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Hebrews 1:1-3

JESUS IS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

INI

For the last 39 years I have had the joy and privilege of preaching Lenten sermons on the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is my favorite time of the year, because everything in Lent is pure gospel. It focuses on Jesus' love for us as he is willing to suffer and die for the sin of the world. It is always interesting to see how you can divide up texts for the Lenten season. You can go with people: Judas, Peter, Caiphas, Herod, and Pontius Pilate. You can go with places like the Upper Room, Gethsemane, Caiphas' Courtroom, Pilate's Palace, and Calvary. You can use statements from Jesus' friends or enemies or from Jesus himself. You can always use the Seven Words from the cross. You can use Old Testament prophecies and many other things. There are always beautiful gems from the Holy Scriptures.

This year our Synod suggested something different. Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest with all of the sermons coming from the letter to the Hebrews. My first thought was to dismiss it and preach on something else. Does anyone really want to hear eight sermons on Jesus being our High Priest? It isn't easy. One would have to have some familiarity with the Old Testament and things recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. One would have to be somewhat familiar with the letter to the Hebrews as well. To be honest, I don't believe that they are among the most popular books of the Bible. We don't ever hear of Jesus being called our High Priest anywhere in the Gospels or the letters of Paul, Peter, or John. He is called our High Priest many times in the letter to the Hebrews. Before I dismissed the possibility, I thought that it would be a good thing to study the letter to the Hebrews. What a wonderful treasure we find there! I pray that I can share some wonderful insights over the next seven weeks as we see that JESUS IS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST!

The letter to the Hebrews is unique in that it is the only letter in the New Testament that we do not know the author. It has been suggested that it was written by Paul or Barnabas or Apollos, but we do not know for sure. It was someone familiar with Paul. He mentions "our brother Timothy." The author does not mention the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that took place in A. D. 70, so it must have been written before those events. Most likely it was written to Jewish Christians in Rome.

We know that Emperor Nero began widespread persecutions of Christians already in the year 64. Christians were being arrested and put to death in the Coliseum. These Jewish Christians were tempted to renounce Christ and return to the old ways of Judaism that they had left behind when they became Christians. They knew the religious rituals of temple worship and they thought that it might be a good time to return to them. The author of this letter tells them that such a move would be a mistake. Jesus is better in every way!

He gets right to the point. Jesus is better, starting with the prophets. "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." He directs his hearers back to the Old Testament and the writers. There were many great men who God used to write them: Moses, David, and Isaiah, among others. These men delivered the gospel message over many years. Each prophecy was a piece of the puzzle that pointed to the Messiah who was to come. No one had the entire picture, but if you put them all together, they all pointed to Jesus of Nazareth: his birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection. "What the fathers most desired, what the prophets' heart inspired, what they longed for many a year stands fulfilled in glory here."

Why would we return to prophecy if we have the fulfillment of the prophecy? The prophets spoke for God; Jesus spoke as God! Listen to his qualifications! "In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." Jesus was not merely a man. He is fully God. We confess these things in the Nicene Creed: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...Through him all things were made." Jesus is fully qualified to teach us about heavenly things because he is God!

But the writer to the Hebrews does not merely want to impress upon us that Jesus is a prophet and a teacher. He wants to show us that Jesus is the great High Priest. He adds to Christ's credentials the words: "After he had provided purification for sins." The original hearers would immediately think of the work of the High Priest on the great Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, to provide purification for sins. God gave his instructions: "On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins."

The High Priest was a very important person in the worship life of Israel. You could see that by the way that he dressed. An entire chapter of the Bible is dedicated to describing what the High Priest was to wear and how those garments were to be made. Not just anyone could serve as High Priest. There were definite qualifications. He had to be from the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron, the brother of Moses. He had to be free from any physical deformity or defect. He could not attend funerals, even members of his own family. Jesus had much higher credentials. He is the Son of God, the heir of all things, the Creator and Preserver of all things, the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being. He will provide the purification we need for our sin.

As our Lenten journey begins, we see Jesus in the Upper Room with a towel around his waist, washing the dirty, dusty feet of his disciples. That doesn't really fit in with what we think of with the high priest's garments. But let's go back to the Day of Atonement for a second. On that day the high priest would not wear the usual garments of his office. On that day he removed those splendid garments that he usually wore and put on simple linen garments. Usually he wore garments that made him look like a king, but when he made purification for sin, he looked more like a slave than a king.

Now we return to the Upper Room. Jesus gets up, takes off his outer clothing and wraps a towel around his waist. He didn't merely set aside his outer clothing as he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet. He laid aside much more than that. St. Paul reminds us that although Jesus was in very nature God, "he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant." Jesus would set aside the divine power and glory that he had as God and would become the lowliest of servants.

So, we see Jesus down on his hands and knees washing the feet of his disciples, cleansing them of dust and dirt. But there is far more here than we might think. Jesus is going to cleanse them of much more. Simon Peter was first insulted that Jesus would perform such a lowly task. Jesus told him, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Jesus wasn't talking about simply washing feet. He was talking about a much deeper cleansing. We need to be washed clean from sin. Jesus would stoop much lower than washing people's feet. He would stoop to dying a criminal's death on an instrument of torture known as the cross. By doing so, he would provide purification for the sin of the world, for your sins and mine!

