags, and I stepped into the cafe. And as soon as I opened that door, I immediately felt out of place.

It was an old-world, turn-of-the-century cafe. If you know Austrian coffee culture, you'll be able to see it right in your mind. Big mirrors, an elaborate bar, waitstaff wearing bow ties and those funny little arm things, marble tables, velvet upholstered chairs.

It was ridiculous. And there I was, hair down to my shoulders, scruffy, unkempt beard, six days past a proper shower because I'd been sleeping in fields. I was so wet when I stepped, my shoes squelched against my socks.

[3 : 33] And my first thought was, well, I should probably leave. I don't really want to impose on these nice people. But then to my shock, the head waiter came and he said, what can I do for you, sir?

And I replied, well, I suppose I'd like a piece of linsertorta and an espresso. Now, linsertorta, if you don't know, is this lovely short cake with nuts and spice and raspberry jam.

It's delicious. And he said, of course, please take a seat. We'll bring it right to you. And I said, well, as you can see, I'm a bit wet.

I don't want to ruin the upholstery. I can just eat outside. And he said, I'll never forget this. Ja, das macht nichts. Bitte nehmen Sie Platz. Which is to say, don't worry about it.

Take a seat. So I sat with a damp squish. I removed my helmet and I waited quietly for my order. It was, without a doubt, the most uplifting, enjoyable, delicious piece of cake I have ever eaten.

[4 : 38] And as I sat and enjoyed my break from the rain, I realized not only that I had been welcomed into this fine establishment, but that I belonged. Nobody there regarded me as an imposition, straining the limits of their hospitality.

No one looked at me sideways. I got the exact same service as every other patron. And when I got up and left my puddle to pay my bill, the staff quietly removed my chair and replaced it with a dry one, without a word.

And I went back out into the rain with a smile in my heart. Now that is a pretty remarkable example of Austrian hospitality.

But it is only a shadow of the heavenly welcome which the great head waiter, Jesus Christ, invites us into. And that is a remarkable statement.

Because, of course, the place we are talking about is no mere coffee shop. Jesus invites us into the holy of holies, the very presence of God.

[5 : 43] Though God is absolutely holy, and though we are wretched sinners with much more to worry about than muddy bike shorts, because of what Christ has done, we don't need to come to God on eggshells, wondering if we're straining his good graces, or mucking the place up with our less than perfect pasts.

We have confidence, says Hebrews, to enter by the blood of Jesus, the new and living way, our hearts having been sprinkled clean, our bodies washed with pure water.

We've been cleansed of everything that separates us from God in Christ. And I think it's also really significant the writer doesn't say we can have confidence, or we should have confidence, as though it's kind of this feeling you just sort of muster up in yourselves, just be really confident.

Rather, we have it to enter into God's presence. It's an objective reality grounded by what has been done. In English, if you want to draw this out a little more, maybe we could say, since we have the privilege to enter the holy places.

It's not a perfect translation, but it kind of gets at something there that we don't always associate with the word confidence. Confidence is given, established by the blood of Jesus. A few verses earlier in the chapter, the writer puts it this way.

[7 : 14] Verse 14, For by a single offering, he, that's Jesus, has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. All those who are being sanctified, all those being transformed into the person God wants them to be, have already been perfected.

It's done. By Christ's sacrifice of himself once offered, in this we have confidence. confidence. And because of this confidence, we can have confidence that even if we don't feel confident, we can nonetheless enter confidently.

Now, maybe that sounds like an overly subtle mouthful of words. What I mean to say is this. We cannot come to God trusting in our confidence.

We receive confidence by looking to Christ, trusting in his welcome, learning to live into the reality of that welcome. As a lived experience, this is a tricky and mysterious thing, difficult to embrace.

But it is the very dynamic of God's lavish grace. It means, for example, we can truly and genuinely repent of our sins and be restored. What is repentance if not the confidence that we can return to the very presence of God in spite of having opposed his good and perfect will?

[8 : 50] When I sat in that Austrian coffee shop, I had very little confidence apart from the welcome of the head waiter. And then as I sat and came to experience the reality of his welcome as the master of the shop, I grew in my confidence until I recognized that actually I fit right in.

which is why this confidence the writer of Hebrews speaks of runs parallel to that other thing we have in this passage.

Verse 19, we have confidence. Verse 21, we have a great priest. We have confidence to enter. We have a great priest. Now, the writer of Hebrews just spent six chapters, chapters 4 to 10, explaining exactly what it means to say Jesus is a high priest.

So there's lots of rich theology hiding behind this statement. We won't get into most of it now. But by way of overview, here are some nice sound bites from the preceding chapters.

Chapter 4, verse 15, Jesus is the priest who sympathizes with us in our every weakness, tempted in every way and yet without sin. Chapter 5, verse 9, he's the perfect priest, the source of salvation for all who obey him.

[10:15] He is, 726, holy, innocent, unstained, exalted above the heavens. 912, by the sacrifice of his own life, he, our high priest, secures eternal redemption, which purifies our conscience to serve the living God.

And then 1014, by this single offering, he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. This is our great high priest. And therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ, since we have this great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith.

This is, in a word, the gospel. Jesus has achieved what we could not as the perfect mediator he welcomes us in, into God's presence.

And so that's the first exhortation or the first holy habit that we live into in verse 22. Because of this high priest who has cleansed us, we are invited to draw near to God's presence.

