

Of Tents and Covenants
Hebrews 9.11-21
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Pentecost +8B
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It was early in President Obama's first term that Nathan and I went to hear him speak at the University of Richmond. We knew we needed to get there early to pass through security. We had our tickets in hand. We, like the good New Orleanians we were destined to become, were running late. And as we sped along the interstate toward the University exit, we saw a parade of lights behind us. We were literally the last car on the interstate as the police shut down the road for the President's motorcade. We sped up and tucked into a little neighborhood near the main University entrance. We found the last parking spot available and began to run for the entrance. We were the last people to arrive at the gate as it closed and secret service began the final sweep of all entrances around campus. We stood just beyond the gate, hoping to be let in, assured periodically that secret service would probably let us in since we had tickets. Then the long black cars began to arrive. Car after car, security lights flashing, the motorcade passed us and moved swiftly onto the University campus as we stood outside. The official word came by walkie talkie: no more entries allowed. We stood there, still holding tickets, still holding a little hope, until finally we walked back to our car, accepting the reality that we had missed the speech.

If only I hadn't run back inside to change my shoes. If only we had not poured that second cup of coffee. If only we had gotten up with the first sounds of the alarm clock and not waited for the second. So many small opportunities missed, so many unimportant details tended, that prevented us from entering the gate in time that day.

We had a second opportunity to hear President Obama speak during his re-election campaign. He was making a big appearance at Richmond's Carillon Park to swing Virginia in his favor. Thousands of people gathered. We knew better this time and arrived early. We felt the excitement of the crowd. Music played as everyone patiently made their way through security and into the cleared and confined area of the park before a large stage that looked more like a music concert was about to take place than a stump speech in a swing state. We waited with folks who wanted a glimpse of a sitting president, parents who had brought children to experience a piece of history, elderly African American neighbors who spoke with a bold and specific pride in casting a second ballot for this man, civic leaders, activists, ordinary folk, and NPR listeners. We all told stories about where we were in November of 2008 when he was elected. Or

January 2009 when he was inaugurated. We talked about our concerns with perceived failings and missed opportunities under his administration and our hopes for what might change in a second term.

We began to look at our watches. We'd been talking quite a while and had covered a lot of ground. That's when the rumors began to make their way through the crowd. His plane had not yet left D.C. We did the math and tried to figure out how late we could stay before making the preschool after-care pick-up at 2 p.m. "He's on his way," we would hear. "No, hasn't left yet." We waited an hour. The conversation now less enthusiastic. The sun a bit warmer than it had first seemed. We entered a second hour, the clock ticking on preschool pick-up. We heard, again, that his plane had still not left D.C. For a second time, Nathan and I walked away from *almost* hearing the President speak. I arrived at the preschool to collect my daughter and received a text from a friend that Joe Biden had just taken the stage minutes after we left. Then I heard from a teacher that Isabel's mom was at the speech and needed someone to play with Izzy on the playground for a bit while she listened to the President. It seems his plane was landing just as we deliberated leaving the park. And so I stayed on the playground with the three-year-olds while Melissa and a few other parents caught the end of the speech and raced to the school, starry-eyed, to tell us all about it.

Another close call, lost to worry and details and obligation. A missed opportunity that could have been different with a shift in priorities or better preparation. Two attempts at encounter but experiencing only anticipation and preparation instead. How much of our lives are spent that way?

We give birth to children, rightly anticipating the joy and beauty of these new souls in our arms and in our homes. How long before the awe and magic of new parenthood becomes the duty and obligation of diaper bags, childcare schedules, and co-parenting? How long before resentment sets in and we are no longer noticing what is grace and mystery under our noses? The butterflies of dating and the eagerness of engagement give way to marriage, and we stop noticing what once made our stomachs flip and instead notice the laundry piled up in the corner or the bills that need to be paid. Our dream job because routine. Our good life becomes mundane. Our house of prayer and community of faith becomes another task on the to-do list with reminders of work left undone rather than transformative encounters with the holy. This is where the Hebrews Preacher meets us today.

We read a snapshot of Hebrews chapter 9 this morning, hearing more about Jesus as the once-and-for-all "high priest of the good things that have come." As the Preacher builds toward this declaration of Christ as "mediator of a new covenant," he first

reminds the audience of the desert tabernacle; a portable tent to house the presence of God, the holy of holies, as the people of Israel moved toward the land of Canaan.