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. This is a day that we are reminded of our sins that have separated us from a just and a holy God. This is a day that we call to mind all those sins of which we are guilty. There

are sins of commission and sins of omission. These are the bad things we do and the good things that we fail to do. There are the sins of thought, of word, and of our actions. God knows all the things that we have done. There are our sins against God. We have failed to love the Lord, our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. There are our sins against our fellow man. We have failed to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. There are those sins that we have forgotten and those sins that trouble us. There are those sins that we commit over and over again and those sins that we willfully choose when Satan tempts us. We are guilty. As St. John reminds us, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

We have nothing to offer God but our sin. Our Gospel reading makes that so clear. While the Pharisee was bragging about how good he was, the tax collector could only confess, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." We must strip all pride from our lives. We must admit that we are powerless to save ourselves. We need to be washed clean from our sin and there is only one Person who can do that: Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest!

We will be reminded over and over again in our Lenten worship that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. The Old Testament sacrifices could not suffice. They had to be repeated day after day. Our Great High Priest would make only one sacrifice, but what a sacrifice it was. He would offer himself. Since he is God, his blood could atone for the sin of the entire world, every man, woman, and child, past, present, and future. We plead with David: "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin!" And the blood of Jesus does exactly that!

And there is even more! Jesus not only is qualified to be our High Priest to provide purification from sin, but he also will glorify us. "After he provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." Jesus would once again take up the full power and glory that he had as the Son of God. He did everything that was necessary, and he would now return to the glory of heaven.

But Jesus' exaltation was not for him alone. He prayed on that night that he was betrayed: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see your glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." This great High Priest had prepared a place for us in the glories of heaven. This comes to us not because we have earned it or deserved it, but because of his great love for us.

On this first day of Lent, we look away from ourselves and our sins and to the one who died for us. We remember both his sacrifice and his promises. He is our Great High Priest. He has the qualifications. He has purified us, and he will glorify us forever! AMEN.

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Hebrews 5:7-9

JESUS IS OUR PERFECT HIGH PRIEST

INI

Is it possible to be too good? Is it possible to be too great? Some time ago it was reported that a girls' basketball team was kicked out of its league in Minnesota because it was too good. The other teams in the league did not want to play them because they would lose games by embarrassing scores. Perhaps there was a time in your life that you really needed a job. You were willing to take just about anything in order to pay your bills. You applied at a number of places and you were told that you were overqualified. That may have been true, but it didn't buy food or make the mortgage payment.

What about our Lord Jesus? Is it possible that he might be too great to be our Great High Priest? The high priest was supposed to be able to relate to the people that he served. The first verses of this chapter begin this way: "Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness." One week ago, we heard about Jesus' qualifications to be our great High Priest. He is the very Son of God, the heir and Creator and Preserver of all things, the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being.

Is Jesus great? There is no question about that. But is he too great? Is he too great to relate to the sinners he is supposed to represent? The Jewish high priests were human beings and they were sinners. They understood what their people went through day after day on their earthly journeys. How could the perfect Son of God possibly relate to sinners? We find the answer this evening as we see that JESUS IS OUR PERFECT HIGH PRIEST.

Perhaps something in the text just didn't sound right to you as we read it. Didn't it sound strange to hear that Jesus was "made perfect." Our first inclination is to think of someone who was imperfect who gradually progresses through trial and error from imperfection to perfection. That is not what the writer to the Hebrews is saying. He speaks of Jesus' life on earth. Jesus is a true human being in every way. When he talks about how Jesus "offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death," we think of the Garden of Gethsemane. We think of the anguish Jesus felt in both body and soul as he exclaims, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." From his human lips come cries, from his eyes come tears, and from his face sweat falls like drops of blood. Yes, Jesus Christ is "true man, born of the Virgin Mary!"

But don't forget that Jesus is also true God. We heard that over and over again last week. Everything that God the Father is, Jesus is as well. This is what we must remember. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Mary, is also the eternal Son of God.

We go to the garden of Gethsemane and see our Lord Jesus on his hands and knees. We hear his agonizing cries. Jesus knew exactly what was coming. He had told his disciples that many times, but now the hour had come! The burden of the sin of the world was now placed upon our Lord. Think of the crushing burden of guilt and shame that just one sin can lay upon a soul! You will see people led away in handcuffs trying to avoid the reporters and the cameras. Some have found that burden so heavy and shameful that they would even take their own lives by suicide. But Jesus,

driven into the dust by the guilt of every man, woman, and child who ever lived, would rise from the ground, carrying that burden and would go out to meet his betrayer. Truly, Jesus is the very Son of God.

Jesus is the perfect High Priest, both God and man, who is able to represent mankind before God. Mary was told that although she was a virgin, she would give birth to a Son. Remember the words that the angel spoke to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." He is the Holy One when he was born, so there is no room to progress from imperfection to perfection. God the Father proclaimed at both Jesus' baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." St. John would write, "You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin!"

So then, how can a perfect, sinless Christ plead with his heavenly Father to take away the cup of suffering from his lips so that he would not have to drink it? How can the Son of God not know that there is no other way for the world to be saved from the powers of sin, death and Satan? How could the Son of God learn obedience? Does he not know all things already?

We remember that Jesus humbled himself. He laid aside the divine power and glory that he had as God. From the time of his conception in Mary's womb to his burial in Joseph's new tomb, he willingly gave up the full and constant use of his divine power and glory. We can't understand that the one who created the angels is strengthened by them in order to bear his struggle.

He "offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death." And yet he never rebelled! We can't even imagine what was in that cup of suffering. There are sins that are too horrible to imagine. That cup was huge. It smelled more vile than anything we can imagine. Jesus was not merely asked to sip it. He was asked to drain it of every last drop. You think of a child asked to drink some medicine. He rebels, pushing the spoon away, spilling its contents and saying, "I won't! I won't drink it!"

