

November 15, 2009

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 15: 33-39

“The Veil is Torn in Two”

Back in Old Testament times, in the days of the prophets and kings, the Temple in Jerusalem was a true testimony to the glory and the might of God! A huge building that took dozens of workers years to complete, it was decorated with gold and bronze and the finest linens. It was a very sacred place, the finest structure that the Hebrew people could build!

Outside, but within the outer walls, there was an outer courtyard where people gathered. People who were ritually unclean---that is, people who had touched dead people, women who were menstruating, those who had contact with pigs or shellfish or other animals that were considered unclean---

and non-Jews who were interested in learning about God----had to stay in the outer courtyard and could not come in to the Temple to worship.

There was an inner courtyard where women and children stayed to worship.

And then inside was the sanctuary. The men who were considered clean could come inside the sanctuary and worship God.

From the inner courtyard, where I would have been with the other women if I had lived back then, I would have stood looking through the doorway, and I would have seen an amazing sight!

Let's pretend that we are standing there together and looking in.

On each side of the room we see 5 golden lamps on stands, lighting the room. The oil in the lamps does not burn perfectly cleanly, so there is smoke curling up from each one, creating a haze in the upper part of the building.

There is also smoke coming up from the incense which is burning on a special altar, and the smell of the incense is in the air.

There are also ten gold-covered tables, 5 on the left side and 5 on the right, and 100 golden basins.

The walls are covered with gold leaf and there are cherubim, huge angelic beings, carved on the walls. There are no pews, no seats. The people stood to worship God. The priests stood, too.

Over on the left side there are 12 golden statues of oxen, 3 facing in each direction, north, south, east, and west. These statues support a circular golden basin, a moat , sometimes called a “sea.” Before the priests can make offerings they first wash themselves in this moat, purifying themselves before performing their priestly duties. There are also a number of basins to rinse the sacrifices before they are offered. Everything must be pure and clean before being presented to God.

There are huge pillars on each side of the sanctuary, decorated with carvings. The altar and the doors are bronze. There is a fire to burn the offerings, which adds to the smoke in the room.

Up in the front, through the smoke, we can barely see the curtain, the veil, that covers the Holy of Holies. There are more carved cherubim behind it, but we can't see them. The ark of the covenant, holding the tablets with the 10 Commandments, is back there, too.

But we can't see it. When the Temple was built, the scripture tells us, the glory of the Lord filled the Temple. No one could enter, not even the priests, at first. And later, only the highest of high priests could enter the Holy of Holies behind the veil, only once a year.

The glory of the Lord is not something to be taken lightly. A person can only come so close to God and no closer, because we are not holy, not pure enough to be in the presence of God!

The veil was not just a decoration, and it wasn't there to hide anything. It was to protect people from the glory and the power of Jehovah God! No one could look at the face of God and live!

People worshipped God from a safe distance, after taking great care to be as pure and clean as they could be. The smoke clouded their vision and the veil hid God from their sight, so they could safely worship.

Priests stood, making sacrifices for themselves and on behalf of the people to atone for their sins. They did this day after day, week after week, year after year.

Because the people kept sinning. Because God is holy and mighty. Because God's glory is too much for humans to withstand.

And so the people went on, year after year, standing at a distance from God, not knowing how to change, not knowing how to be in relationship with their Creator, not knowing what God is really like.

Standing with a veil between them and God, the people couldn't approach God. They couldn't be in the presence of God. They stayed in the dark and in the distance.

And then, one night in a little town called Bethlehem, a baby was born to a young girl and her carpenter fiance, because God was tired of being hidden from our eyes behind the sacred veil. He wants more of a relationship with us. He wants us to really know him, to know that he loves us, to know that we are his beloved children.

God wants us to know what he's like, he wants us to love him more and to know deep in our hearts, in the deepest part of ourselves, that he loves us.

He wants us to **want** to be forgiven, to change, to become the people he created us to be.

So God sent his son. In Jesus Christ we see the face of God in human form, in a way that we can understand, in a way that we can withstand----a way that shows us the glory of God without needing a veil.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Christ is the way through the veil, the way to see God without a curtain, without the smoke, without the distance.

Christ said, "Those who have seen me have seen the Father. I and the Father are one." Close up. Clearly. We know God because we know Christ. We cannot see or touch or comprehend God, but Christ makes God visible, tangible, and knowable.

We know how to be in relationship with the person who is Jesus Christ, so we know how to be in relationship with God. By being God incarnate, God in the flesh, Christ has shown us what's behind the veil, in the Holy of Holies.

In the Gospel according to Mark we read that when Christ breathed his last breath on the cross, the veil in the Temple was torn in two. God was no longer hidden, no longer kept from our sight.

Men no longer need to follow a ritual to keep or make themselves pure and clean enough to enter the Temple. Christ has purified their souls and cleansed their hearts.

Women and children no longer need to stand outside the door, peering in through the smoke and the dim light. Christ has swept away everything in the way of our seeing God clearly.

God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ because he loved us all, because he so loved the world, and we can know God in Christ by reading the scripture, by spending time in prayer, by spending time with each other in fellowship, and by serving others and finding Christ in their eyes.

Scripture tells us the story of God and Christ in relationship to the creation, to people throughout the history of the Jewish people. The human condition hasn't changed much; we are not so much different from the people in the Bible. And certainly God's love for people has not changed. The veil is torn in two when we read the Bible.

Prayer brings the experience of the people of the Bible into our lives. We cannot see Jesus with our eyes or touch him with our hands, but in prayer, we can hear him speaking to our hearts, and have a conversation that can help us know who he is and who we are in relationship with him. In prayer, the veil is torn in two and we can see God more clearly.

When we are together, we can also understand more about God. Jesus told us that “whenever two or more are gathered,” he is in our midst. While we might pray in solitude, fellowship and worship together adds much to our understanding. We need each other, we need to be together, to know God more fully. Looking at each other’s faces, we can see God more clearly. When we are in fellowship together, the veil is torn in two.

Serving others is another way to see and know God better. When we serve others, we begin to understand how God sees them. Seeing through God’s eyes teaches us a lot about who God is, what God is like. When we start out by being the hands and feet of Christ, we finish by seeing the light of Christ in others. The veil is torn in two.

When the veil is torn in two, all of the walls that keep people separated from God are also broken down. Men, women, and children, everyone is welcomed into the presence of the Lord. Because Jesus Christ came to be fully human among us, we can come close to the glory of God that is also Christ's glory.

The veil is torn in two! And Christ has shown us the way through it to God.

The veil is torn in two! Hallelujah! Amen!