

A Narrative 51
Pentecost 13
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Poulsbo
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Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father, and our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

In today's reading, the writer of Hebrews is addressing his audience in a language they understood, a language that included high priests and tabernacles and sacrifices and holy-of-holies. This is not our language. So, a little bit of background here:

The tabernacle was divided into three parts. There was an outer courtyard with the sacrificial altar where the animals were slaughtered and the burnt offerings were, well, burnt. Then just inside the tent was a secondary place where the bread and the lampstand were. Third, behind a veil, was the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant was kept. This place was considered so holy that nobody went in there except the high priest, and even he only went in there once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. On that day the high priest would go in and offer sacrifices for himself, his family, the community, and for the tabernacle itself. The high priest was the intermediary between the people and God.

So when the writer identifies Jesus as the high priest, the readers know that everything has changed. Because this intermediary between us and God *is* God. Jesus' self-sacrifice isn't offered from the outer courtyard toward God. Jesus' self-sacrifice is offered from God's side of things. The author is saying that no longer is God in the Holy of Holies. No longer are God's people out here and God in there. God has offered a self-sacrifice that has removed the veil, that has torn the curtain in two, that has closed the distance between us and God.

"Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

God is among us, full of mercy and grace to help in time of need.

In the words of John the evangelist, God has now tabernacled among us. Maintaining presence among us at all times, full of mercy and grace to help in time of need.

Approaching the throne of grace, then, isn't something we do only here in worship. Approaching the throne of grace happens any time our attention turns toward God, whether that be in prayer or confession or bible study or communion...or serving another or comforting another or caring for creation or any time our attention is not on ourselves. And the writer encourages us to turn our attention to God often, because then we receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Because of Christ's self-sacrifice, because God is here, among us, around us, and in us, that mercy and grace in time of need is all around us. You live in that reality. Not as something to strive for, but as something God keeps you in.

God's presence suspends you in mercy and grace, like a buoy bobbing in water.

God's presence covers you in mercy and grace, blanketing and protecting you like the blankets smoke jumpers use if they get overrun by flames.

God's presence encloses you like an astronaut's helmet, mercy and grace like the very oxygen you breathe.

But, boy, do we fight it. Our attention wanders so often. It is our nature to think first of ourselves. And we become like Peter, sinking when he begins to doubt. Being caught up in ourselves is disbelief. When we are caring for ourselves, we are not trusting that God will take care of us. And we sink.

And God's mercy and grace remain.

We are still surrounded, blanketed, held. But we can't experience it. We can't feel it. We can't use it. Our attention has wandered, and so we cannot see that we are still in the grasp of God's mercy and grace.

So God draws your attention back. God comes to you in worship. God comes to you in confession and absolution. God comes to you in Word and music. God comes to you in communion and fellowship. God comes to you in water and the world. God draws your attention back outside of yourself to see God's work, to point you to the needs of those around you, to invite you into the Holy of Holies in service and care.

Because then, when times of need come in our lives, when times of suffering come – and they always do – we can see that we are enfolded, comforted, buoyed by the presence of God who knows what we suffer, who has endured suffering and knows its pain, who meets us in suffering and takes us by the hand to draw us through it. Then we find mercy and grace in time of need because we have a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses.

Jesus took on human form for precisely that reason: to know our suffering first-hand. And now, when you suffer, he enters into your suffering not just to comfort, but to walk with you, to draw you through that suffering to life in the fullness of God's mercy and grace.