Jesus prayed and as he prayed, he concluded with the words, "Not my will, but yours be done!" And so, he was heard. As we follow the Passion story and see what lies ahead, we might conclude the very opposite, that Jesus' prayer was not heard. But he was! In reverent submission, Jesus would do his Father's will, carrying the cross, drinking the cup, and dying on that cross. Three days later he was saved from death as he would be raised from the dead and celebrate glorious victory on Easter morning!

We do not always live our lives in reverent submission to our Father's will. We don't always say, "Father, your will be done!" The prophet Isaiah reminds us that we all like sheep have gone astray and have turned to our own way. We do it in our lives every day. We do it with our time and our money and our energy. There are days when God is not even a blip on our radar; we are so consumed by our own priorities. We grumble and complain that God is unfair to us and has not answered our prayers. It is easy to say, "Your will be done!" but hard to pray, "Your will be done!" The world says, "My will, my way, my body, my business!"

If it is difficult for us to say, "Your will be done!" imagine how hard it is to actually do God's will. That's what the writer tells us this evening as he says, "He learned obedience from what he suffered." Jesus moved from Gethsemane to Calvary. There God's will was done. There Jesus carried out God's plan of salvation to the letter. He did everything that needed to be done. In that way, he learned obedience.

To this point you can say that all of our Lord's sufferings were theoretical. He knew that he would be betrayed. He knew that Peter would deny him and that the rest of the apostles would all run away. He knew that he would be condemned both by the Jewish Sanhedrin and by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. He knew that he would be beaten, whipped, and spit upon. He knew that he would be nailed to that horrible instrument of torture known as the cross. And he knew that he would be forsaken by his heavenly Father on that cross. But now these things would actually happen. It is one thing to make a promise. It is another thing to obey.

Remember the day that you got married? It was a wonderful, exciting time. All your family and friends were there, and you were asked to say your wedding vows. You promised that you would love, cherish, and care for your spouse in sickness and in health, in poverty or wealth. You said, "I will!" It wasn't easy, was it? Oh, it was easy to say, but difficult to do. You can think back on many times in your life when it was very difficult. You had no idea what was coming. It meant many times of self-denial and times of loving a person who wasn't always lovable. We don't always put our promises into practice, whether it is our confirmation vow, our wedding vows or hundreds of other promises.

Jesus did. He said, "I will!" and he did! He went to the cross and did what had to be done. He did the will of his Father. That's what it means when we hear, "And, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation." Or you could translate it, "After he had finished his work." That should ring a bell. Think ahead to Good Friday. Jesus spoke triumphantly from the cross, "It is finished!" Jesus not only promised to do his Father's will. He did his Father's will. If Jesus had only promised to do his Father's will, but refused to carry it out, he could not have been our perfect Savior. His rescue mission would not have been complete, finished. We would still have our sin. But he did finish and so he "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

How do we obey him? That comes by faith. Faith is obedience to God. We cannot be saved without faith. St. John writes, "This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he has commanded us." You cannot save yourself. All the supposed good deeds you have done are like dirty rags. Instead we cling to the perfect Savior who obeyed God's will perfectly and died for our sins. He provides us with the righteousness that we need to stand before a just and a holy God. He invites us, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." Trusting our Lord Jesus is the obedience that we need. That faith will show itself in our love for God and for our fellow human beings.

Jesus is our Great High Priest and he is our perfect High Priest. He was perfect in his prayer and he was "made perfect" in his obedience to his Father's will! Thanks be to God! AMEN.

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Hebrews 4:14-16

JESUS IS OUR COMPASSIONATE HIGH PRIEST

INI

As we go through the Passion History each year, we find many people who should have known better. There are those who acted in weakness like Peter, the other apostles, and Pontius Pilate. And there are those who acted deliberately in their condemnation of our Lord Jesus! Among those who stand out in that regard are Caiphas and his father-in-law Annas, who served as High Priests of the people of Israel. It is not a very flattering picture. We see pride, greed, hypocrisy, disregard for the law and abusive treatment, not only for Jesus, but for many people in Israel, especially widows and orphans. We might be tempted to think that this was true of most of the high priests who served the people. But that assessment would be unfair.

There is an old saying that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The High Priest of Israel did have absolute power to deal with religious matters. Even though the Romans controlled the land, they let the Jewish people observe most of their religious practices and let the High Priests gather the monies demanded for the sacrifices and other things. There were many good high priests beginning with Aaron, the brother of Moses, Zadok who faithfully served King David, and Jehoiada, who rescued King Joash from being murdered by his wicked grandmother. But even these good and decent high priests pointed to someone greater than themselves. They were to point the people to the true Great High Priest who was to come into the world to offer the perfect sacrifice that would atone for all sins of all time. That perfect High Priest is our Lord Jesus, the Son of God. This evening we see that JESUS IS OUR COMPASSIONATE HIGH PRIEST who is able to sympathize with us in our weakness and is able to energize us with his power.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us to hold firmly to the faith that we profess. Remember that the Jewish Christians of the first century were being persecuted for their faith. They had grown up with the temple rituals and sacrifices and high priests. They had seen how Jesus was the fulfillment of all of these things and they confessed Jesus as Lord and God. But now things were getting hot! As arrests and persecutions came, they were tempted to renounce Jesus and return to the old ways of Judaism.

They were not the first people to face such a challenge to their faith. We think of Peter in the high priest's courtyard who failed to confess Jesus. He was not being tortured, but simply asked the question, "Didn't I see you with him?" by a little servant girl. Peter would deny knowing Jesus three times that evening, even resorting to cursing and swearing, "I don't know the man!"