To make it a rhythm in our lives. Now, before we move on to the second habit, I think it'd be good to say a few things about that phrase drawing near.

[11:37] It's a major theme in this book to the Hebrews. We find it in six passages, including ours today. And behind it, behind this phrase, is the image of ancient Israel's temple where the people of God enjoyed his presence.

God would descend down to a specific place in crazy apocalyptic imagery, clouds and lightning and smoke and trumpets, the holy places, the place where God's presence dwelt.

God would descend there and he did it to bless his people. But the writer here in Hebrews isn't describing the temple in Jerusalem. If we go to the end of the book, you don't have to turn there, I'll just read it for us.

Chapter 12, we read this, For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest. Rather, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to heavenly Jerusalem.

This temple or this holy place, we can't touch it. We can't see it. And that's because it's a heavenly place. To use Jesus' language in the Gospel of Matthew, it's the kingdom of heaven.

[12:55] So it's not here materially and yet paradoxically all the same, it is. Jesus teaches in Luke, the kingdom of heaven is not coming in ways we can observe, but instead, the kingdom of heaven is among us or within us at our fingertips.

it is the power of God at work in the world, which means that it is always possible to draw near to God's presence.

This is an incredible privilege. In Psalm 27, David wrote, One thing I've asked of the Lord that I may seek after, to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.

Because of Jesus, we can do this every day, every moment, wherever we are.

And in fact, because of our great priest Jesus, it means our lives as his followers are meant to be spent practicing his presence. As many priests mimicking our great high priest, we learn to enter into the kingdom where we are, to take it with us wherever we go, to invite others into it wherever they might be, as we wait for that great day when he returns, bringing it in all its fullness.

[14:28] And that precisely is why we have the third holy habit in verse 24. we read this, let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another all the more as you see the day drawing near.

So because we are all learning to live into God's presence, because the spirit gives all of us different gifts, we actually need each other for the task of sanctification, when God makes us into the people he desires us to be.

That's why we meet on Sundays for worship, gather with other Christians for Bible study, for prayer, for fellowship, why we undertake missions together, partner in evangelism.

It's so we can encourage one another and stir each other up to love and good works. Now, I don't know about you, sometimes when I hear that phrase love and good works, I'm cynically tempted to think of fake smiles and contrived piety, gatherings that pretend at perfection, you know, shiny, happy Christians.

Thankfully, though, that is not what is going on here, that phrase, consider how to stir one another up. The stirring up is actually describing a very heated situation.

[15 : 57] It's the same word in Greek that we find in Acts 15 when Paul and Barnabas have a falling out and part ways. It's a word associated with irritation, sharp provocation, spirited disagreement.

You don't just sit there, you get in their face. Right? So, too often, I think, and I say this about myself personally as well, as a confession to you all, too often, we tend to think of discipleship as a mild and generally painless process, rather than a cross-shaped denying and dying to self, which demands everything from us.

Stirring one another up to love and good works can be messy, confrontational, uncomfortable, imperfect. It involves coming to terms with our collective sinfulness and rooting it out.

We could put it another way. how do you guys feel about group projects? They're the worst, right? They're awful.

Every time, it's just a source of irritation. You have to compromise. People are lazy. You're sending emails at two in the morning saying, are you ready for the presentation tomorrow? And yet, the church is the biggest, messiest group project we will ever know.

[17 : 32] And the people in that project, they suck. And they get under our skin. No, I like you guys, but...

But even then, we need to remember these people are beloved of God, gifted by his Holy Spirit. because even though every follower of Jesus has been perfected, we are still being sanctified.

Together, we are still learning to practice the presence.

And that sober reality brings us to our final habit, which is actually the second habit in the passage, if you were paying attention. I played around with the order just for fun.

Now, that first Holy Habit was, let us draw near into God's presence. We have confidence in Jesus because of our great High Priest. The second Holy Habit was, let us consider the necessity of life together as church.

[18 : 38] We finish now with verse 23, the third Holy Habit. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering because he who promised is faithful. Because life is messy, because we are messy, because we are all learning to enter into God's presence, we need an anchor to hold us fast in the storms of life, amid all the very real tribulations which rise up and seek to overwhelm us.

And that anchor is nothing less than the hope of God's faithfulness, the fact that he makes good on his promises, which we know because he sent Jesus, which we look forward to in Advent for his second coming.

This is precisely why, for example, we say the creed at every service. We hold fast the confession of our hope. We say it out loud to remind ourselves and each other to drill it into our bones.

This is what we believe. What we hold to in the midst of turmoil, conflict, uncertainty, death, chronic illness, societal evils that are so big you can't even comprehend them.

And this confession doesn't just face inwardly towards us. We don't just say it to ourselves. It has an outward dimension as well, I think.

[20 : 05] We confess our hope in the faithfulness of God and when we do that we are also professing our hope in the faithfulness of God, saying it out loud to a world in desperate need of hope.

Because of Christ we can hold fast to this confession of hope. Because of Christ we consider how to stir one another up to love and good works.

Because of Christ we are invited to draw near the throne of grace and have been welcomed by our great high priest. because of him we can boldly pray this Advent call together.

Stir up your power O Lord and with great might come among us and as we are sorely hindered by our sins from running the race that is set before us let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us through Jesus Christ our Lord to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be honor and glory now and forever.

Amen.