

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is Reformation Sunday, when we remember and celebrate the history of the Reformation of the church by the Lutheran Reformers. What was the deal all about? It wasn't about knocking the Pope off his throne. It wasn't about pushing through some new understanding of Christianity. At its core, it sought to correct a misunderstanding of the Greek word for repentance that St. Jerome translated into his Latin bible using the word "penance," which meant "do repentance." Jerome made this translation around 380 AD. By Luther's time that Latin word had changed its meaning from "do repentance," signifying a change of heart, to "do an act of repentance." This change of meaning led to the church teaching that you had to do some act in order to be forgiven. You could take a pilgrimage, view relics, say Hail Mary's and Our Fathers, give money, etc. The amount of forgiveness was commensurate with the magnitude of what you did. Luther said this was hogwash, and that it drove otherwise good Christians into despair. They would always be wondering if they had done enough. They always felt guilty and unworthy. They could never feel confident that God loved them, forgave them, or accepted their prayers and praise. We can see Luther's emphasis on this misunderstanding in the first of his 95 thesis he posted on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517:

When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ``Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. Martin Luther - Thesis One

Luther taught the only way to God's forgiveness was to have a change of heart, admit we are sinners, implore God's grace for Jesus' sake to forgive us, and sincerely intend to amend our sinful life. This idea was like a match that lit a fire that is still burning in the church 504 years later! And today's sermon on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus chapter 16 could not have come at a better time, because it illustrates exactly what Luther was talking about so many years ago. The Day of Atonement was a National Day of Repentance for all Israel. Let's take a look at what this is all about.

After Moses and Aaron had gotten things up and running with the tabernacle and the work of the priests, something terrible happened.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Leviticus 10

When we wonder why not all people can attain to heaven after they die, this is a pretty good picture. God is most holy. Nothing unholy, impure, or unclean can enter his presence. Nadab and Abihu were not properly prepared to come before the Lord. They were burned to a crisp.

What will be the fate of those who stand before the most holy creator who are not properly prepared to meet him? Leviticus chapter 16 and its New Testament fulfillment give a very clear picture of how this works, hellfire and all.

After this defilement of the sacred space, resulting in the death of two of Aaron the high priest's four sons, the Lord added a new ritual - the Day of Atonement. This special ritual took place on the sabbath day of the seventh (sabbath) month. Its purpose was to cleanse the sanctuary of the Lord after its defilement by Nadab and Abihu, and also cleanse the people from their collective guilt. Aaron, the high priest, was the central figure in the rituals for the Day of Atonement. First, Aaron offered a bull in a sin offering for himself and his household, including his priestly sons. He took some of the blood and entered the inner room of the tabernacle and sprinkled the blood on the Ark of the Covenant. The top of the Ark was known as the mercy seat, the place where the Lord placed his presence. This blood was now Most Holy. Next, Aaron offering the sin offering for the people. He also took the blood from that offering into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled it on the mercy seat. This blood was now also Most Holy. Aaron now took some of the blood from these sin offerings and sprinkled it on the tent of meeting. The tent of meeting had two rooms. The first was the sanctuary with the altar of incense and other articles. The second inner room was the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies. Then Aaron took some of the sin offering blood and put it on the altar of burnt offering. The Most Holy blood thus cleansed the tent of meeting and the altar of burnt offering from the impurities the Israelites had brought upon them.

With the worship space now restored, the attention turned to the people. Aaron placed his hands on the head of a goat and confessed the sins of all the people of Israel. The goat was taken out into a very inaccessible place in the wilderness, to the place of Azazel, the place of Satanic demons. With this ritual of the scapegoat, the sins of the people were taken as far away from the Most Holy Place as possible.

After the sanctuary and the people were purified by these rituals, Aaron then made the burnt offerings for himself and the people. These offerings made atonement for his sins and the sins of the people. On this day, everyone in the nation was to take a position of repentance.

