

Bethany Presbyterian Church

25 February 2018

Hebrew 4:14

God of the prophets, God of consuming fire, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: in your covenant faithfulness, send forth the fire of your Holy Spirit to accompany the reading and hearing of your Holy Word; that your truth and righteousness may be emblazoned upon our hearts. Set our souls on fire with a holy passion, that we may offer ourselves as living sacrifices of obedience and praise to you, the one and only True and living God; through Jesus Christ who is our eternal prophet, priest, and king. Amen.

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Previously, we have observed something of what Jesus said about prayer and what the Gospels have said about his praying. Now we take a look at Jesus our Great High Priest.

The word "priest" means bridge-builder. He is the one who builds a bridge between God and us, giving us access to God. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way ... no one comes to the Father, but by me." He also said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and any one whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). Someone has pointed out a general characteristic of the priest and of the prophet. "The priest speaks to God on behalf of us, while the prophet speaks to us the message of God." Jesus was both priest and prophet. He speaks to God for us. He opens the way to God by sacrifice.

The priest was at the center of the Jewish religion. There were many priests but only one high priest at any given time. All the Jewish priests were from the line of Aaron and the tribe of Levi. On the Day of Atonement the high priest entered the Holy of Holies behind the veil in the temple to intercede for himself and for his people. He made sacrifices for himself and for the people. But the Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, the Gospels tell us, "And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). This signified that now every one had access to God through Christ, our High Priest, who is, as Paul told Timothy, "one mediator

between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for many, all the testimony to which was borne at the proper time" (I Timothy 2:5, 6). What kind of High Priest is Jesus? He is described in the Book of Hebrews.

Jesus is one who "had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). The writer continues in the next verse: "For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted."

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

In this meaningful passage we learn that the sufferings and temptations of Jesus are representative of the sufferings and temptations of all. When we are tempted and when we suffer, we cannot say to him, "Lord, you just do not know what I have had to bear and how I was tempted." Jesus can say, and he does say through his Holy Spirit: "Yes, I understand fully. I passed through similar sufferings and all the temptations within the power of Satan to bring. I understand fully, but I can also help you if you will 'draw near to the throne of grace' and accept the help I have to offer you." Jesus was merciful to those who came to him seeking help. He is the one who said, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). He showed mercy to the robber who was crucified by his side and promised this repenting man a home in heaven with the Lord. He said to Paul, who prayed to him repeatedly about a thorn in the flesh, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9). Jesus

was faithful to the Father and fulfilled his divine plan in making expiation for the sins of the people as he gave himself upon the cross. Our great High Priest offers us understanding, sympathy, mercy, and help whenever we come to his throne of grace.

The author of Hebrews goes on to say, "Therefore holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. He was faithful to him who appointed him" (Hebrews 3:1, 2). He was God's missionary and apostle to this planet. Jesus repeatedly said in John's Gospel, and elsewhere, that God had sent him into the world. God had sent him as a representative and as a priest or bridge-builder between God and us. And Jesus came to earth and was perfectly obedient to his Father, making God's will the one great law of his life. Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house, "But Christ was faithful over God's house as a Son" (v. 6), and we who are Christians are the household of the faith, or the family of God.

Our High Priest "has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God" (Hebrews 4:14). He has been exalted to the highest heaven and has been given the highest honor in heaven. It was God the Father who exalted him. "Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, 'Thou art my Son, today I have begotten Thee'" (5:5). In 5:7-9 there seems to be an echo of Gethsemane and other sufferings of Jesus: "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 for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." Jesus was human as well as divine, and yet he

was the only perfect human being who could become the source of salvation to all other human beings.

We are reminded several times in Hebrews that Jesus was a "high priest after the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20). This strange character is described as "king of Salem, priest of the Most High God" who blessed Abraham, to whom Abraham gave tithes. He is called "king of righteousness," and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, and had neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever" (Hebrews 7:1-3).

The old levitical priestly system was imperfect and had to be replaced by a new system. It was necessary for a new priest to arise from a new order, not the order of Aaron from whom the Levites came. Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. His priesthood is forever, whereas in the old order the priests died and had to be replaced. But Jesus, our High Priest, was appointed by God with an oath sworn by himself, for there is none higher. "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 6:19, 20). The old covenant of law could not save. The people broke the covenant every time they broke the law. There had to be a new covenant, based upon love and grace, one that could never fail. Jesus became "a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:16). "This makes Jesus the surety of a better covenant" (v. 22).

Jesus "holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (vv. 24, 25). The Lord prayed for his disciples while he was with them in the flesh. Now he prays for all who come to God through him. As he prayed for Simon Peter, he prays for us today. What a blessed assurance: He lives forever to intercede for all who come to God through him, our great High Priest.

Jesus is described as "a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (v. 26). We are told there were 142 physical blemishes that could bar the levitical priests, but there was not one blemish in our perfect High Priest, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

He did not need, like other priests, to offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as for the sins of the people. He made one complete and all-sufficient atonement for them in every age. "He did this once for all when he offered up himself" (v. 27). He was perfect forever and needed no sacrifice for himself, since he had no sin.

Our High Priest is the minister of the sanctuary and the true tabernacle. The author of this wonderful epistle says: "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord" (Hebrews 8:1, 2). Christ "obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises" (v. 6). The first covenant was based on law, which man could not keep. The new covenant is in

the heart and mind of God's people. In this covenant they find mercy and pardon for their sins.

Christ Jesus, our High Priest, has obtained eternal redemption for us. "But when Christ appeared as a high priest ... He entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:11-14). This is the new covenant in his blood which Jesus speaks of at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:28).

Our High Priest, Christ Jesus, has gone back to heaven, from whence he came, "Now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ... He has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ... Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly awaiting for him" (Hebrews 9:24, 26, 28). Since the blood of animals could never really take away any man's sins, Jesus came and offered his own body on the cross. "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:12, 14).

What does it mean for us today to have such a High Priest as Jesus? In Hebrews we read of several important benefits we can enjoy.

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). We can with perfect

assurance pray to our wonderful Savior and receive the help he graciously offers. We should always obey him, "the source of eternal salvation" (Hebrews 5:9). We cannot expect him to answer our prayers unless we are willing to obey him.

Again, our author tells us, "Since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:21-25).

We are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and do his will. "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1, 2).

Since we have come "to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant" (v. 24). "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a Kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (v. 28). "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God" (Hebrews 13:15, 16).

The beautiful benediction found in Hebrews 13:20, 21 makes a fitting close for this book. "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with

everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

LET US PRAY

O God our Father, whose love was revealed at the cross and whose power was shown at an empty tomb, our hearts swell within us at the thoughts of your presence. We know that we live too often on the wrong side of Easter, worrying about things that are trivial in the light of the resurrection of Christ. Forgive us for our lack of faith, and teach us to live more daringly, more expectantly, more joyfully. Let the discovery of the first Christians, that evil is doomed in the world, take hold of our minds and transform them into minds of hope and excitement. Show us to submerge our self-interests, which are small and petty, into confidence in your eternal kingdom, which will come despite wars and injustice, ignorance and prejudice, illness and death. Grant that we may become your agents of conversion and commitment in the world, feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, caring for the sick, and teaching the illiterate. Make the spirit of resurrection contagious among us, that we may honor our risen Lord in active discipleship. And grant that his name may ring out today in every nation, like the gladness of bells, calling men and women everywhere to the mystery of redemption in the community of faith. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray: "Our Father . . . Amen."