

“A Mediator”

1 Timothy 2:1-7

It was a wonder that happened just once a year. People came from miles around to see the spectacle. It was the most powerful of religious spectacles — if you happened to be a Jew living in ancient Israel. Had you been there, here’s what you would have experienced:

As the first rays of dawn break across the Mount of Olives, a priest standing on the very pinnacle of the temple sounds the trumpet. It’s the signal that the morning sacrifice is about to begin.

Fifteen large animals — cattle, sheep, goats — are led before the massive altar that stands before the temple. Before the eyes of thousands of witnesses, the high priest lifts high his ceremonial knife and plunges it into the neck of the first animal. A second and a third follow. Before long all 15 have been slain. The stones of the courtyard run red with blood. The crowd looks on, in awed silence.

A portion of the blood from the sacrificial animals is gathered and poured into a cup. Hours later, when the appointed time has come, the high priest takes the cup and solemnly enters the temple. Passing through the massive outer doors, he finds himself in the holy place, the Court of the Priests. To his left is a lampstand of pure gold, casting soft light throughout the room. To his right stands the table with the “showbread” — 12 ceremonial loaves, representing the 12 tribes of Israel.

Before the high priest stands the altar of incense, its coals still warm from the morning offerings. Beyond the altar of incense is a massive double veil, shielding from sight a small room on the other side.

Normally, no one is permitted to pass beyond the veil — for this is the Holy of Holies, the very place where God Almighty is pleased to dwell. Such is the spiritual power buzzing in that place, that to pass through that heavy curtain could mean instant death.

Yet on this day, the high priest parts the veil and boldly passes through. For this is *Yom Kippur*, the great Day of Atonement, the one day when a human being is permitted to enter the Holy of Holies. That privilege is reserved for one particular man: the high priest.

Dominating this small, windowless space is a single piece of furniture, gleaming golden in the half-light. It's none other than the ark of the covenant — a wooden chest overlaid with gold. Its top is a lid of pure gold. This lid is known as the Mercy Seat. On each end of the Mercy Seat is a statue of an angel, kneeling to face the center.

The Mercy Seat represents the throne of God. The high priest lifts high his cup of sacrificial blood, then plunges his fingers into it. Carefully, reverently, he sprinkles the blood over the Mercy Seat. Its golden lid is stained dark from earlier rituals. Each year on this date, for many centuries, the high priest has entered the Holy of Holies and performed precisely this act, to atone for the people's sins.

Not exactly the sort of worship experience we're used to, is it?

Nor is it the sort of worship experience our modern-day Jewish neighbors are familiar with. The blood-sprinkling in the Holy of Holies hasn't been performed in two millennia. That's because there no longer *is* a Holy of Holies in Jerusalem. The temple that once contained that sacred space was pulled down by the Romans and has never been rebuilt.

Judaism no longer has a high priest, either. After the year 70, when blood-sacrifices ceased, there was no longer a need for one.

Who Is the Mediator?

Why did the Jewish people have a high priest in the first place?

The same reason any religion needs a priest. The nature of priesthood is to serve as a mediator.

A mediator is a person who stands between two people estranged from one another, to facilitate communication between them. If there's a power differential between them, the mediator is duty-bound to protect the interests of the weaker party.

That was exactly the situation of the ancient Israelites. Their God, Yahweh, was not the sort of deity you cozied up to. No, Yahweh was a fearsome desert God: “the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God,” it says in Deuteronomy 4:24. The famous proverb, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” pretty much sums up that tumultuous relationship (Psalm 111:10).

Moses tried, at times, to act as a mediator. There's that famous episode from Exodus 32, when Moses is up on the mountaintop conferring with Yahweh. Unbeknownst to him, the people down below are forging a statue of a golden calf and bowing down to worship it.

Descending the mountain, Moses is — predictably — enraged. He takes the new stone tablets with the law engraved upon them and casts them to the ground, smashing them to pieces. He melts down the golden idol, burns the remains until they are powder, and spreads the powder upon the water. Then he forces the Israelites to drink it. After that, he dispatches the sons of Levi as his enforcers, putting the leading idolaters to the sword. When it comes to idolatry, Moses takes no prisoners.