And we know that same temptation all too well. The world we live in does not love Jesus. The world we live in has no use for Jesus or his followers whoever they may be. The world we live in has a whole different set of values and priorities. The world we live in does not want its deeds of darkness exposed by the light of God's truth.

We have a high priest who is able to sympathize with us in our weakness. Perhaps you might have wondered why God chose human beings to serve as high priests and not angels. God chose human beings because they can understand the weaknesses in other human beings and not lose their temper. We have pastors who are to serve God's people. We know what our members go through. There is no sin that should shock us because the same temptations

fall upon all of us. We all must confess, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” Any pastor who constantly screams and yells at his people is going to be headed for a huge fall himself.

Temptations come in so many ways, yet our Lord knew them all. Are you tempted to just quit, turning away from the calling God has given you in life, whether it is the calling to follow Christ or to be a faithful spouse, parent, or child? Our Lord Jesus was in the wilderness, facing all the temptations of Satan as Satan tried to get our Lord to be unfaithful to his calling. Are you most tempted to turn away from Jesus when suffering comes into your life? Jesus knew suffering well. He suffered physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Does your temptation to turn away from Christ come from friends urging you to take the easy way out? Jesus knew that as well. His own disciples tried to lead him away from Jerusalem and the cross that would come. Do you ever feel like you have too big a burden to carry? The same Jesus who would face the indescribable agony of Gethsemane and the cross would urge us to come to him for rest. He would help us carry our burden.

Is it the stuff that the world offers that tempts us: money, power, sex, fame, and many other things? Jesus understands that as well. When he was in the wilderness, Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would just bow down and worship him. Is it the contempt and scorn that you feel as a Christian that tempts you? Jesus knew that all too well. People mocked his claim to be the Christ. They laughed at him and even spit in his face. He knows what it is like. He went through every bit of it for you.

Our Lord Jesus is a human being just like us in every way. He is a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.” There is one difference. He was without sin. He does know what we go through in life. He has faced every temptation that we do in our daily lives. He is able to deal gently with us.

Let’s get back to Simon Peter for a second. What did Jesus do when Peter denied knowing him? He turned and looked straight at Peter. What was in that look? Was it a look of rage? “I’ll get you for this!” Obviously, Jesus knew exactly what Peter did. Jesus had warned Peter that he would do exactly what he did, by denying him three times. That look would let Peter know that Jesus knew exactly what he did. Jesus knew his sin. But that look was also a look of love. In spite of what Peter did, Jesus would not cast him out. Jesus would add that sin of denial to the burden that he would carry to the cross and pay for in full. Peter’s sin was real. Neither he nor Jesus would say that it was no big deal. It was an offense against his fellow man and an offense against God and Jesus was both! But that is exactly the reason Jesus came into the world: to forgive and to save sinners like Peter, like you, and like me!

We all know what it is like to try to hide our sins. We are not alone in that. Adam and Eve tried to hide from God. Cain tried to pretend that he didn’t know what had happened to his brother Abel. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samson, King David, and everybody else has tried it at times. Jesus sees all our sins. He knows our hearts and our minds. He knows our lusts, our greed, and our selfishness. He does not ignore those sins or pretend that they don’t matter – they do! He did not come into this world to excuse sin. He came to forgive sin. He calls us to repentance. He does not want to drive us away, but rather restore us to be his people. King David would write, I will confess my transgressions to the LORD, and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

Yes, the temptations to turn away from Christ come from every angle and direction. But we must remember that we have a Great High Priest who faced the very same temptations that we do. He can sympathize with us in our weakness. But we must also remember that he can do something else. He is able to strengthen us in our weakness.

Our High Priest has ascended into heaven after having made purification for our sins. “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” He doesn’t merely say, “I understand what you’re going through.” He also says, “Let me help you in your struggles against temptation.”

We love to think that we are able to conquer anything on our own. There are thousands of self-help books out there on the market that tell us that we can be masters of our own fate and destiny. There are some things that we can do; there are others that we can’t. We cannot save ourselves. We do not have the power to live the holy life that God wants us to live.

Once again, we go back to Peter. Jesus had given him many warnings about pride. Jesus warned him about Satan, but Peter felt that he was strong enough. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus warned him to watch and pray so that he would not fall into temptation. He was sound asleep. Peter would later write: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” He was certainly speaking from experience. He would also write: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” Satan can, and he will attack us any time, any place. We need to know how vulnerable we are. We cannot underestimate him and his tactics.

The Psalms are such a great source of strength. The Psalmist knew what we face. King David prayed, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” Asaph prayed: “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.” The writer of Psalm 130 knew how we feel when he wrote: “Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.” The prophet Isaiah reminds us: “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

Prayer helps us to resist Satan and his evil snares, but God’s Word also is that source of strength. James urges us: “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” How do we do that? Jesus met the devil with the words: “It is written!” Know God’s Word and what it says. You will be tested. Remember your Great High Priest. He understands what you are going through. He is our compassionate High Priest, able to sympathize with us in our weakness and able to strengthen us in our weakness! AMEN.

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Hebrews 10-5-12

JESUS IS OUR SELF SACRIFICING HIGH PRIEST

INI

“Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Three weeks ago, our Old Testament reading was the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. We know that God tested Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice his only son. Abraham trusted that even if he had killed his son that God would raise him from the dead. We hear the words of Isaac, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham would reply, “God himself will provide the lamb!” And so, God did. There was a ram caught in a thicket that would take the place of Isaac.