For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins. It is a Sabbath of solemn rest to you, and you shall afflict yourselves; it is a statute forever. Leviticus 16

And the priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father's place shall make atonement, wearing the holy linen garments. He shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins." Leviticus 16

This statute of the Day of Atonement where the most holy priest engaged in the most holy rite with the most holy animals and the most holy blood at the most holy place on the most holy day of the year so Israel could have access to God in his grace applied each and every year ... until Jesus.

With Jesus, Good Friday is the once and final Day of Atonement for God's people. Remember how on this day only the high priest entered the most holy place in the tabernacle to access God? Remember what happened on Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified?

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. Matthew 27:51

The point God made here is clear. Access to the Father's presence is no longer limited to the high priest on the Day of Atonement. God is now available in his favor for all Jesus' disciples every day. However, in order to access the Most Holy Lord, you have to be purified and clean. Remember Jesus' words to his disciples that one day?

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. John 15:3

Receiving the words of Jesus here in church, in our prayer lives, and as embodied in baptism and Holy Communion, we are made clean, and can enter into the presence of the Most Holy Lord. Not only does the word of Jesus make us clean, but Jesus is also himself the place where we access God's grace and favor. Paul confirms this truth in Romans chapter three.

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God presented as the mercy seat by his blood, to be received by faith. Romans 3:22-25

Most translations say God presented Jesus as a propitiation as we saw in other passages a few weeks ago. However, the original uses a different word than the one translated as *propitiation*. It uses a different word best translated as *mercy seat*. This gives us a much clearer picture of what Paul is trying to say. We are all sinful, unclean, and therefore unprepared to come into God's presence without great harm. In the Old Testament, the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies, (whose curtain was torn in two on Good Friday) and sprinkled blood on the mercy seat – the top of the Ark of the Covenant. This brought God's forgiveness, cleansing, and favor. Paul says Jesus is now the mercy seat, where we go for forgiveness, cleansing, and favor. Not only is Jesus the place for our atonement, he is also the high priest who sprinkles his own blood on us and makes us clean.

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf. Hebrews 6:19-20

This thought continues in chapter nine:

... he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:12

As it says right here, Jesus' offering of himself on the cross is a one-time, once-for-all sacrifice whose benefit lasts into eternity. Let's put everything together we have this far. On Good Friday Jesus offered himself as the once and final sacrifice for our sins, his word and his blood cleanse us from our impurities and sin, he is the high priest who officiates at the ritual, and finally Jesus is the mercy seat where we have access to the presence of God in his grace. There is at least one more thing that is very important in comparing Jesus with the Day of Atonement. Jesus is also the scapegoat. The high priest put his hands on the head of the scapegoat, confessed all the sins of Israel onto the goat, then it was taken out as far away from there as possible, into the outermost wilderness to the place of demons. In the scriptures we learn that Jesus, like the scapegoat, is the one upon whom all our sins were laid.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, 1 Peter 2:24

All our sins were placed upon Jesus. Bearing our sin, he went out into the place as far away from God as possible – into the wilderness of hell, the place of demons. This is the meaning of Jesus' cry from his cross:

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew 27:46

Jesus is both our sin offering and our scapegoat. Between the two, we are totally cleansed and all guilt is removed from us. We are free to approach God in Jesus Christ, assured of his favor, and we can ask his help and blessing for ourselves and for others.

This is the message of grace and favor that was at the heart of the Lutheran reformation of the church. Jesus is our all in all when it comes to our forgiveness, access to God's grace, and hope of the eternal blessed life in the new heavens and earth where righteousness dwells. God give you his Spirit of truth that, like the Israel of old, you come to him in repentance and humility, seeking and receiving his mercy from Jesus Christ, whose Good Friday fulfilled everything the Day of Atonement attained to, and more. Amen.

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Note: These sermons are usually updated between the time of this printing and Sunday mornings. For an updated version of these sermons, visit christlutheranfhh.org.