

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 6, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 134, 37:3, 220, 628, 242:2.

Lessons: Isaiah 52:13-53:12, 1 Peter 2:19-22, Luke 4:1-13.

Sermon Text: Hebrews 4:14-16.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Sacrifice means giving up something. It is often done for someone else, or to help someone or to serve someone. God required sacrifices – bloody sacrifices of bulls, goats, lambs, sheep in the Old Testament era. He demanded that his chosen people show their allegiance to him by sacrificing something, and he was very specific about what those sacrifices were to be. After the Law was given on Mount Sinai, we find priests who were to do the sacrificing of animals to God.

When you sacrifice an animal – especially a large animal – you are giving up something valuable. If you have thousands of animals, that isn't really a very big sacrifice. But if you only have a few animals, it is a great sacrifice; it is giving up something very valuable. We don't often do that kind of sacrificing for God today.

We often hear the term “ultimate sacrifice” used in connection with servicemen who die in the service of their country in war. That is an apt description. They gave up more than possessions. They gave up their lives.

But we really must carefully examine a sacrifice that really is the ultimate sacrifice. This is a sacrifice of someone who didn't just die for a country. He died for the world, for all mankind.

Priests were essential to the worship lives of the Jews in the Old Testament. Since the time of Moses and Aaron priests had been intermediaries between God and the people. And one of those priests had been chosen to be the “high priest”, the leader of the priests. Moses' brother Aaron was the first high priest, and in that capacity wore special clothing and did special things. Jesus is identified as a priest, and in fact, as high priest, twice earlier in this letter to the Hebrews. Now the writer begins a six-chapter discussion of Jesus as our great high priest.

Today we talk about the ultimate, the final high priest,

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST, “JESUS THE SON OF GOD”

1. ***“We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.”***
2. ***Although he “has been tempted in every way, just as we are” yet he was without sin.***
3. ***“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.”***

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. 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.” We find in these words a comforting reassurance for all sinners, that is, for all humans. Remember that all humans because of their sins deserve eternal damnation and complete separation from God.

High priest is a term which only the book of Hebrews applies to Jesus Christ. The idea of his high priesthood forms the central theme of this book. Jesus, our great high priest, is mentioned only twice previously in this book, but is spoken of very extensively in the remainder of the book. ***“For this reason he had to be***

made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." (Hebrews 2:17) And we read in Hebrews 3:1: *"Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess."*

Every Jew was familiar with the concept of the priests officiating at the Jerusalem Temple and of the high priest, who led them in their service. Did the Hebrew Christians to whom this book of the Bible was addressed miss the priesthood? Did that Old Testament priesthood appeal to any of the readers? Were some of them backsliding from Christianity to Judaism because they thought that Christianity had no high priest? Then let them listen and learn.

"We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God," the author writes. Never was it said of any Old Testament high priest that he was great, not even of Aaron the first one. But it is said of God's high priest, Jesus Christ.

The author never loses sight of the fact that Jesus the Savior is his great topic, and that the preaching of the Gospel of salvation is the only way of working faith.

In addition this great high Priest has gone into heaven. Did this invisibility bother them? Did they prefer that visible priest from Aaron's line going on that annual Day of Atonement with the blood of the sacrifice across the temple courtyard into the holy place and then going where they could not see, behind the veil into the Holy of Holies?

If so, let them remember that Jesus Christ, God's high priest, has done more than pass through earthly temple chambers like those earthly priests who were seen today and ended up dying like every other human. Jesus has gone through the heavens to the throne of God, there to live and reign forever. His invisibility is his advantage. His absence shows his greatness. The sacrifice he offered, the blood he carried to the mercy seat of God, was his own. He is himself the victim and himself the priest. And his sacrifice was perfect. He had to bring it only once, not yearly like those human high priests with the animal blood. He said on the cross *"it is finished"*. (John 19:30) Jesus' Ascension into heaven's glory showed this.

Of Jesus it is truly said that he passed through the heavens. For just as the high priest of the Old Testament passed through the temple courts and behind the veil to reach the Holy of Holies inside the temple, so Jesus passed through the heavens and appeared in the very throne-room of God.

