

“Why Church? To Boldly Go”

Reading: Hebrews 10:11-25, 12:28-13:6

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Our sermon title for today is a reference, of course, to the iconic lines of the opening credits to *Star Trek*. Even if you’ve never watched a single episode of *Star Trek*, you’ve surely heard those words: “These are the voyages of that starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.” I have a little book someone once gave me titled “All I really need to know I learned from watching *Star Trek*.” No, this will not surprise you, and no, it does not sit on my shelf right next to my Bible. I remember that one of the points the author talks about is what a great mission statement that is: “to boldly go where no one has gone before.” It tells you exactly what the crew of the *Enterprise* is supposed to do with themselves — go where no one has gone before — but more than that, it tells them *how* to go — boldly. If they explore a strange new world timidly or apathetically or aggressively, they’ve failed their mission.

And that book is right: that’s a great mission statement. It’s clear, it’s concise, it’s to the point. But I think there can be a problem with that idea of boldness, because while it’s one thing to imagine Captain Kirk being bold, that idea of boldly going doesn’t necessarily translate into our lives very well. Probably every one of us has known at least one person during our lives who is obnoxiously bold: someone who’s just a little too confident, someone who dominates every conversation, someone who always seems to get their way, someone who feels like they can say whatever they want whenever they want regardless of the impact it has. Our American culture is one that rewards people for being bold and brash and even aggressive, but I think it’s fair to say that not many of us really *like* people who are obnoxiously bold, or at least it’s not easy to like that part of them.

Our text from Hebrews 10 for today uses the word “confidence” instead of “boldness,” but it’s much the same idea, and in fact many translations of the Bible use “boldness” instead of “confidence” here: “we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus.” Or, a very similar verse from Hebrews 4: “Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time.” The writer of Hebrews has this consistent idea that because of what Jesus has done, we can have this boldness in coming before God Himself; a confidence that should have an impact on our whole lives. But the question is what sort of boldness we’re talking about. What sort of confidence can we have as followers of Christ? And what exactly is the impact it has? Is it an obnoxious sort of boldness, a brashness that offends and gets its own way and makes no apologies? Of course not. Is it the boldness with which Captain Kirk explores the galaxy, a self-confidence that comes from within or a courage that comes from one’s convictions? Not really.

What we see in this passage from Hebrews is a continuation and maybe even a climax of much of what the author has been talking about for a while. The book uses a variety of images from Israel’s historic faith — the Tabernacle, the priesthood, the system of sacrifices, and so on — to describe what Jesus did and who Jesus is. And really, the point is not so much to say that Jesus is like the high priest, it’s to say that the high priest is like Jesus. Jesus isn’t imitating all those old religious practices and images; in fact they were imitating Him or foreshadowing Him without even realizing it. Jesus is the greater reality that they were pointing to. And one of the main points is that the old system of worship was only partially effective in maintaining the connection between God and His people: it

required constant sacrifices, and even then only one man, the high priest, was allowed into the presence of God, and even then only once a year. But that was only a taste of what Jesus did: He acted as both high priest and supreme sacrifice, and because of what He did, He ushers us all into the presence of God forever.

And our passage for today takes all of this and puts it in almost overwhelming language. Jesus has not only fulfilled the role of priest by acting as a mediator between God and humanity, and He has not only fulfilled the role of the system of sacrifices by giving His own blood as an offering, He has also ascended to the role of King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He “sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time He waits for His enemies to be made His footstool.” That’s royal language; that’s the image of a victorious king. This priest who is sacrificial victim has now been enthroned on high. His work as priest has been completed as no other priest could hope, because He offered the sacrifice that makes perfect forever “those who are being made holy.” And then, from His throne, He engages in the work of a king: He proclaims His law and causes it to be written down, and He pardons those who have sinned against Him. He has been victorious, and the author of Hebrews wants us to be clear in no uncertain terms of the greatness of what Jesus has done.

Because of all of that, the author of Hebrews gives us the “therefore.” “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence, boldness, to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near to God.” This is not brashness, or arrogance, or cockiness, or self-confidence. You don’t just stroll into the throne room of God like you own the place. You can boldly climb the fence of the White House and try to see the President, but at best you’ll be tackled and arrested. No, this is the confidence of one who does not have to hide or sneak in because you have been unexpectedly and graciously invited in. It’s unheard-of eternal access granted to all who claim the blood of Christ.

