

“Priests in the Great High Priest”

Hebrews 5:1-10; 1 Peter 2:4-10

Sermon for Lenten Midweek Service, April 1, 2020

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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For our Lenten Midweek services this year, we have been looking at various things or themes in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in Jesus, and then also fulfilled in us through Jesus. A few weeks ago we looked at the Temple, with the theme of God’s presence. Ultimately, God’s word teaches us that Jesus Himself is the promise of God’s presence “as the whole fulness of God dwells in Him bodily” (Colossians 2:9), and as He is Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23). But then God’s Word also teaches us that we Christians are also God’s temple through faith in Jesus. The Apostle Peter speaks of this wonderful thing when he tells us that Jesus is the living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious to God, and that we also as living stones are being built up in Him as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to God (1 Peter 2:4-5).

The week after that we looked at the theme of anointing. God’s Word teaches us that Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah. His anointing is with the Holy Spirit to accomplish His work of redemption. God’s Word also teaches that you are anointed in Jesus with the same Spirit in faith toward God and for the fruit of the Spirit in your lives (Galatians 5:16ff).

This evening we pursue the theme of priesthood. God’s Word shows us Jesus as our Great High Priest. It also teaches us to regard ourselves as priests in and under the Great High Priest.

So we use this word “priest.” What do you think of when you hear this word? Maybe you think of someone who has special access to God, and that you must go through that person to get to God. Maybe you think of someone who offers sacrifices, with such sacrifices being made to atone for sin to appease God’s wrath.

In the Old Testament, the priests were supposed to be those appointed to serve God with respect to the tabernacle and then the temple in Jerusalem. They were supposed to attend to the many services and sacrifices involved in such service. They were also supposed to teach the people the books of Moses. They were supposed to engage in such service and perform the commanded sacrifices for sin on behalf of the people. And then the High Priest was supposed to enter the most Holy Place of the Tabernacle and then the Temple with the blood of a bull or goat to make atonement for himself and the sins of the people once a year (Hebrews 9:7). We read about this in Leviticus 16.

The Old Testament priesthood and the sacrificial system teaches us one very important thing: “Under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). A penalty must be paid for sin. Since God wants the sinner to be able to live before Him in the forgiveness of sin, the penalty is paid by a sacrificial substitute for the sinner. But “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4 ESV). So the most the Old Testament sacrificial system and priesthood could be was a provisional remedy for sin that pointed to the true Remedy that God would provide that really does take away sin forever.

So then one day John the Baptist saw Jesus walking nearby and proclaimed: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Johan 1:29). And the author of Hebrews tells us how Jesus is the Great High Priest who accomplishes eternal redemption. But He does not accomplish eternal redemption through the sacrifice of bulls and goats. No. He accomplishes

it by the sacrifice of Himself. He does not take the blood of bulls and goats into the most holy place. No. He takes His own blood, the blood of the eternal Son of God (Acts 20:28). We have been “sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10 ESV).

This blood, the blood of the Son, shed for us in human flesh, takes away sin. He Himself is our sacrificial substitute. And as He rose again and ascended to the Father’s right hand, He takes the blood of His own sacrifice into the presence of God where God dwells in His true and everlasting glory. He takes His blood there and presents it to God as the Holy Sacrifice. God is pleased. He turns toward us in forgiveness and love. Jesus has secured for us eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12).

He did this in the offering of Himself out of a love for us that is deeper and broader and higher and more unyielding and unyielding and available for you and me than we can imagine. His love is beyond imagining, yet true and real for you; as true and real as the fact that He died and He rose.

What a wonderful High Priest He is, the one true and everlasting High Priest. High Priest according to the manner or nature of Melchizedek. King of righteousness, for that is what Melchizedek means. King of Salem, priest of God most High, having neither beginning of days nor end of life (Hebrews 7:1-3). He is not High Priest in the manner of Melchizedek pursuant to the Law of Moses or through bodily descent, but “by the power of an indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:16 ESV).

His blood takes away your sin. By the power of His resurrection, He lives and reigns for you at God’s right hand, interceding for you there, as a faithful high priest. He fully sympathizes with you in what it means to be human here in this life. For He Himself was fully human, though without sin, to be a faithful High Priest for you. He knows what it means to be human and suffer. He knows what you need.