Notice who this great high priest is. Jesus the Son of God, the author clearly states. He called him "Jesus" to remind us of his humanity and "Son of God" to assure us of his divinity. Here's a high priest who was far superior to any earthly one because of his person and his work.

We know that this our High Priest is pleading for us about the atonement made during his holy, sinless life and completed on the cross on Calvary, and that the Father must acknowledge the pleading of this Advocate.

He is also our high priest! God had given him to the Hebrew Christians and to us. By God's grace they had professed Jesus and all that he offered as the substance of their faith. Now was no time to waver in that confession. Regardless what forces were pulling and pressing upon them there was no room for cowardice. Think about the forces that are pressing upon us today. We find all sorts of temptations to lead us away from Jesus into compromise, denial of Jesus, and into all sorts of dens of iniquity. A great high priest who made life worth living and death worth dying dared not be lightly dismissed or thoughtlessly traded for something inferior. Instead it was time to keep holding firmly to him and his blessings.

What about weaknesses? It's easy to say *"let us hold firmly to the faith we profess"* but what about those weaknesses which can lead to doubt and disobedience toward God, lovelessness toward our fellow man and preoccupation with ourselves? This high priest knows about such things too. That's part of what makes him so great. In Jesus' life on earth when he took on our human nature and became true man, he also *"has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin."* From the beginning to the end of his earthly stay Jesus faced temptations more severe than we shall ever know. He felt the full pressure as all of Satan's armies with all of their weapons from hell's arsenals were attacking him. He felt those temptations even more than we do because we so often fall under temptation's first round but he remained standing to the very end.

In all his life he was without sin. We apply this thought to Jesus in two ways. It means that though he was tempted he never yielded, but remained holy. Scripture properly guards Christ's sinlessness zealously, reminding us repeatedly that he did not sin. A sinful Jesus could not be a Savior and could not be a great high priest.

And Scripture also points to his perfect human nature. Unlike us he had no old Adam, no inherited sinful nature out of which temptations could arise. All the attacks came not from within but from without, from Satan and the wicked world, so that Jesus could tell his disciples in John 14:30: "***The prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me.***"

We do not have a High Priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. He was tempted in all things like us, yet he did not sin. This is one special point of human interest that tends to draw our hearts to this great High Priest. He was and is flesh of our flesh, true man. And during his earthly life he underwent the severest temptations that have ever come upon any man. It was not merely that the temptation came near him without really assailing him. His entire being, body and soul, was sometimes shaken to the very depths, as when he declared his soul to be exceeding sorrowful unto death, and when he found himself forsaken by his heavenly Father, in addition to all of the attacks of the devil time and again.

So he can truly be touched by our infirmities. In fact, as Isaiah tells us: "***Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.***" (Isaiah 53:4) He can indeed have sympathy with our weaknesses. He knows what it means for weak flesh and blood to battle with dangerous enemies. But because he passed through all temptations without sin, he is able to be our High Priest and our Advocate with the Father.

The point is that Jesus knows. Although repeated and very real temptations left his sinlessness unshaken he knows what it's all about. From experience he knows what we face, and he will sympathize with us

Give up such a high priest? Go back to Judaism where sinners dared not approach a holy God except through the mediation of a human high priest once a year? No! Rather the author urges "***Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence.***" It is God's very throne in heaven that we can approach, the seat of his infinite majesty and holy justice. Before this throne of splendor, sinners shrink back in terror and must stand in guilt. But with Christ our great high Priest standing there, it becomes a throne of grace where believers receive mercy and find help in time of need.

Right when we need it, when our temptations come, we will find what we need from him who knows just how to give it. We'll receive mercy there, God's love that looks at and offers help to believers overwhelmed by their own weaknesses. Grace will also be there, God's love wholly undeserved which pardons the guilty. To such a throne of grace we come boldly confessing sin and receiving forgiveness, pouring out sorrow and being comforted, laying down weaknesses and being strengthened, asking questions and being answered. All this happens only because of the great high priest who has made full atonement 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." So we, too can approach God and his most holy high place with confidence, knowing our priest has made perfect sacrifice for us and for all our sins. What a joy to have confidence in a priest who can "***help us in our time of need.***" Amen.