But what does this boldness result in? What does it look like to boldly go before the presence of God? This is the critical point, because we so easily get this wrong. Based on the powerful description Hebrews gives us of what Jesus has done, we might expect the effects of this boldness to be likewise overwhelming and powerful. I know that for me, it’s easy to go the other direction and spiritualize all of this, so that I just kind of picture in my head going into the presence of God and, well, that’s about all it amounts to. It’s easy to think of it as just a “spiritual” reality, and by that we mean it’s something out there in the ether that doesn’t have any earthly reality. But what does the author of Hebrews tell us? This boldness results in action in our lives, but it’s not the sort of boldness our world recognizes.

No, this boldness results in several things. Our hearts are “sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience,” meaning that we no longer have to bear the burden of our sin. We’re set free from that guilt. The author also speaks of our bodies being washed with pure water; we are called to the sacrament of baptism, followed by living a baptized life. We “hold unswervingly to the faith we profess,” the message we’ve heard throughout the book, to remain faithful to Jesus, because He has been faithful to us. “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” or, as the King James has it, “provoke” one another to love and good works. And finally, don’t give up “meeting together,” meaning that we should continue participating in the worshipping community that is the church. We don’t take attendance, but coming to church does actually matter. And we’re to encourage one another in this “all the more as you see the Day approaching,” that is, as

the return of Jesus draws near. The closer it gets to the finale of God's work in creation, the more important it is that we remain constant and faithful.

This might seem like kind of a letdown after the grand language used to describe what Jesus has done. It might seem kind of disappointing to say that we can boldly approach the throne of God, therefore we should get baptized, encourage one another, and go to church. But contrary to what we might expect, this is the definition of boldly going. It does not sound anywhere near as dramatic as Captain Kirk's bold exploration of strange new worlds. We are too easily tempted by the world's definition of boldness to think that if God has done this, we should look for dramatic events in our lives as a result. We should find a crusade to fight, an enemy to defeat, a demon to cast out, a magic spell to utter, a city in need of fire and brimstone from heaven. But no, when it comes to normal life, when it comes to everyday decisions to be made, it takes much more boldness to make consistent small decisions to live in the kingdom of God, boldly seeking an audience with our Lord in the countless seemingly insignificant matters we face every day. The idea continues later in the book, as we read in chapter 13: we continue to worship God, and we keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters, and we show hospitality to strangers, and we take care of prisoners, and we honor marriages and keep them pure, and we live generous and humble lives free from the love of money. These seem like such small things, but they take great boldness, because they are demonstrations of life lived under the lordship of Jesus Christ. There are times for more dramatic, more obviously bold actions, but to live this way consistently for a lifetime is one of the most powerful things you can do. These simple acts declare to the world, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

The reality is that we Christians don't always have a good reputation when it comes to this sort of boldness. We have at times failed to have any boldness at all. I'm as guilty of it as anyone else; I can't even hazard a guess at how many situations I've been in where I could have spoken a redemptive word, when I could have introduced the hope of Jesus Christ into the situation, and I've kept my mouth fearfully shut. There have been far too many times in one-on-one conversations and in issues of global importance when Christians have cowered behind the claim that religion is just a personal matter and we should keep it to ourselves. We have at other times adopted the world's sort of boldness and betrayed Christ's boldness. We've loudly proclaimed our right to spout off our opinions, claiming them to be Christ's while failing to consult Him. We've brashly insisted that the world dance to our tune, and thrown a fit when it didn't. In other words, rather than boldly going before God our Father, we've assumed we have the right to boldly march into the palaces of the world and demand their obedience. No, we have a different boldness that comes through Christ.

And the further reality is that this sort of boldness is particularly difficult in today's world. The last few days have seen horrific attacks in Paris that leave us wondering at the madness of the world. How can getting baptized and going to church and showing hospitality really be that significant in a world that has such evils in it? But these evils are not new. God's people have always faced such enemies, and even worse, and the call that God has consistently given them is to live as the worshipping community of God's family. In the Old Testament, yes, God called His people to wars of conquest to take the land of Canaan, but the goal was to give them a land for living in that worshipping community. That was always the goal. God's tactics have not changed, but they have expanded due to the work of Jesus Christ. And so we live as bold witnesses.

Jesus Christ has died for us. He has made things right between us and the God we were created to love. He has opened for us the way to boldly go before our God and be embraced as His children. He has been raised from the dead and is enthroned in heaven and will return again. We have every reason to boldly serve Him with our lives. Will you live that kind of bold life?

Benediction: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.



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