

16 March 2011
Lent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Miraculous Tearing of the Temple Curtain”

Text: Matthew 27:51a

(Hebrews 10:1-25; Matthew 26:1b-35)

Sin means *hiding*. Like when you were little and broke something, or spilled and stained something, and tried to hide it.

Sin means *separation*. Like when you were little and your parents found out that you broke something, or spilled and stained something, and sent you to the corner, or to your room.

But you know it's even more serious than that. We still try to hide our sin, which is why we have skeletons in our closets and pasts that haunt us. Sin still causes separation in our world, dividing spouses, friends, neighbors, even churches. And there's a lot of pain and suffering with that.

And it is even so with God. Adam and Eve hid from God after they sinned. They hid from each other under garments of fig leaves and skins. There was separation and division as they began blaming each other. Their fellowship and intimacy with God was shattered. The prophet Isaiah, when describing this ongoing reality to the people of Israel many centuries later, said: “*your iniquities have made a **separation** between you and your God, and your sins have **hidden** His face from you*” (Isaiah 59:2).

That's what the curtain in the Temple was all about. *Hiding and separation*. For God wanted to be with His people, but because of sin, God and man could no longer dwell together in safety. And so the Temple hid the face of God and kept God at a safe distance.

But it wasn't only the curtain - the entire Temple reflected this, as you had ever-decreasing access the closer you got to God. From the Court of the Gentiles, to the Court of the Women, to the Court of the Priests, to the Holy Place, to the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies, which was the throne room of God. That is what the Temple curtain hid and separated - it divided the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place, which is where the priests carried out their duties and sacrifices.

As a sinner, you would bring your sacrifice to the Temple, confess your sins and transfer them to the animal, which the priest would then take back into the Holy

Place, where it would be sacrificed as your substitute. Your substitute, *for that should have been you*. But you had no access to God. Only the priest could go back there for you, and only the High Priest could go all the way back into the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, with great fear and trepidation. For if he went on the wrong day or in the wrong way, it meant death.

Sin is serious business.

And so now you can imagine how frightening a thing it must have been on the day the Temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom! Those who were there probably thought they were going to die. The picture on the cover of the bulletin gives you a feel for the size of the curtain - but it was probably even larger than that. The Temple was some 60 feet high at that point - think of a six-story building.

And then remember *when* this happened - Matthew tells us it was at the time of the Passover, when Jerusalem was packed with people, and the number of lambs that were being sacrificed was at its highest point of the entire year. There were so many lambs being sacrificed and so much blood being shed that, it is said, the brook Kidron outside of Jerusalem became a river of blood at this time every year. And so there wasn't just one guy in the Temple when the curtain tore (like on the cover of the bulletin), but lots. And it was probably panic and pandemonium. Like when the angel of death went throughout Egypt on the *first* Passover.

Except this time, there was no death. **Because that death had just taken place outside the walls of Jerusalem, at Golgotha, on a cross.** As we heard from Hebrews, THE Lamb of God had been slain for the sin of the world. The sacrifice to end all sacrifices had been offered. Our separation from God caused by sin was ended, for all sin had now been atoned for, once and for all. Our Great High Priest entered the presence of God for us with His own blood, and so now the curtain was no longer needed. Jesus changed everything! We now have full and complete access to the Father - not through human intermediaries, but through Christ Jesus. In Him and by His Spirit we cry out "*Abba, Father*" (Gal 4:6). We can always and everywhere go to our Father, not in fear, but in peace.

But it is not just with the tearing of the Temple curtain that we see this - already Jesus was foreshadowing this in His life. As we heard in the Holy Gospel, Jesus goes to the house of a leper - someone who was *usually* separated and an outcast from society - and eats with him.

On the night when He was betrayed, all the disciples ask Jesus, "*Is it I?*" the one who will betray you? And while it was one of them in that way that Jesus spoke of, it was really all of them. And it is all of us; for each and every time we sin, we betray our Lord. But Jesus is with them, and loves them, and eats with them, and

feeds them.

And then we heard of Peter - and don't we, like Peter, make great and bold promises to our Lord! Not me! But then, like Peter, it *is* us. Denying our Lord in thoughts, words, and deeds both done and left undone. And yet our Lord comes to Peter and forgives him and restores him, just as our Lord comes to us to be with us and feed us and forgive us and restore us.

For that's what Jesus is all about. In everything He does, He is about restoring our fellowship with the Father through the forgiveness of our sins. That God be longer hidden from us or us from Him. That God no longer be separated from us, but that we be brought back together in peace and love and joy.

But the tearing of the Temple curtain didn't just signify *that*, I don't think. I think there's even more to it. For I don't think the curtain tore *just to let us in* - I think the tearing of the curtain *was the releasing of the gracious of presence of God into all the world*. Now, no longer would the nations have to come to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Now, the Word and Spirit of God would go to all the nations. The apostles would be sent into all the world to bring Christ to the nations through His Word and Sacraments. And so when Jesus died, He gave up His Spirit, and that Spirit, given to the Church at Pentecost, now goes into all the world, making the forgiveness and life of Jesus available for all people. Available for you.

And so Jesus is here for you. The sin that hid and separated us from God, in Him is no more. But so, too, is it His desire that the sin that hides and separates us from each other also be no more. That the love and forgiveness given to us be also given by us to one another. That we be reconciled and no longer separated - spouses, families, friends, neighbors, all people. For Christ, our Passover, has indeed been sacrificed for us (1 Cor 5:7). Death is done and life reigns! Thanks be to God.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.