

OUR HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 5:1-10

Fifth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 17, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson comes from *The Letter to the Hebrews*, chapter 5, verses 1 through 10. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Hebrews 11, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵ So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

⁶ as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you ever been told you can't go somewhere? You know, like, “Authorized Personnel Only.” If you've ever worked for the military, no doubt you ran into things that were above your clearance. You can't go in that space. You can't access that file. Or at stores or restaurants, somewhere there is a sign that says, “Employees Only.” You and I can't go there. That's for someone else who has been given access to it.

In Old Testament times, there was a big “No Access” place. And I don't mean “big” in the sense that it was large, but “big” in the sense that it was really important, and it was very, very forbidden for anyone except one select man to enter that place. It was The Most Holy Place. It was a special room that was first in the tabernacle, and then later in the temple, when it was built. At first, the place of worship was the tabernacle. It was a big tent God commanded the Hebrews to construct while they were in the desert, after they escaped from Egypt, but before he brought them into the land of Canaan. They moved it around with them as they wandered in the desert.

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And they set it up in a more permanent place when they came into the Promised Land. Then, a few hundred years after they settled in Canaan, they wanted to build a temple, which was basically a permanent stone structure to replace the tent. And God, kind of reluctantly, allowed them to do it. Well, in both structures, first the tabernacle and then the temple, there was a special room called “The Most Holy Place.” This was the room in which the LORD dwelt.

The book of Exodus prescribes all of this (Ex. 26), and Hebrews talks more about it in chapter 9. Common Israelites were allowed in the main room of the tabernacle or temple. Then there was The Holy Place that only the priests were allowed to enter. And they went in there every day. But behind that was another super special place. That was The Most Holy Place. This one room was only for the high priest, and he only entered it once a year. He went in once a year to make atonement for sins. He sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the Ark of the Covenant before the LORD. It was a special place that could only be accessed by one special person. And I don’t mean “special” in the sense that the high priest was better than anyone else. He wasn’t. Some of them were rather scandalous persons. And all of them were sinners. The passage we just read from Hebrews talks about this. They were weak, just like the rest of the people (5:2), and they had to make sacrifices for their own sins before making sacrifices for the sins of the people (5:3; 7:27). They were special only in the sense that they were called by God. They were set aside for the purpose of making sacrifices for the sins of the people.

That’s what the priests were for. The high priest, which there was only one of at a time, was “appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God” (5:1). We’ve talked some about this before, but I want to go a little bit more in depth into what a priest is, because it should help us see and appreciate what Jesus does for us as our great high priest.

A priest acted toward God on behalf of men. In the Old Testament, there were three primary offices: prophet, priest, and king. All three of these offices foreshadow Jesus, who is our Prophet, Priest, and King. But in the Old Testament, it was divided up into these three offices. It’s kind of a division of power. I’ve even heard people say that our American structure of dividing power between three branches of government is based on this division in the Old Testament. I don’t know how much there is to that idea, but it did have that function in the Old Testament of separating power between three different branches. A king could not be a priest, and a priest could not be a king. Occasionally there would be someone like Samuel who might fill two offices at once, but that was rare, and no one could fill all three until Jesus came and did it.

The king, of course, was the big political leader. He fought the wars and executed the laws. The priests and prophets were more religious in nature, although they didn’t have a separation of Church and state. Priests and prophets had very different functions, though. Priests acted on behalf of the people in relation to God, while the prophets spoke the Word of God to the people. The easiest way to illustrate this is with two arrows, one going up, and one coming down. The priests had an arrow going up to God. That is, they represented the people before God. They didn’t really teach the people or speak to them very much. Their activity was focused upward toward God. They “offer[ed] gifts and sacrifices for sins” (5:1). But the prophets had an arrow coming down. That is, they spoke the word of God to the people. So the priests represented the people before God, and the prophets represented God before the people.