The writer to the Hebrews has been talking about Jesus as our great High Priest. He is our perfect High Priest and our compassionate High Priest. He is able to sympathize with us in our weakness. But is there something missing? Well, the readers and hearers of this letter knew what it was. They were very familiar with the Old Testament and the work of the High Priest. They knew all about the sacrifices that were offered every day at the temple. If Jesus was indeed a better High Priest, then what was he going to sacrifice? Were there better lambs and sheep and bulls? If so, what were they and where would one find them? Where was the lamb? We see the answer this evening as we find that JESUS IS OUR SELF-SACRIFICING HIGH PRIEST. He is an acceptable sacrifice and he is the accepted sacrifice.

Does it seem a little weird when we hear: “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them?” Weren’t there all kinds of regulations about sacrifices that we hear about in the books of Exodus and Leviticus? There were all kinds of sacrifices in Israel. Every day you had the morning and evening sacrifice of a lamb. You had more on the first day of the month and at festivals. One could say that rivers of blood flowed from the altar of burnt offering and mountains of animal carcasses filled the courtyard where the altar of sacrifice stood, first in front of the tabernacle and later the temple.

Yes, God required sacrifices, but these sacrifices were never meant to be an end unto themselves. The sacrifices were designed to be a regular proclamation of the people’s sin and the grace of God. Every time a lamb or goat was killed, the message was clear: “The wages of sin is death!” God’s people were spared by the death of a substitute. The animal sacrifices were there to point to the perfect substitute that God would send into the world that would take away the sin of all time.

The Old Testament sacrifices had no value unless they related to the coming Savior. Earlier in this chapter the writer declares: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” He also asks: “If those sacrifices could have actually taken away sins, wouldn’t they have stopped being offered?” We just sang: “Not all the blood of beasts on Israel’s altars slain could give the guilty conscience peace or wash away the stain.” Could the death of an animal really take away sin? No, it couldn’t!

But people began to think that it could. The offerings became an end unto themselves. The people failed to see their need for a Savior and they thought that if they brought a lamb or a goat, they were earning their way into God’s favor. The animals they brought were worthless in God’s sight. They were simply bribes to buy God’s mercy and forgiveness. That is why Jesus said, “Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire.”

It is the same today. Do we really think that we can buy God's favor by coming to church and throwing a few dollars into the collection plate? If we think that will buy us the forgiveness of our sins, then we are woefully misguided. All the money in the world cannot buy us the forgiveness of a single sin. Once again we turn to a familiar hymn: "Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands. Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; thou must save and thou alone." We cannot pay for our sins by feeling sorry for them or by bringing God a gift or by trying to do enough good things to make up for them. It is a dead end. "The wages of sin is death!"

Because our own sacrifices were not pleasing to God, God would provide his own lamb for sacrifice. Jesus says, "A body you prepared for me." This is the miracle of the incarnation. The infinite, eternal Son of God would become one of us. He would take on human flesh and blood. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." How can this be that Jesus Christ is true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary?

God the Father prepared a body for his Son so that the Son might have blood to shed for us on a shameful cross, blood that can do what all the blood of beasts and good works and gold and silver could never do, blood that can purify us and every sinner from every sin because it is the holy, precious blood of God. God gave his Son a body so that he could wash away our sins. That body would be offered as the great sacrifice for all sins. But was Jesus an acceptable sacrifice?

When people brought their animals to the priests for sacrifice, the animal would be examined. Have you ever watched the Westminster Kennel Club dog show? The judges will give the animals a thorough examination for competition. The judges run their hands over the dogs' sides and legs checking for lumps. They check the dogs' eyes and inspect their ears. They lift up the dogs' lips to check their teeth and gums. That's what the priest did for animal sacrifices. They thoroughly examined these animals, looking for physical defects and rejecting any that were not perfect. At the time of the prophet Malachi, the people were bringing diseased, crippled, and injured animals, and the priests were accepting them. The prophet pronounced God's curse on both the priests and the people. God deserved only the best. But even the best unblemished animals could not take away sin. That is why God prepared a body for his Son and that is why Jesus says: "Here I am. I have come to do your will."

Jesus presents himself as the Sacrifice that would take away the sin of the world. Jesus declares his willingness to do whatever it took to buy us back from our slavery to sin, death, and the power of Satan. Over the last few weeks we have seen all the tests that Jesus faced: his forty days in the wilderness, one on one with Satan, and the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane. God the Father declared Jesus to be his beloved Son with whom he was well-pleased.

During his trials the Sanhedrin tried to find a charge against Jesus that would make him guilty of death. They paid false witnesses to testify against him but could not find even two who would agree. Pontius Pilate thoroughly examined Jesus and concluded, "I find no basis for your charge against him." Inspected by God and in the courtrooms on earth, Jesus was proved to be the Lamb of God, pure and holy.

"I have come to do your will." How many times don't we hear of Jesus saying that? He did not come for riches or pleasure or anything else. He came to do the will of his Father. It meant a life of humility. It meant setting aside the full power and glory that he had as the Son of God to become the lowliest of servants. It meant enduring rejection by the very people he had come to save. It meant dying a criminal's death on that instrument of torture known as the cross. It meant being forsaken by his Father in heaven, suffering hell itself so that we might have heaven. He had come to do his Father's will, and nothing would stop him from doing it. Jesus was an acceptable sacrifice.

