

Miracles are very much a part of Lent. The death of Jesus Christ on Calvary's cross was preceded by the miraculous darkness. And of what followed His death, we read:

“And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. (Matthew 27:51–53) This evening, I would like to direct your attention to the *Miraculous Tearing of the Temple Curtain*.

The curtain separated the two inner rooms within the temple; those rooms were called the Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place. Only priests could enter the Holy Place. Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and he could only enter it on the Day of Atonement — once a year. The curtain itself was a sight to behold. It was about 10 yards wide and 20 yards tall. It was elaborately woven together from 72 plaits, or squares, and was as wide as a person's hand. God's own description of this curtain in Exodus chapter 26 shows us just how ornate it was. **“Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim worked into it by a skilled craftsman. Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the Testimony behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place”** (Exodus 26:31-33).

You can probably sense that this was not like something you'd find on the clearance rack at Bed, Bath, and Beyond! This was special, and it conveyed an important spiritual truth. Not even an ordinary priest could walk behind that curtain. The curtain was a symbolic reminder that sin is a major, serious barrier that divides us from our holy and righteous God. Isaiah 59:2 says : “your iniquities have separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you.” The High Priest was the only person who could walk behind that curtain, only on the Day of Atonement, and only carrying the blood of a special sacrifice that he sprinkled on the Ark of the Covenant inside the Most Holy Place. Hebrews chapter nine explains, **“Only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance”** (Hebrews 9:7). The blood of that sacrifice was a reminder that someday God would send his Son to be the Sacrifice to end all sacrifices and to give us open access to God once again.

Now go back to our main Scripture selection for this sermon. **“When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”** Coincidence? Not if the Holy Spirit makes the connection! The Sacrifice to end all sacrifices had just given up his life after pouring out his blood for the sins of the world. The Sacrifice that all those Old Testament sacrifices pointed to had just been completed, and the thick barrier of sin that separated God and humankind was removed — permanently! Oh, to have been one of those priests offering the evening sacrifice in the Holy Place when the curtain was torn in two! And yet those priests probably did not understand what we now understand — the miraculous and symbolic tearing of the temple curtain declared to the world that Jesus' sacrifice and death have shredded the barrier and torn down the sin that would have otherwise separated us from God in hell for eternity! Once again, the book of Hebrews sheds some light on this miracle's meaning: **“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our**

bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:19-22). We live in a world that doesn’t take sin seriously. I don’t think we can understate that point. Our world does not take sin seriously. The famous drunk and fornicator Charlie Sheen grabs media attention wherever he turns; he joins Twitter and as of today has over 2.4 million followers. We don’t have to hold our breath long before the next news story appears about a politician embroiled in yet another scandal. And it’s not too hard for us to see this kind of behavior and be aghast — and rightly so.

But are we just as aghast at our own sinfulness? Are we aghast at the loveless words thrown around among family members, or the lustful thoughts that we entertain, or the extravagant wants that we try to justify as “needs,” or the ridiculously poor excuses we can come up with to explain why God and his Word do not need to be a part of our daily lives? Are we aghast at our own sin that has put up a barrier between us and God that is so thick and heavy that not even an NFL linebacker could knock it down? Or are we only aghast at the sins of others? Do we come to church with the Pharisee’s heart, thanking God that we aren’t like those real sinners out there? And do we realize that our Pharisee-like attitudes are just as dangerous and damning as the sins that our culture exploits and glorifies?

Our world doesn’t take sin seriously, and frankly, we don’t take it all that seriously either. But God does. He was serious when he mapped out the design for that thick, sin-symbolizing curtain in the temple. And he was serious when he miraculously ripped open that curtain at the death of his Son. Our sin separates us from God, but Christ’s death tore down the barrier that we had put up. Our sin divides us from God, but Christ’s death not only patches but completely restores the broken relationship that existed because of sin. Our sin attracts the wrath of God, but Christ became the lightning rod that attracted God’s judgment on the cross, and now Christ’s death attracts the hearts of hurting sinners who are looking for real forgiveness and peace and reconciliation with God.

And so there is no longer a curtain in God’s house. There is no curtain that separates the nave from the chancel. There is no curtain that separates the people in the pews from the pastor at the altar. Jesus’ sacrifice on the altar of the cross has taken down the curtain. Jesus’ blood has removed the barrier. Jesus’ **“It is finished”** cry has proclaimed full and free forgiveness to anyone and everyone whose faith rests in his barrier-breaking sacrifice on the cross.

“A picture is worth a thousand words.” “Actions speak louder than words.” Those familiar sayings carry a great deal of truth. The words, “I love you” seem to mean a lot more when accompanied by a hug or kiss or maybe a bouquet of flowers. The championship winning team feels a lot more like champions by holding the trophy in their hands more than by reading the final score on the scoreboard. And ashes on our skin seem to say “sinner” even more powerfully than a corporate confession recited together in worship.

God, who designed human psychology in the first place, understands that pictures and actions communicate powerfully. That’s why he designed Old Testament worship the way he did. And that’s why he accented his Son’s greatest act of grace with the miraculous tearing of the temple curtain. Jesus’ sacrifice proclaims that we are redeemed, restored, and forgiven, and the torn temple curtain puts that message in flashing, bold, italicized, triple underlined and highlighted letters. Even tonight, even 2,000 years later, the torn temple curtain proclaims to you and to every believer that you are redeemed, restored, and forgiven through Jesus Christ our Lord. Be glad and Rejoice. Amen