With respect to Jesus and only Jesus, therefore, it is true that priest means the One who has special access to God and the One through whom we get to God. With respect to Jesus and only Jesus, it is true that He makes sacrifice for sin in the sacrifice of Himself.

But now we need to talk about you and me. “You are a . . . royal priesthood,” the Spirit proclaims through the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:9). What does this mean for you?

Let’s first talk about access. It means that you have special access to God in Jesus. In Jesus you can enter right into the most Holy Place, so to speak, where God dwells and He receives you and hears you. The Apostle Paul declares to you that you have obtained access by faith in Jesus to the Father (Romans 5:2). There is no other human agency through which you must go to gain access to God. You have such access as a priest in our Great High Priest Jesus.

Now this does not eliminate your need to be made a priest with such access through the ministry of the Gospel, for no one makes himself or herself a priest (Hebrews 5:4-5). We are made priests by Christ through the ministry of the Gospel. But being made a priest by Christ’s doing through such ministry, you have direct access to God.

We are talking about faith and prayer here. The Father hears your prayer, because you are priest in our Great High Priest. What burden or need do you have? What fear or anxiety? What care or concern? Especially these days. You are a priest of God, with access to God through faith in Jesus. Bring it to Him. He hears you.

There is also a significance of your priesthood in relation to the world. God has placed us in the world to be a people who appeal to God for mercy and His mighty acts of salvation (1 Peter 2:9-10). You have God’s Word. Thus, you know God’s judgment against sin and are

contrite. You also know the atonement our Great High Priest has made in God's grace and mercy, and you rejoice in thanksgiving.

And so you know something that the world does not know, and it is this: That we do not appeal to God for any good thing—for blessing, for protection and deliverance from peril, disease, and pestilence—by appealing to anything we have done or to any worth or value we may think we have in ourselves. We admit that we deserve His displeasure and wrath. But we appeal to God's mercy presented to us in Jesus, who takes away our sin. And God hears His priests, you and me, because of His mercy in Jesus.

This is why God's priests cry "Lord have mercy" when they gather in Jesus's Name. This is why your priestly prayers are laced with "Lord have mercy" as you pray in Jesus's Name. This is why God hears us and still blesses His creation, even as He also disciplines it; it is because His priests cry "Lord have mercy."

So He wants a people of priests in the Great High Priest who appeal to His mercy. The world around us may not appreciate the importance of Christ's people among them who cry "Lord have mercy." So there is a sacrifice in this. For though we appeal to God's mercy on behalf of the people among whom we live, they may not appreciate it and might cause us to suffer in a great misunderstanding. But it is a sacrifice of being faithful to God through our Great High Priest. A sacrifice we make for the sake of our loved ones, ourselves, and the people among whom we live.

So let God's priests in the Great High Priest be praying. For God hears these priests and brings blessing to the nations through them.

Finally, we too as priests are called to sacrifice in other ways. But this is not a sacrifice to make atonement for sin. Only our Great High Priest, Jesus, can do that, and He has done it.

This is the sacrifice the Apostle Paul speaks of, of presenting our bodies, that is our lives, as a living sacrifice to God in Jesus's Name (Romans 12:2). When we have God's mercy in view, this is a sacrifice of joy and thanksgiving. It arises from within through faith, not by coercion from without. This sacrifice does not mean to kill ourselves. It means to live for God in thanksgiving for His mercy, in the power of His love; it means to live for God in our conduct according to His commandments, in the way we use our bodies, the money, talents, things and possessions He has given (Hebrews 13:16). It means to offer ourselves in loving kindness and good deeds toward our neighbor motivated from within, as our Great High Priest has done such good things for us in His great love.

Indeed, as you are in Jesus you are also a priest in Him. It is a great honor in humble thanksgiving to be a priest by His doing. It is a high calling to which you have been called; to which you have been called in love and grace, not fear. It gives you purpose, value, and a reason for being. The power of it all is Jesus. But He is living His power in you and through you by grace in the eternal redemption He accomplished for you. Embrace your priesthood in the Great High Priest and see what He can do.

Amen.