The Old Testament priests offered up all kinds of sacrifices: lambs, goats, bulls, birds and other animals. There was one thing that they did not offer up: themselves! Jesus, the Great High Priest is different. As the hymn writer once again declares: "Himself the Victim and himself the Priest!" Was the death of Christ an acceptable sacrifice? Jesus said, "It is finished!" Was it? Look at the empty tomb! That is all the evidence that we need. The writer to the Hebrews declares: "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Jesus came to do his Father's will and he finished the task. He paid for the sin of the world by his sacrifice and we now have peace with God.

Compare the work of Jesus with the other priests of Israel. "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." The older I get, the more tired I get. At one time I had no problem standing in line for hours. I stood for concerts and political rallies and playoff games. I can't do that anymore. I need to sit down and rest.

The other priests stood for hours, offering sacrifice after sacrifice, but they could get no rest. Those sacrifices were repeated endlessly year after year. After our Lord Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice, he sat down at the right hand of God. His work was finished. There was nothing left to be done. There was no more sin to atone for, not one sinner yet to be saved. He had done it all. By his resurrection and ascension into heaven, God has assured us that Jesus was both Lord and Christ. His work is finished and there is nothing that you or I can add to it.

That is something that we must remember. Satan will always try to convince us that there is still something that we must do, that Jesus didn't do enough or that our sin is too great. Judas fell into that trap. He may have convinced himself that Jesus was an acceptable sacrifice, but he did not believe that Jesus was the accepted sacrifice who would take away his shameful sin of betraying our Lord. There is no sin that you have committed that Jesus did not take to the cross and pay for in full. Jesus sat down at the right hand of God to give you the rest you need for your soul. No further sacrifice is ever needed.

Jesus is our Great High Priest who offered the perfect sacrifice: himself. Trust in him and in him alone! AMEN.

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Hebrews 13:10-16

JESUS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST SERVES AT A GREAT ALTAR

INI

Over the last four weeks we have been studying the letter to the Hebrews concerning Jesus as our Great High Priest. The letter was written to Jewish Christians. They had grown up knowing all the rites and sacrifices of the temple in Jerusalem. They learned that Jesus was the fulfillment of all those rites and prophecies. But then persecutions came. Other Jews tried to reel them back. They would argue with the new Christians and tell them that it was not worth leaving the old ways behind. These ways were good and should be retained. Last week we looked at the claim that there was no animal for sacrifice. We saw that our great High priest would make the ultimate sacrifice: himself. He was the accepted sacrifice for all sin for all time.

Tonight, we look at another argument that the Hebrew Christians had to face. Where was the altar for sacrifice? Atonement for sin was made at the altar by the shedding of blood and they knew that without the shedding of blood, there could be no atonement for sin. Did the Christians have an altar? The answer is "Yes!" We have an altar and that altar is the cross. Tonight, we see that JESUS OUR HIGH PRIEST SERVES AT A GREAT ALTAR.

The city of Jerusalem is very impressive. Eight years ago, I visited the city and as you see it from the Mount of Olives, it still takes your breath away. One did not merely see the city. You heard the city with all its bustle and commotion. And you smelled the city. You know what it is like in the spring when you go outside and smell the air. Someone in the neighborhood is having a barbecue and whatever it is that they're cooking, it smells great! There were thousands of sacrifices taking place at the great altar of burnt offering. That altar was built to God's specifications at the time the tabernacle was erected in the wilderness. It was about 7 ½ feet square and about 4 ½ feet high. You could say that the altar for sacrifice was like a very large grill where the fire kept continually burning and the parts of the sacrificial animals were burned up and dedicated to the Lord.

Most of Israel's worship took place in front of that altar. Only the priests could enter the temple proper and only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and only on one day a year, the Day of Atonement. The people watched as animals were slaughtered and the blood of those animals was used to make atonement for sin. The meat was burned up on the altar. It was indeed a powerful message that was preached. It reminded the people of their sins and that the wages of sin is death and that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness. Sin is very serious. God is angry with sin. But there was another message preached. God spared the people from dying because a substitute died in their place. That is the message that we hear over and over again as we see that Jesus was our divine Substitute who offered himself in our place.

The ritual for sacrifices was not the same in every case. For most sacrifices, when the animal was slaughtered, part of the meat was offered to God by burning and part was given to the priests to eat. One sacrifice was different. On the Day of Atonement, the priests did not eat any of the meat of the sacrificed animals. On that day, after the high priest made atonement for himself and his family by the offering of a bull and then for the sins of the people by the offering of a goat, the carcasses of those animals were taken out of the city and burned. That symbolized the removal of the sins of the people. The priests were not permitted to eat the meat of those offerings. That is why the writer says:

“We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp.”

When the writer to the Hebrews says, “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat,” he is pointing us to the cross and Good Friday. That is our true Day of Atonement. He reminds us of that ritual where the animals were taken out of the city when he says, “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.” Just as the bodies of the animals were taken out of the city and burned, so the cross of Christ was outside the city walls. It proclaims to us that our sins are washed away and forgiven by the holy, precious blood of Christ. It was no accident that Jesus was crucified outside of the city. That is God’s way of assuring us that our sins have been taken away, as far as the east is from the west. We do have an altar, not one where animals were sacrificed day after day, but rather one where the true Lamb of God was sacrificed for the sin of the world.

“Let us then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace that he bore.” Yes, Jesus was crucified outside the city, outside the camp. That showed how much Jesus was hated and despised by his own people. The Scriptures refer to Jesus as the stone that the builders rejected that would become the cornerstone. Jesus was led out of Jerusalem and nailed to the cross. What kind of people would be nailed to a cross? Certainly not outstanding, law-abiding citizens! You had only the worst of criminals: murderers, rapists, armed robbers and people guilty of treason and sedition. Crucifixion was a public thing. People would mock and curse those hanging there. They knew that the criminals were helpless to do anything to retaliate. The cross reminds of sin’s curse. The Scriptures said, “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree!” Yes, the cross would remind the people of God’s curse upon sin. Jesus would feel that curse as he was forsaken by his heavenly Father as he bore all our sin. That is why he was crucified outside the city.

