

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

The Great High Priest

Hebrews 5:1-10

March 21

This morning we turn to the book of Hebrews. For a people discouraged, Hebrews is encouragement. For a people who feel like they've lost sight of Jesus, the joy of their salvation, Hebrews says: Look again and lift up your hearts. So, it's for people on the edge, on the fringe, in the liminal spaces of faith. And it's so interesting what happens here.

I went to a church years ago that kind of understood itself to have this kind of ministry, to people on the fringes, people kind of teetering in their faith. So, everything was . . . I'll put this gently, dumbed down. The messages were super simple, the music was, too. I loved a lot of it, but after a while, you're left sitting there thinking: is this all there is? Is this enough? I'm not sure it does anyone any favors for very long. Not in the complex lives we live and the depths of the human heart and soul which is at stake in the cross, resurrection, and our salvation.

We probably didn't hear many messages from Hebrews. To be fair, I'm not sure I've preached many, either. It's a tough piece of meat, this book. It's not baby's milk, it's a porterhouse with a side of Brussel sprouts, but it's worth it. It's so worth it. To a people teetering in their faith—they're about to give up, Hebrews says, "you've been drinking milk for too long; it's time for some meat. Are you ready for some meat?" Are you ready to put some theological meat on the brittle bones of your faith? If you are, come with me. I have some things to show you.

I can only imagine it took real faith in this preacher for them to follow. I say preacher because Hebrews isn't a book. It's not a letter, like an Epistle. It's a sermon. We don't know who wrote it or to whom, and the truth is, we don't know much about Hebrews. But it's a masterful, dense, rich gift to all of us that centers for most of its chapters on a single image, offered as encouragement even to the most distraught: Jesus is our Great High Priest. The New Testament has a lot of images for Jesus: a good shepherd, the true vine, the light of the world, the Word made flesh; here in Hebrews, we see Jesus as the Great High Priest. This may be one image to rule them all.

The people who first heard this sermon, they knew all about priests or thought they did, and you may, too. You may remember that priests of Israel were descendants of Moses' brother Aaron. They were the Levites. Among all the 12 tribes the Levites had no land of their own. They served the other 11 tribes, and the other 11 served them in a mutual relationship. The Levites were the priests of the Temple, and no one else was. It wasn't a job you just applied for. The Levitical priests were set aside, anointed, called to a holy ministry in the Temple. The High Priest of Jerusalem was appointed to go behind the Temple curtain, the only one to go behind the curtain, into the Holy of Holies. He would meet God and pray and intercede on behalf of himself and everyone else. In a sense, he bore the sins and tribulations of the nation in his prayers as he went. As a pastor, he would certainly bear them in his heart before God. He

offered the sacrifices; he said the prayers. He acted on behalf of the people before God and spoke to the people on behalf of God.

So, from all of that, we learn three things about priests: A priest acts on behalf of people in relation to God by offering gifts and sacrifices for sins. The priest mediates between people and God. We learn the priest is compassionate, since he himself can relate to the plight of human life he has a pastor's heart; he himself is a sinner who offers sacrifices for his own sins as well as others. And we learn a priest is called by God, not taking the honor for himself but given it by God. This was the designation of the order of the Levites.

So, in Hebrew's theological picture, Jesus is like that--an anointed, compassionate high priest who enters God's eternal presence interceding for us in the heavenly Temple, offering sacrifice of himself that all in him may be redeemed. That's the image. We have a faithful, compassionate high priest interceding for us.

However, there's a problem. As you may remember, Jesus is not a Levite, not of the tribe of Levi, not a son of Aaron. He was from the tribe of Judah and a son of King David. When Jesus comes into Jerusalem next week on Palm Sunday, he doesn't put on the robes of Levi; he puts himself on the donkey of David. He enters not as priest but as a king.

So, Jesus was not a Levite and never claimed to be. His most famous interaction with the Temple was to go in and wreck the place, driving out all the merchants. So, with all of that, how then are we supposed to see him as a priest? You can't be a priest unless you're a Levite. Unless there's someone else. There is. Diving even deeper into the Old Testament, Jesus, we're shown, is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. I can only guess no one saw that coming. Only a master preacher can look into the eyes of a discouraged congregation and say, you have a fever and the only prescription is more Melchizedek. We get that nowhere else in the New Testament, but here, chapter 5, 6, and 7 of Hebrews. So, what's a Melchizedek? Ah, now that's an interesting story.

In Genesis 14, long before the Levites, was Abraham. Early in the stories of Abraham, he goes to battle to rescue his nephew Lot who was taken captive. After the successful battle, Abraham is met by the mysterious Melchizedek. Melchizedek's name translates *King of Righteousness*. He is the king of Salem, which is the word shalom which means peace and later becomes Jerusalem. So, this Melchizedek is the king of righteousness and peace and the ruler of Jerusalem. And, intriguingly, he is Priest of the Most High God. And we have no idea how or why? Where did he come from? Shalom. Who made him a priest? God Most High. A king of Jerusalem, not of David's Line. A priest of God, not of Levi's line. A king of peace and righteousness, not of Abrahams' lineage, and by whom Abraham is blessed as a superior blesses an inferior. After the blessing, Abraham turns around and tithes his possessions to this Melchizedek.

