

November 18, 2018 – Hebrews 10:11-25

Well, it's over. All the TV ads and junk mail. All the automated phone calls and airport rallies. The campaigns are finished. The votes are totaled. Except, of course, for Florida. But... well... that's Florida for you. But for the rest of us, finally, the election is over.

And it gave us exactly what it was intended to give us: a government. Which is really quite remarkable, when you think about it. In one day, we threw our entire government into the air and rebuilt it from scratch.

There are nations around the world that dream of having stability like what we have. Where the worst thing about politics is just about a bunch of stupid campaign ads and not bloodshed and violence. It really is incredible what we have here. And whatever you currently think about our government and whether or not you were rooting the Democrat or the Republican or the proposal, you gotta give God credit for the gift we have in the United States.

Because, like it or not, we need government. We need law and order. We need civil authorities to make and enforce laws. And while, as Christians and as a country, we often get caught up in arguing over who those authorities will be, in the end it really doesn't matter all that much.

God isn't a Republican or a Democrat and you'll find pros and cons no matter how you vote. As a friend of mine from seminary said once, the first thing he was going to do on election day was go vote. And the second thing he was going to do was find a fellow pastor to make confession to, because voting for either party felt sinful.

God isn't a Republican or a Democrat, but he is pro-government. Which is to say, he's in favor of having a system of laws that, as our founding father's rightly discerned, "provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare." Period.

It doesn't even have to be a democracy, really. The church survived just fine for 1700 years under imperialism and feudalism and monarchies. There's nothing special about democracy in God's eyes. It's just one more way of ensuring that laws get made and enforced.

We know that God is in favor of having a government because, when he was organizing the Israelites during the Exodus, he gave them a government. But the way that ancient Israel established its laws was quite different from the way that we establish our laws.

For them, there was no difference between civil law and religious law, there was only God's law. And likewise, there was no difference between civil authority and religious authority. There was only the priesthood.

Yes, the priesthood. That was really their primary role. You see, I think nowadays we hear the word "priest" and we think of a Roman Catholic priest, for example. A religious leader. Somebody who is very spiritually minded, but not at all involved in day to day law enforcement.

The priesthood of the Israelites wasn't anything like that. They were an integral part of the judicial system of their day. They were the ones who heard disputes between two people. They were the ones who decided whether one person was clearly in the wrong and needed to make restitution, or whether both parties were to blame and reconciliation was needed. They were the ones who pronounced what penalties and offerings must be made. They, even, were the ones who found people deserving of the death penalty.

How did they end up with all this authority? Well, they were the ones who made peace with God. They were the ones who made sure that your sins were atoned for and forgiven. They were the ones, the only ones, who could relieve the weight of divine guilt from your conscience. And when you've got that much authority in God's eyes, it only makes sense that you should have it in the eyes of men.

I think we all understand that we need these authority figures in our lives. We live in a world where laws must be made and enforced consistently. We live in a world that would become lawless if not for the authority of the police and the courts and the government. As much as we may want a utopian world where everyone does what is just and fair and righteous at all times and in every circumstance, we know that's simply not going to happen.

And the only way for that authority to have any weight, any importance to us, is through sacrifice. In the Old Testament it was the sacrifice of a sheep or grain or a life. Today, it's the sacrifice of money through a fine or freedom through jail time or, in the most extreme cases still, a person's life.

The sacrifices may have changed, but the principle is the same. Law and order demands sacrifice and the satisfaction of those in authority. It's the same in every age.

And yet, what our Epistle lesson tells us is that, in Christ, nothing has changed and everything has changed. Nothing has changed in the sense that, even now, our sins demand sacrifice. If we want to call ourselves God's people, then we are no different than the people of Israel.

Every sin demands a sacrifice. Every thought, word, or deed that we do in violation of God's law demands divine satisfaction. And, like them, if we want any hope of forgiveness, we must appear before the priest, plead our case, receive our punishment, and beg for God's forgiveness.

4,000 years may have gone by, but nothing has changed in that regard. The only thing that has changed is the priest and the sacrifice. Because it is no longer a sinful human priest, standing day after day, again and again offering the same sacrifices, as Hebrews tells us.

Sacrifices that, really, accomplished nothing. Because they were made by a sinful priest who would one day die. And because they couldn't take away the sinfulness of the person. Those sacrifices could pay for the sins, but they couldn't stop the sinning.

For that, we needed a greater priest. We needed the greatest priest, in fact. Who became his own sacrifice. And laid down His perfect life. That we might not simply have our sins forgiven, but that we might be perfected by the sacrifice.

And that's the key difference. You can sacrifice a sheep and it might pay for a sin that you've committed, but it won't change you as a sinner. It won't write God's Law in your heart and on your mind. It won't change you so much that God simply sits down and says, "I can't even remember what you did anymore."

Only Jesus Christ can do that. Only Jesus Christ has done that. We have been made perfect forever and we are continually being made holy by that one sacrifice. A sacrifice that gives us confidence to enter the holiest place of God and know that we are accepted there.

Not by our sacrifice. Not by the sacrifice of any sinful man. But by the blood of Jesus Christ. It is He who has sprinkled our heart and washed our bodies with the pure water of baptism. He is our great priest welcoming us into the house of God.

It is He who welcomes us to this altar today. Because when you kneel and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord for the forgiveness of your sins, you are entering the Most Holy Place of God. You are entering a place where even the high priests of old feared to tread.

But you enter it knowing that Jesus' death has torn down the curtain dividing God and man. That His flesh has opened a new and living way to the Father. That we draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith that where there is forgiveness of sins, there is no longer any offering for sin. The offering has already been made, once for all. The righteous for the unrighteous. So that we might be in the presence of God.

God doesn't change. His laws don't change. The way that He orders this world with sacrifice and authority doesn't change. But we are not without hope. He who promised is faithful. God doesn't change. Instead, He changes us. Into the perfect, holy creatures He create us to be. Until we do enter that world where everyone is just and fair and righteous at all times. Because our sin will be gone forever. Amen.