

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | NOVEMBER 14, 2021

DANIEL 12:1-3 | PSALM 16 | HEBREWS 10:11-14, 9-25 | MARK 13:1-8

For the past five or six weeks, our New Testament readings have come from the book of Hebrews. And while it's been fun to hang out in St. Mark's gospel and Revelation, it would be a lost opportunity to say nothing about Hebrews.

There's a lot we don't know about this book. We don't know exactly where it was written—maybe Jerusalem, maybe Rome, maybe Alexandria—and there's some debate over when it was written—maybe before the year 70, maybe after.¹ But as the title suggests, it was likely written for a group of Jewish believers. And so the author is trying to describe who Jesus is and what Jesus does using language, images, and motifs these people would know. And one image they spend a lot of time on is the priesthood of Jesus.

In the Hebrew Bible, priests are people who repair relationships by interpreting and interceding. They interpret the word of God to the people. And they intercede on behalf of the people to God.² And as today's reading notes, one of the ways priests interceded for the people was by offering sacrifices. Sacrifices have a way of resetting the relationship between God and the people. The relationship is ruptured or disordered, and when the priest offers a sacrifice to God, the relationship is reset, and we can move forward.

The author of Hebrews says that one way to understand Jesus is as a priest from that tradition. He interprets the word of God to people. He intercedes on behalf of people to God. And he does that by offering a sacrifice.

But there's one way in which that Jesus is different. Notice how the author describes the priests from the Hebrew Bible. They “stand day after day...” And why do they stand? Because as soon as you offer the sacrifice and reset the relationship and go sit down and grab a drink and put your feet up, guess what happens? The relationship gets disrupted or disordered again. And so you have to go back and offer another sacrifice. The priests stand because they can't sit.

Notice how the author describes Jesus. The author says that Jesus is “at the right hand of God,” but they say more than that. They say he is “*seated* at the right hand of God.” The sacrifice that Jesus makes is so profound that it only has to be

¹ The argument for pre-70 is that the text never mentions the destruction of the temple. The argument for post-70 is that the text is a response to the elimination of the Jewish priestly tradition. See Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament: New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 406.

² Interpreting image comes from Rowan Williams, *Being Christian: Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 14. Luther summarizes the priestly functions as as 1) preach, 2) pray, and 3) offer spiritual sacrifices. Gerald O'Collins and Michael Keenan Jones, *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ* (OUP Oxford, 2010), 130.

offered once. “By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” So how do we know Jesus is powerful? Because he can offer his sacrifice and sit down. It’s hyperbole, but you get the idea.

That’s the image we get in today’s reading. And it’s important to pause here for a moment and frame what we do with this image. I mentioned at the beginning that the author is writing to a group of Jewish believers. And so they end up making lots of comparisons between Jewish and Christian practice.³

The majority of us come to this text from a much different perspective. Instead of understanding this as comparing Judaism with Christianity, it’s more useful for us to compare the priestly vocation of Jesus with our own vocations. If we believe that Jesus is our great high priest, as the author of Hebrews does, then why do we talk about the priesthood of all believers? Isn’t the whole point of having a priest like Jesus that we don’t have to have priests? Why talk about any of this “priest” stuff at all?

Well, keep the focus on relationships. Remember, the whole point of priests is that they repair relationships. In the beginning of today’s reading from Hebrews, the author is talking about our relationship with God and how Jesus repairs that relationship. And Jesus repairs that relationship once and for all. You’ve probably noticed that when we do confession and forgiveness during worship, I often say something like, “In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins.” We say those words again and again, but we’re always talking about the same event. It happened once, and you don’t need to add anything to that to make it real.

But that’s often difficult for us to accept. A couple of years ago, I was doing baptismal prep with someone, and when we finished looking over the service, they said, “This all looks fine. But when we get to the end, don’t I need to stand in front of the congregation and tell the people what I believe about God?” And the answer is no, but it’s easy to understand why you might think that. Because we think that our relationship with God becomes real when we offer something in return, even if it’s just the sacrifice of awkwardly telling everybody what you believe about God. But the problem with that self-justification isn’t so much that it’s difficult. It’s that you have to do it again and again and again. To use the image from Hebrews, once you start trying to justify your relationship with God based on your own contributions, you can never sit down.

But that doesn’t mean we can drop that priestly language entirely. Because there’s another relationship, too. And this is the one that we Lutherans tend to ignore when we talk about the priesthood of all believers. We often sum up the priesthood of all believers as *You don’t have anyone between you and God*. Me. God. That’s it.

³ “Reading Hebrews without Supersessionism,” The Christian Century, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/new-testament-s-most-dangerous-book-jews>.

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But if you go back and read Luther on the priesthood of all believers, you get all this other stuff about our relationships with creation.⁴ This is how Luther says we live out our priestly office. A priest “puts on his neighbour and so conducts himself toward him as if he himself were in the other’s place.”⁵ In the same way that Christ puts on our lives when he intercedes for us, we “put on” our neighbours’ lives. We take their concerns and hopes and aspirations just as seriously as our own.

And sure enough, you actually heard that in today’s reading from Hebrews. “Since we have a great priest over the house of God,” the author writes, “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” *Provoke one another to love*. Now I know you all aren’t big on being provoked, but you get the idea. We encourage one another, we inspire one another, we lift up one another to love. It’s not just *Me and God*. It’s *Me and God and Everybody and Everything Else*.

This interceding for others probably sounds weird. But we do it every week here. When we get to the prayers of the people, who do we pray for? We pray for ourselves and people we know, sure. But we pray for people of other faiths, too. We pray for people who are sick and unemployed and exploited. We pray for our enemies. That’s the only prayer we’ve done that I’ve gotten complaints about. We pray for creation. Today we’re going to pray for animals getting ready for hibernation. We have a prayer cycle that goes around the world in a year, so we pray for every single person we share this planet with. And next week, we’ll finish that prayer cycle and then go right back up to the top and start over.

And I love that day when we get to the end and start the whole thing all over again. Because that’s what having a priestly vocation is all about. There’s never a point where you can step away and go sit down. Our relationship with God might be fixed once and for all, but our relationship with creation certainly isn’t. There’s always more work to do together. There’s always more provoking that needs to happen. And so we continue to provoke, encourage, inspire one another.

That’s what the priesthood of Jesus is all about. Christ intercedes for us so that we can intercede for others. Christ gets involved with us so that we can get involved with creation. And Christ puts on our life and death so that we can take on our neighbor’s.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁴ O’Collins and Jones, *Jesus Our Priest*, 147.

⁵ Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomír Batka, *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology* (OUP Oxford, 2014), 365.