We still have some of this distinction in Christian churches today. Some denominations, like Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglicans call their clergy “priests.” And in their doctrine of the ministry, their clergy have more of a priestly function. Like in the Roman Catholic Church, the priests offer the mass to God as a sacrifice. They think of their priests as someone who acts on behalf of the people before God. The arrow is going up. They also have a

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prophetic function, because they teach the people. But the title “priest” emphasizes their function of representing the people before God.

In the Lutheran Church, and in most Protestant churches, we think about our clergy differently, so we usually call them “pastors.” And the role is different. A pastor is much more like a prophet than a priest, because the direction of our work is down, from God to man. The work of a pastor primarily consists of taking the Word of God and proclaiming it to the people. I guess there’s a little bit of a priestly function in the sense that we pray for the people, but it’s not like pastors have special access to God that makes our prayers more valuable. All Christians have this priestly access to God where we can pray for one another.

Martin Luther and the other reformers taught “the priesthood of all believers.” They taught that, in Christ, all Christians have access to God. The priesthood of all believers does not mean that every Christian is a pastor. That’s not what the reformers meant. Rather, they meant that you don’t need anyone other than Jesus Christ to mediate between you and God. You don’t need to ask a clergyman to pray for you. You can, of course, but you can also pray to the Father. And you can ask any other Christian to pray for you. And you don’t need anyone to offer sacrifices for you, because Jesus offered his own flesh, once and for all, as a sacrifice for sins. So every Christian is a priest. No one is a high priest, except for Jesus now. But we are all priests through him, and we all have access to the Father through Jesus.

The priesthood is all about access. You are a priest. You have access to God. But we should never think of this apart from Christ. How do you have access to the Father? Through the blood of Christ. So you receive forgiveness from God the Father. Why? Because Jesus sacrificed himself for your sin, and he presented that blood before God the Father in heaven. And you can pray to God the Father. You have access to him. He is your loving Father. But it’s never just you and the Father. It can’t be. And it’s never just you and the Holy Spirit. It can’t be. You cannot approach God on your own. We need a high priest. We need a human being to represent us before the Father. And that high priest is Jesus Christ, who is true God and true man. He is the mediator between God and man. If you want to think about it this way, he’s the only person who has a foot in both camps. He is God, and he is man. Therefore, he is able to represent all of mankind before God the Father. This is his priestly function.

So when you pray, don’t ever think of it as just you and the Father. But you have access to the Father through Jesus Christ. This is what it means that we pray “in Jesus’ Name.” It’s like if a friend recommends a good mechanic to you, and your friend says to you, “Tell them I sent you.” Your friend knows that the mechanic will treat you, like he would treat your friend, if you invoke his name. So Jesus teaches us to invoke his Name when we approach God the Father. We have no right to approach the Father. We have no right to ask him for anything. But we have every right in Jesus’ Name, because Jesus made atonement for our sins. He purchased us with his own blood. As our high priest, he presents us to the Father as beloved children. So God the Father treats us as beloved children, and he hears us as his own beloved children, because his beloved Son, Jesus Christ, has brought us to him. You are beloved children of the Father. And you have intimate access to him, but it is never because of you. It is always because of Jesus.

Jesus is our high priest. He was appointed by his Father to this honor. Hebrews says that no one takes this honor for himself, but he must be appointed to it. Aaron was the first priest in Israel. He was the brother of Moses. And all of the priests descended from Aaron. So it wasn’t like someone could aspire to go into the priesthood. It was appointed by God that Aaron’s descendants would be priests, but no one else. This separated the priesthood from the line of

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kings. Aaron was from the tribe of Levi. But David, whom God appointed as king, was from the tribe of Judah. And God established David's house forever over Israel. So there was this separation of power. If the priests were from Levi, and specifically descendants of Aaron, but the kings were from Judah, and specifically descendants of David, then no one could possibly be both.