“The old sanctuary was a tent divided by curtains into two chambers, and the Preacher begins the [narrative] tour by pulling back the flap and inviting the congregation in for a peek at the first chamber.”¹

That first plan contained directions for worship, and a specially designed place of worship. A large outer tent was set up. The lampstand, the table, and “the bread of presence” were placed in it. This was called “the Holy Place.” Then a curtain was stretched, and behind it a smaller, inside tent set up. This was called “the Holy of Holies.” In it were placed the gold incense altar and the gold-covered ark of the covenant containing the gold urn of manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, the covenant tablets, and the angel-wing-shadowed mercy seat. But we don’t have time to comment on these now.

Picture it just like this, he says dramatically. And just as the crowd is lost in the mind’s eye, he waves his hand and essentially says “we don’t have time for more of that.” Thomas Long suspects, “In part, he wants to say that the actual details of the old sanctuary, impressive though they be, are beside the point. One could go on and on about lamp stands, tables, oil, curtains, vestments, and the like, but the Preacher’s main emphasis is on action and meaning, not fixtures and architecture.”²

How much time do we spend in our lives focusing on the fixtures and architecture of a thing and missing the action and meaning? Work, family, community, and faith. We are consumed by details, and often the most inconsequential ones. All the while, it is encounter and meaning that we most desire.

Long continues, “The Preacher knows that his congregation, like many others, often feels burdened by the toil of the Christian faith but shut out of its joy and peace. Like all other human beings, what the members of the Preacher’s congregation really need and want is an encounter with the living God; they want to go into the holiest sanctuary, to have access to God’s mercy and forgiveness, but ironically the very rituals of religion block the way...they will fiddle with the oil lamps and pour out gallons of energy meeting religious obligations, but they will never get where they need to go.

¹ Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, p. 93

² Long, p. 93

They will be at a deadening committee meeting on the outside, while the living God is in the inner sanctuary.”³

We are in compressed time right now. Do you feel that? It’s July 15 already; half the year gone. Time is zooming, the news headlines crash over us like waves, we don’t know where to put our energy and attention. I suspect that many of us (most of us?) distract ourselves from feeling everything at once because there is just so much to feel. We distract ourselves when there is too much to do because we don’t know where to begin. We distract ourselves so habitually and so thoroughly that we miss true encounter, again and again. True encounter with ourselves, with the people we love the most, with our neighbors and friends, with the God we crave. We must wake up to the fixtures and architecture that takes priority in our lives and prevents us from real meaning.

“People want God, but instead they often get information about God. People hunger for transcendence, but as a substitute they frequently get a religion of rules, procedures, and preliminaries. People are trapped in the vestibule, and they cannot get inside the sanctuary. They are busy, very busy, put to work studying the Bible, observing regulations about ‘food and drink’ (9:10), organizing prayer chains and trips to the Holy Land, and generally laboring hard at the business of being religious. None of this activity is evil,” Thomas Long assures, “indeed, most of it is good and useful, but it is not the thing itself, the thing we seek—access to the living and healing God.”

The way of living and healing, the way of action and meaning, the way of holy encounter is the way of Covenant, the Preacher tells us. Relationship and story wrapped in promise. A mutual giving between two parties, not a one-way contract signed on the dotted line. Covenant flows both ways and invites the parties to show up for each other. God invites and welcomes the encounter, maybe even desiring action and meaning just as much as we humans. In covenant, the two parties are bound together, not just in commitment but in mutual care and partnership and story.

We can get wrongly caught up with the old and new language the Preacher uses, and I worry about that only because I think human nature is to assume we’re part of the new and *those folks over there* are part of the old. We surely aren’t the ones missing out. So let’s recall that across scripture are promises of a new thing God is doing. From the words of Isaiah, “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” to the words of Revelation, “Behold! I am making all things news! Write this down for these words are trustworthy and true.” The way of holy encounter, the

³ Long, pp. 94-95

way of experiencing and knowing the divine, the very way of God is always offered from a new and fresh perspective. It's almost as if God suspects we lose ourselves in the wrong part of the tent, fussing over lamp stands and oil, losing ourselves to fixtures and architecture. And so, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah....I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jeremiah 31.31, 33b)

Friends, what word needs to be written new upon your heart?⁴ What fixtures and architecture are preventing you from holy encounter? What habits and routines in your life keep you from experiencing beauty and mystery and joy in your everyday, ordinary life? How much are we missing, you and I, because we are fiddling with the lampstands instead of rushing the holy of holies? Don't miss it. Don't miss out on the movement of the Spirit, the path of Christ, the voice of God. Don't replace action and meaning with tedium and busyness. Welcome a new word today. Good news is all across scripture, even in the book of Lamentations, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" Welcome what is new. Open your eyes and ears and heart and mind to this day. This way is waiting for you, even now. Amen.

⁴ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/03/19/day-23-a-new-covenant/>