So, what does that mean for us? We are connected with Christ. We are Christians. We bear his name. The hatred that he endured will fall upon us as well. We hear a lot about the war against Christians. Should this be surprising? Why wouldn’t the world hate us if it hated Christ? If the people wanted Jesus dead, why wouldn’t it want us dead as well? Think of the original hearers of this letter. To confess Christ meant that you would be ostracized from the Jewish community. Your own friends and family would have nothing to do with you. You associated yourself with this disgusting criminal. You deserve all the hatred that you get.

The world does not want to hear the message that we preach. People may say that they believe in God, but it is not the God that we worship, who reveals himself to us in his Word as a God who hates sin. We want to create God in our image, a god that does not care about sin, a god that condones any and every lifestyle. We do not want a god who gives Ten Commandments and reminds us that the soul that sins is the one that will die. We want a god that simply makes suggestions and if they don’t fit our plans, will apologize for even thinking about it. We want a god that will reward us lavishly for anything good that we do and ignore any bad things that we do. We want a god that will jump through our hoops.

We don’t really want to think of sin as serious, so serious that it would take nothing less than the death of the Son of God to pay for that sin. The hymn writer once again reminds us: “If you think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here you see its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed; see who bears the awful load – ‘tis the Word, the Lord’s Anointed, son of Man and Son of God.” That is what it took. That is the Savior that we confess that we need. People will think that we are crazy and woefully misguided. They will hate us. So be it!

Is it worth it to have faith in such a God? Why would we subject ourselves to the hatred and ridicule that will surely come? “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” Nothing lasts in this world. The older we get, the more changes we see. Those of us who have been around for a time, know all the

things that are no longer here, things that we tell our children and grandchildren that we experienced. They look at us as if we were crazy. We remember rotary phones and party lines, black and white televisions, the milkman, five and dime stores, and many other things. They are long gone. And then there are all those family members and friends who are no longer with us. We realize that our earthly journey will come to an end as well. We have something far better waiting for us.

This world is passing away. If we are kicked out of this world's club and excluded from the elite of society for proclaiming Christ crucified, so be it! This city won't endure. Through Christ we have an eternal home in the mansions of heaven, a place in an eternal city. Despite all the hatred the world could throw at him, Jesus secured our place forever. We proudly bear the same disgrace that he bore.

There is no more need for sin offerings, but God's people will gladly bring thank offerings for what our Lord did for us. These are not given to earn heaven. We already have that. Rather they are given because he gave us heaven and all the other blessings we enjoy in this world and in the world to come. "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

By nature, we don't want to praise God. We are totally selfish in our desires. But faith leads us to praise God. We know that everything we have is a gift from a loving and gracious God. He loved us so much that his Son died for us. That praise shows itself in our confession of his name. We do not apologize for our message. We boldly proclaim it to the world, no matter what the world has to say about it.

The fruit of faith is not only found on our lips, but in our lives. We do good and we share with others. What we have is only a temporary gift from God. When we are gone from this world, we will have no further use for it. We want to share our time, our talents, and our treasures to help bring others to the saving knowledge of Christ. Only through Jesus can hateful hearts become grateful hearts. He is the Vine, we are his branches, meant to bring forth much fruit.

Yes, we have an altar, the altar of the cross. We see the sacrifice and gladly bear our Savior's name. AMEN.

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Hebrews 10: 19-25

JESUS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST MAKES US PRIESTS

INI

Over the last five weeks we have looked at many aspects of the form of worship that God gave to his people of the Old Testament. We have looked at the high priest and his various duties. We have looked at the animals that were sacrificed. We looked at the altar that stood in front of the tabernacle and later at the temple. There is still one thing remaining. We have not yet looked into the tabernacle itself. We have not entered it. And there is a good reason for that. The people were not allowed to look into that sanctuary. Only the priests were allowed to enter the Holy Place. And there was the matter of the Most Holy Place. There was only one person who was allowed to enter there, and he was only allowed to enter on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement. The readers and hearers of the letter to the Hebrews knew that well. Therefore, they must have been shocked to hear that they were now invited into the Holy of Holies, the very dwelling place of God and that they could enter confidently. How could such a thing be? How could sinful human beings enter the dwelling place of God? We find our answer tonight as we see that JESUS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST MAKES US PRIESTS. We enter into God's presence through Christ's body and we enter God's presence through Christ boldly.

God himself set up the standards for the tabernacle. It was 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. It was divided into two rooms, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The Holy Place was the first room. In it were the table for showbread, the golden lampstand and a small altar for burning incense. It was separated from the Most Holy Place by a heavy curtain. The only way that one could get into the Most Holy Place was through that curtain. The Most Holy Place was a perfect cube, 15 feet by 15 feet by 15 feet. Inside that room was the Ark of the Covenant, signifying the very dwelling place of God. Only the high priest could go behind that curtain and only on the Day of Atonement, carrying the blood of a bull and a ram and the smoke of burning incense. Anyone else who would attempt to go behind that curtain would be struck dead!

Who would be crazy enough to attempt such a thing? It had to catch the hearers' attention when the writer to the Hebrews says: "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place." How could a sinful human being have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place? That was the very presence of God. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, God told him: "Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." King David says, "The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong." The prophet Isaiah was filled with fear as he exclaimed: "Woe to me! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King."