It seems to create a problem when it comes to Jesus, because he was from the tribe of Judah. And he was a descendant of King David. So his genealogy shows that he can be the King of Israel, but he's from the wrong tribe to be a priest. So it seems like Jesus is ineligible. But Jesus' priesthood goes back farther than Aaron. Aaron was appointed a priest in the book of Exodus. But Jesus' priesthood comes from an earlier priest: Melchizedek.

Hebrews goes on to say more about Melchizedek in chapters 6 and 7, but this is the beginning of the stuff about him. Melchizedek is kind of a mysterious figure in the Bible. He shows up in Genesis 14, interacting with Abraham. Nobody knows where he comes from. But here's this great man of God in the land of Canaan when Abraham arrives there. Melchizedek was the king of Salem, which later became the city of Jerusalem. And Genesis also says that "He was priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:18). Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and Abraham offered him tithes (Gen. 14:19-20). So here we have this guy around 1900 BC. He was the king of the holy city, Jerusalem, and he was the priest of God. And he obviously wasn't a descendant of Abraham, like all the Israelites were. And Abraham pays him tithes, demonstrating that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham (7:4). This is all long before the priests or kings of Israel were appointed. Aaron was appointed a priest in the 1400s BC, about 500 years after Melchizedek. And David was anointed as king around 1000 BC, 900 years after Melchizedek. So we have this separation of the priesthood and the throne in Israel, but long before either of them, the priesthood and the throne were united in Melchizedek.

Then Melchizedek is mostly forgotten through the rest of the Old Testament. The only other place he's mentioned is in Psalm 110, which is extremely significant. Hebrews quotes it over and over again. Psalm 110 is a conversation between the LORD and the Messiah (110:1). It's a conversation between God the Father and God the Son. And the Father says to the Son, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" (110:4). So the letter to Hebrews picks up on this and shows that Jesus really can be a priest, because he is appointed by God to be a priest, not after the order of Aaron, but after the order of Melchizedek, who was a priest hundreds of years before Aaron.

The point is that Jesus can be a priest, even though he wasn't from the tribe of Levi. Furthermore, it shows that he is a greater priest than any of the sons of Aaron, because their father Abraham was subservient to Melchizedek. And Jesus did not become a priest simply by being born into it. But he was appointed by his Father. He's not just one guy in the line of priests, but the entire line of priests is a shadow of his greater priesthood. He is the one priest who can truly represent us before God.

Remember what a priest is. A priest is someone who "act[s] on behalf of men in relation to God. And what place does any other human being have to represent you before God? All of the Old Testament priests were sinners, just like you and me. God appointed them to serve as priests for a time. But they were merely a shadow of the true high priest, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is without sin. He is also the Son of God. So he does not stand before the Father as a sinful human. He stands before the Father as the perfect Son of God. But he is also man so that he can truly represent us. And he offers himself as the sacrifice for our sins. Not only is he the priest, he is also the victim. He is the perfect and willing sacrifice that purifies us before God.

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The lesser priests offered bulls, goats, and lambs for their own sins and for the sins of the people. But those sacrifices never really took away sin (10:4). They were just a shadow of the better sacrifice to come. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice and our great high priest. So he has no sins of his own to offer sacrifices for. He offered his own life as the sacrifice for our sins, and he presented his blood before the Father to atone for our sins.

Through Jesus, you have access to God the Father. You can pray to the Father, through Jesus Christ. But it's more than that. Access to the Father ultimately means that we will dwell with God forever. It means access to God's new creation.

There is a new world coming, one in which righteousness dwells. It is not corrupted by sin, like this world is. That means that in this new world, all of the citizens will love the things we are supposed to love. We will do the things we are supposed to do. And we will not suffer under sickness, death, or old age. Without Christ, there is a big "No Access" sign. We would not be right for that world. But in Christ, you are redeemed and sanctified. You do have access to that world, and when he raises your body from the grave, he will make you right for that world. Our high priest has given us access to the Father and everything that belongs to him. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.