The next day, Moses resolves to go back up to the Lord to try to atone for the people's sins. This is where his mediation skills come into play — but in this case, they can only take him so far. He begs Yahweh to forgive the idolatrous people: “If you will only forgive their sins,” he begs — “but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.”

See how this mediator is willing to offer up his own life — and his own place in the book of life — for the sake of the people. But in this case, it's not enough. Rejecting Moses' mediation attempt, the Lord is adamant, declaring, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book.” But there's yet a glimmer of grace. Go, Moses, Yahweh says. Lead this faithless people to the promised land. The quest is not over. I will send my angel before you, to guide you (Exodus 32:30-35).

God's people will suffer a fearsome plague and none of that first generation will live long enough to see the promised land. Their descendants will at long last make it to the Jordan and will cross over.

Moses couldn't do what Jesus would one day do. He couldn't take upon himself the sin of the people. That's because Moses was only a man. God rejected his offer to give his own life as a ransom for many.

In later books of the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets labor hard to convey the message that Yahweh's justice is tempered with love — Isaiah, notably, has Yahweh saying, “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13). But that's still something of a hard sell. The image of God as the pre-eminent smiter of sinners is hard to shake.

So, that's what the high priest was about, performing blood sacrifices in the temple of old. He was trying, however imperfectly, to mediate between Yahweh and a fearful but still stiff-necked people.

Later, many Christians felt the need for a human mediator. The Latin word for "high priest" — *pontifex*, still used today as a title for the pope, also called the pontiff — is related to the word *pontus*, or bridge. That's what a priestly mediator does: he lays himself down as a bridge between God and the people. It's like the old Simon and Garfunkel song, "Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down ..."

Not all Christian traditions, today, have a role for a human being who fills the function of priestly mediator. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions still have priests, but most Protestant churches do not. Most of the Protestant reformers were adamant that the only mediator any of us need is Jesus. Even those traditions that do have priests proclaim that the priest *par excellence* — our great high priest, successor to the high priests of old — is Jesus Christ himself.

The writer of 1 Timothy would agree. He says in today's reading: "there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all." Jesus does not fear to step through the curtain blocking the Holy of Holies, for he, as the second person of the Trinity, is one and the same as God and the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul pictures this mediation happening in another way, deploying a courtroom metaphor. In Romans 8, he depicts sinners standing trial for the wrongs they have done. What's the first thing a defendant on trial needs to prevail? An advocate — an attorney — to argue before the judge.

The courtroom also contains another legal official: a prosecutor. “Who is in a position to condemn?” asks Paul. Who’s fulfilling that prosecutorial role?

Surprisingly, that person is Jesus. But here’s the thing: he’s the same one who’s serving as our defense attorney! This advocate of ours has already demonstrated his total commitment to working on our behalf. “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Romans 8:34).

This prosecutor has a conflict of interest. For us, that’s excellent news because the outcome’s tilted in our favor. He’s already given his life for us. When Jesus takes on the role of mediator, standing between us and the Divine Judge, who can doubt he has our best interests at heart? Who can doubt that we are saved by God’s grace through our faith in Jesus Christ?

Jesus is the “mediator” of God’s presence with us in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, Jesus comes into us, strengthens our faith, to go out from this holy space to mediate his love and forgiveness to everyone around us.

Stephen Ministers mediate God’s love, or as we say in our training, we are conduits of God’s love and grace for our care receivers.

Sunday school teachers, ushers, greeters, worship assistants, music makers, A.A. members, everyone in this building are mediators of Jesus Christ as we come together to serve one another.

For the next 3 Wednesdays, during the day, the Parma Heights Police and Fire Department will be here in Divinity training for what they call “Active Threat Response”. They, too, are mediators of God’s love to our community.

There's bread ("This is my body"). There's a cup ("This is my blood"). We need little more than that, because, in the end, it's not the nature of the communion elements that are important, but what they are: the gift of the mediator's own life, offered up for us on the cross, that we may be reconciled with God and with each other. The bridge to God is not the law, but the cross.

So, come to the table. Our mediator awaits!

May the peace of God . . .

#409 – Kyrie! God, Father