How can sinful people enter the Most Holy Place and the presence of a holy God? There was only one way and that was through the curtain. That curtain hid the people from God's presence and reminded them that their sins had separated them from a just and a holy God. They could not see God or even enter his presence. And they were not alone. We are just as sinful as the nation of Israel. Our sins have separated us from God. There is nothing that we can do of ourselves to enter that Most Holy Place. Isaiah reminds us, "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear." So how could we enter into the presence of God confidently? How could we have hope?

The Day of Atonement was meant to give the people hope. The high priest would go behind the curtain and sprinkle the blood of the sacrificed animals on the cover of the Ark to cover the sins of the people. But as we have said previously, the blood of those animals could not take away our sin. They could only point to the one who was to come, the One who would take away the sin of the world.

In our reading of the Passion History tonight we heard of a remarkable miracle. Jesus had finished his suffering. He would cry out in a loud voice and give up his spirit. At that precise moment the curtain of the temple, marking the way to the Most Holy Place, was torn in two from top to bottom. This was a huge curtain. It was as thick as the palm of a man's hand. This happened at the time of the evening sacrifice. The priests who were officiating at the Temple must have been shocked! What was going on? The Roman centurion and his men knew that something had indeed happened. They exclaimed, "Truly this was a righteous man! Truly this was the Son of God!" They were Gentiles, and yet they could understand what God had done. This was no ordinary man who had died. This was a special man. This was the very Son of God.

This would mean that we would no longer need a high priest to sacrifice animals over and over for sin, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. We had the High Priest, the Great High Priest, the perfect High Priest, the compassionate High Priest who would perform one sacrifice and take away the sin of the world forever. The barrier of sin that had separated us from God was now gone. God had reconciled the world to himself in his Son Jesus Christ. He no longer counts our sins against us. With that miracle God declares that Jesus is his beloved Son who did everything needed to buy us back from our slavery to sin, death, and the power of Satan.

Because of that sacrifice, "we now 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." The old curtain is gone. It was not torn down by men, but rather by God himself. Jesus' death meant that the old curtain was no longer necessary. We would have direct access to God through his Son Jesus Christ. We have a new curtain, not made of fabric, but one made of flesh and blood, the body of Jesus our Great High Priest. That body that was crucified would be buried and raised again. In only a week and a half we celebrate the great day of Easter. Death could not hold our Lord Jesus. He would rise exactly as the Scriptures had promised, exactly as he had promised.

Jesus did not come to earth to show us the way to heaven. He is the Way. He is the new and living way. That word for "new" originally meant "freshly slain." That is truly fitting for our Lord. And "living?" He is the Living One. Not even death could hold him in its grasp. And he brings us life, eternal life. Whoever believes in him has eternal life! He continues to give us his gracious invitations. "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." "Whoever comes to me, I will never drive away." We can go to the Father, confidently, knowing that every sin of thought, word, and deed, has been paid for in full by the holy, precious blood of his Son.

Why would anyone want to go back to the old ways of endless sacrifices performed over and over again by sinful men who would have to sacrifice first for their own sins? Why would anyone want to go back to that curtain that separated us from God? We have a great High Priest over the house of God. He is there to pray and intercede for us. He is there to plead our cause. He is there to strengthen us as we face Satan's temptations. He is there to welcome us as we take our last earthly breath and enter the joy of Paradise.

Yes, we too are priests. We can enter God's presence and do it boldly. "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." We have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ and washed clean with the waters of Holy Baptism. This was not done by us, but rather for us. We no longer have a guilty conscience, because Christ has taken all

our sins away. We wear the robe of Christ's perfect righteousness in Holy Baptism. God no longer sees our sins. We can go to God at any time, in any place, and find a loving, caring Father.

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." The Hebrew Christians were facing some very difficult challenges as persecutions threatened them. Yet they had God on their side. The worst thing that their opponents could do was to take their earthly lives. If that happened, they would enter the joys of heaven. God is with us. Our Lord Jesus promised that he would be with us always, even to the end of this age. He will be with us every step of our earthly journey and he will be with us for all eternity in heaven. He is faithful. Every promise that God made to send a Savior was fulfilled. Jesus paid for all our sins. He rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven where he would prepare a place for us. We trust his promises!

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage each other – and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Why are we here? Is it merely for ourselves? Are we not here to encourage others? This is my favorite time of the year: the NCAA basketball tournament, the Masters, Opening Day of baseball season. Millions of people are following their favorite teams and players. They are there to encourage and cheer for their favorites. As these athletes get tired and discouraged, they listen to their fans. They get stronger as they are urged on.

Our earthly life is not easy. There are many traps and temptations that Satan sets for us. We deal with pain and suffering, illnesses, the loss of loved ones, financial setbacks, broken relationships, and many more things. We need encouragement. We need to pray for others and we need the prayers of others. That is why we are here in the Lord's house. God strengthens us through Word and Sacrament and we strengthen each other. Can we ever have too many hugs? Can we ever hear the words, "I love you!" enough? What a wonderful joy I have had in writing these sermons during Lent and sharing these thoughts with you. And next week is Holy Week!

The Day is approaching. This world will not stand forever. Our risen and ascended Lord will return to judge the world. We have to stay the course, to keep on encouraging and inviting our family, our friends, our neighbors, and even those we don't know to hear about Christ, our Great High Priest. He has torn down the curtain and given us free access to the Father. Let us approach him boldly with our prayers and thank offerings! AMEN.