And all that right there is a show stopper. According to Hebrews' theological reading of the Genesis 14 Melchizedek story, the children of Abraham and the children's children of Abraham are within the body Abraham when he kneels before Melchizedek. And Father Abraham had

many sons, including Isaac, Jacob, and Levi and the Levites who collect tithes from the people. So, in a way, the people give their tithes to Levites who in Abraham gave them to Melchizedek. In Abraham, all the future Levite priests bow before the priest Melchizedek. All the future Davidic kings bowed before King of Salem. And therefore, all the children of Israel give homage to and are blessed by Melchizedek. Who is this great man?

He's a mystery. He appears and then disappears from the story and is never seen again. But before he goes, he does something that tips his hand to those who have eyes to see. To Abraham, he serves bread and wine.

Like a simple hospitality perhaps to a hungry fellow traveler.
Or like a cosmic eucharist, if you have eyes to see.

Hebrews says, Come on. Look again. There he is. Like the Prince of Peace, the King of Righteousness serving bread and wine and blessing Abraham the father of the nations, the father of the three great monotheistic religions. This is Melchizedek, who looks an awful lot like . . . Jesus.

People who are discouraged, in their discouragement, are given this to hold on to: Jesus is High Priest, not in the order of the Levites, but in the order of the mysterious Melchizedek.

We need a priest. Deep down, in our times of great anguish, suffering, and shame, what we need the very most is assurance that we are not alone and God loves us and God has a purpose for our lives. All of us need this. Years ago, when I went to spend a week with the Taizé community in France, I told our friend Br. Emmanuel, "Br. Emmanuel I am asking for a blessing. I need a priest." I know I can go to God directly; I'm a good Baptist, but sometimes, I just need someone to stand in the gap I sometimes feel between myself and God and say words of hope and anointing over me. I need a priest. Sometimes we need it more than others, especially when we're so very lost. Someone, come find me.

This morning we prayed with Psalm 51. Can you hear the terrible anguish in this Psalm of confession: Have mercy on me O God. I know my transgressions. My sin is ever before me. I was born guilty. Create in me a clean heart. A desperate prayer. God come and find me. Here I am. Restore to me the joy of my salvation. Like the two Greeks who came to Phillip saying, 'We wish to see Jesus.'

I wonder what is simmering within you these days. When do you cry out and say, "I need someone to find me. Here I am. Come and find me."? Concern for healing for a loved one who is sick; prayers for a loved one who is dying; a yearning to be good when so much is stretching you to the just the opposite direction; a prayer of just see me through another day, or see through to another way of being in the world. God, heal the pain of the world and make right what is so very wrong. These places are where humans find themselves and in there they feel so alone so much of the time. I don't know what—have no real way of knowing what the preacher saw when he looked in their faces when he gave this message. He saw beautiful children of God, beloveds whom Christ died for, whose faces were downcast. They carried so

much pain just under the surface, for themselves and for one another. And they wondered is there any way forward? Any way to redemption from here? Or do we just beat on, boats against the current, bore back ceaselessly into a past from which we can never escape nor reconcile with a God that appears increasingly distant?

Our sight does not penetrate the veil of history or circumstance but we know. Don't we? We know. We know what they felt; we know what it feels like. Hebrews does not blink in the face of despair. Hebrews says, in your darkest moments of doubt, when you're ready to give up, turn your eyes to Jesus. No matter what, don't take your eyes off him. You may not see everything in subjection to him yet, but we do see Jesus who for a little while was made lower than the angels. The words of encouragement stack up through the chapters: do not give up; strive to enter God's rest; do not harden your hearts; keep going, do not relinquish the gift of faith you've been given and still lives vibrantly within you.

Proclaimers like the master-preacher of Hebrews don't just send words into the void. They look into the eyes of their brothers and sisters and say: God loves you. God wants you. And God is relentless.

You are not alone. Jesus is our Great High Priest serving at the eternal altar of God. God appointed him to mediate between creation and the creator. He is compassionate, like us in every way, but without sin; he brings not his own sins to God in prayer, but the whole human condition. He prays with cries and tears for all of us, and by his suffering he is made perfectly the source of eternal salvation.

You are not alone. Jesus your High Priest is interceding for you in the heavenly sanctuary even now. Even now. All the time. Your prayers: have mercy on me, O God. He intercedes for you. Your prayers: heal my beloved; be gentle with her. He cries with you. Your prayers: cleanse me and make me whole. He takes your sin and your weakness wholly unto himself. He enters fully into you and receives you fully into his life. The prayer you lift a thousand times; you do not just pray into the void.

We see Jesus, who is with us now serving bread and wine to all who come.
Jesus, with us now, interceding on our behalf.

No, you are not alone. You are never alone. He is with you.

He is with God interceding for you all the time.

So don't give up.

Don't give up on your prayers, for they are heard, every one of them.

Don't give up on your faith, for it is shared by so many who have come before who show how to hold on in trouble and shared by those with you here now. They walk with you.

Don't give up on yourself. For you are loved, you are desired, you are being redeemed.

Thanks be to God.