

Living Vicariously

Chris Currie

Hebrews 9:24-28

November 7, 2021 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church New Orleans

It can be hard to parachute into the middle of Hebrews it's kind of like walking into a room an hour late and trying to find out what everyone has been talking about for the past hour. As we land in the middle of Hebrews here, we begin with a vision of Christ's ascension, as the risen Christ leaves earth and enters into heaven, as the author writes, Christ enters heaven to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. We usually think of 'on our behalf' only in reference to the cross and the sacrificial love and transaction that is concentrated in Christ's passion and death. But the author of Hebrews reminds us that Christ does not just die on our behalf, but enters heaven on our behalf, offering to God, from beginning to end, a faithful human life, on our behalf.

Of course we are not using the Apostles' Creed this Sunday, but there is a line in there that you probably know by heart, and maybe it has even perplexed you at times...that 'he (Christ) descended into Hell.' I thought only the baddies were sent to hell, why would the Apostles' Creed confess that Christ went there after death? To say Christ descended into hell though means that the reconciliation and transformation of the world in Jesus Christ and all of Jesus' actions 'on our behalf,' extends much farther than we could ever see or fathom. He enters heaven on our behalf and he descends to the depths, to hell, on our behalf, too. To tell each other that Christ descended into hell is to say that Christ ventured into the farthest distant away from God that is imaginable, that Christ entered into all that is not God and all that opposes God, that Christ entered into all that seeks to negate God, and Christ descends right into the thick of whatever hell that is, and endures a state of godforsakenness and the infinite distance from God (on our behalf) so that none of us will ever have to experience such despair and godforsakenness on our own. It is not that any of us will never experience any kind of anguish or hells or hellish experiences, but we will never experience a pain, a loss, an anguish that Christ has not already taken into himself and endured on our behalf. If hell is the infinite distance away from God, then Jesus has even gone that distance 'on our behalf,' to ensure that there is literally no place in the universe apart from the love and presence of Jesus Christ. Even hell.

But we are talking about heaven, and there too, the author of the Hebrews tells us, Jesus enters before God, on our behalf, representing the whole lot of us, flawed and dysfunctional, as well as the stable and successful, and Christ stands for all of us in the presence of God and in a sense represents all of us, so that God can only see us through Christ's mercy, Christ's eyes, Christ's love, Christ's forgiveness, Christ's life. Because Christ stands before God on our behalf, Christ allows God to see our lives only through the lens of his, all our individual quirks and foibles are still there, but they do not appear before God as we often assume they would appear, obvious and exposed, but they cannot be seen apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is what it means that Christ appears once and for all in the presence of God

on our behalf. We will never appear before God on our own, but only through Christ's love, shot through with Christ's grace, and inseparable from Christ's presence.

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas was once asked if he had a 'personal relationship with Jesus'....and he thought for a second and then answered, 'No, I imagine I've got one about like everyone else does.' And according to Hebrews, he is exactly on target. Jesus Christ, in the words of theologian James Torrance, is the one person 'in whom God has given himself personally to the world and for the world, that God's purposes for all humanity might be brought to fulfillment.' While Jesus is concerned and interested in the uniqueness of every single one of us and desires to reach us in any way shape or form at his disposal, Christ stands in for us all, in hell and at the right hand of God in heaven, so that we may all be represented in his life of faith, hope, and love lived before God, and so that we may know through the activity of the Spirit, that Christ has lived this life for us, loved humanity in all our forms, and reconciled this world, on our behalf and for our sake, for the glory of God and the flourishing of humanity.

In interpreting what it might mean that Jesus Christ appears in the presence of God on our behalf, Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance takes it a step further than Stanley Hauerwas, not only acknowledging that Christ has a relationship with all of us, but declaring, that from beginning to end, Jesus Christ 'has acted in your place in the whole range of your human life and activity, including your personal decisions, and your responses to God's love, and even your acts of faith. He has believed for you, fulfilled your human response to God, even made your personal decision for you,, so that he acknowledges you before God as one who has already responded to God in him, one who has already believed in God through him, and one whose personal decision is already implicated in Christ's self-offering to the Father, that in Jesus Christ you are already accepted by God.' 'On our behalf,' indeed. To hear the radicality of the gospel in this way sets us free from ever having to live our lives with any 'have-tos' or 'good enoughs' or 'yes-buts' when it comes to God. We do not need to spend our lives looking over our shoulders all the time, Torrance reminds us, trying to measure 'whether I have really given myself personally [enough], whether my belief and trust level is really [enough], whether my faith is at all adequate,' for it is not our personal faith, our personal commitment, our feeling at the moment, or anything else, 'but solely upon what Jesus Christ has done for me, in my place and on my behalf, and what he is and always will be as he stand in for me' in the presence of God (Hebrews 9:24). Such a gesture on our behalf, liberates us, Torrance acknowledges, from ever following Jesus Christ or trying to serve the ends of his kingdom, out of ulterior motives or selfish ends. We are free to offer our joyful response, we are free to serve Christ in this world, we are free to stand for the demands of his justice, we are free to seek the flourishing of our fellow human beings, not with the hopes of getting something out of it, getting ahead, or somehow contributing to our salvation, but because Christ has liberated us from ever having to prove ourselves. As Hebrews tells us, 'he appears in the presence of God ON OUR BEHALF.'

We have a good friend and pillar of the church who was dedicated throughout her life to making sure she got her children up on Sundays, got them dressed and packed into the car,

and into a church pew without being too worn for the wear. Often in the mad rush to get up, get going, and get to church, a cry went up from the back seat, 'why do we have to go to church.' Perhaps this is a query that has been posed to some of you once or twice or a thousand times in your lives. She would also answer that question with the following response: 'Because this is who we are.' Not so we can prove to God that we love God. Not so we show everyone our worthiness. Not even so we can get our religious fix for the week. No her answer was more profound: 'because this is who we are.' Because we have been liberated from having to measure our worthiness or prove our love of God, we have even been liberated from thinking that faith is about some private experience between individuals and the divine. There is no have-to, there is only get-to. Because this is who we are, we get to this. Because this is who we are, we get to try and live in a community where the waters of baptism are even thicker than the blood of family. Because this is who we are, we get to worship God no matter the state of our faith or the amount of our belief or the degree of our spiritual temperature or the level of our personal commitment at the moment. Because Christ has fulfilled the purposes of humanity before God, we don't have to. He has already fulfilled who we are. So we can bring all our gratitude, all our baggage, all our feelings of religious fervor and our feelings of religious displacement, we can carry it all with us and keep showing up to receive who we are, our true humanity from Christ who freely offers it to us all and offers his faith, hope, and love, to God, on our behalf.

To follow Jesus Christ, to dare to be a saint that reflects something of his grace and glory to others, to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind, requires immense courage, will, persistence, and determination, but there are no have-tos. We are simply set free to become the people Christ has already vicariously offered to God on our behalf. This is who we are. This is our true reality. Our true destiny. Now, in this time, we are free to become that. Free to become the people in this world and in this moment that Christ has already offered up to God with gratitude.

In my own life when I imagine the saints of the church, they are not going to be big names who will ever have a special feast day in their honor. They are people who took the time to talk to me and take an interest in me when I was a truculent teenager. They are people who offered me a peppermint in the pew right before church started. They are people who welcomed me when I was unloveable, taught me when I was unteachable, and saw gifts in me that I did not see or want to see in myself. These saints were people who had nothing to prove or earn or achieve, but who were determined to contribute to the flourishing of others even though they weren't keeping score. Our passage from Hebrews reminds us starkly, that Christ has redeemed this world and stands before God on our behalf so we don't have to act like that is our job. Instead, our job is to sow seeds of encouragement and flourishing wherever we go, to stop keeping score, and to cherish the light of Christ that beautifully reflects off the saints who are all around us, beside us, and probably coming toward us, through the people we least expect. Thanks be to God.