

Sermon for April 1, 2018 – Easter Day

Hebrews 7:23-27 (EHV)

Theme: Jesus lives as our Forever Priest:

- 1) A perfect priest who offered a perfect sacrifice.
- 2) An interceding priest, who is able to save us forever.

²³ There were many who became priests because death prevented any of them from continuing to remain in office. ²⁴ But because this one endures forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ So for this reason he is able to save forever those who come to God through him, because he always lives to plead on their behalf. ²⁶ This is certainly the kind of high priest we needed: one who is holy, innocent, pure, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices on a daily basis, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. In fact, he sacrificed for sins once and for all when he offered himself.

Isn't it great to have a forever priest, who loves you dearly?

“What,” you might be thinking, “where did this question come from?” It came from our sermon text.

I know, the word “priest” can evoke negative images – especially coming off the Lenten season, having heard everything the priests of Jesus’ day did to crucify our Lord and oppress the Gospel. Even though there have been bad priests throughout history, who have abused their offices, understand that those bad men are not representative of what God instituted his priesthood to be.

And what did God intend his Old Testament priesthood to be? A living picture of the loving work that the Christ would do on our behalf. He wanted his Old Testament priests to be loving men - promising to give them every gift necessary to care for His people by instructing them with His Word, interceding for them in their need, and leading them in thanksgiving for all the LORD’s blessings. Most importantly, however, He wanted the priests to offer the sacrifices needed to make atonement for the people’s sin. All of this was a living picture of what the coming Savior would do.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: do you want to have a friend you can go to in every need – someone who has experienced some of the very same troubles you experienced, and came through them victorious? Do you want to have a counselor you can go to at all times someone to whom your most intimate thoughts are known and who is unafraid to tell you when you are wrong in order to put you on the right path? Do you want someone who will take away all your sin - freeing you from the oppressive guilt you feel in your heart? Then come to Jesus; for, as we will learn today, **He rose from the dead to live as our forever priest.** 1) A perfect priest who offered a perfect sacrifice. 2) An interceding priest, who is able to save us forever.

Part One: A perfect priest who offered a perfect sacrifice

Our sermon text is from the book of Hebrews, found in a section where the Old Testament priesthood is compared with Jesus. Why the comparison? Because the author of this book wants to impress upon us that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament priesthood – the one to whom every one of its aspects points. He wanted to encourage his initial readers, who were tempted to revert back to Judaism, to place their confidence in Christ.

Do you want proof that the Old Testament priesthood was merely a picture of the coming Messiah? Consider what happened to the priests. Our text begins: ²³ *There were many who became priests because death prevented any of them from continuing to remain in office.*

The historian Josephus writes that there was a total of 83 high priests from Aaron to the destruction of Jerusalem. Why so many? Because, one by one, they all died.

Why did they die? Because they were sinful – just like the rest of us – and *the wages of sin is death.*ⁱ In and of themselves, the priests had no ability to save the people they served. Everything they did was at God's command and by his power, looking forward to the Savior who would not only forgive the sins of the people, but their own sins as well.

But Jesus is not like those priests, who were every bit as flawed as we are. Verse 26 describes Jesus as *the kind of high priest we needed: one who is holy, innocent, pure, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.*

Now, someone might ask: “Why do we need a priest who is holy, innocent, pure and set apart from sinners?” Simply put: because God is that holy. The LORD is, in fact, so holy, that he cannot even tolerate the slightest sin in his presence! And if that's how holy our God is, then that is how holy our mediator needed to be, whose purpose was to reconcile us lost and condemned sinners to God.

And Jesus is exactly such a priest. During his life on this earth he was “*tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.*”ⁱⁱ Just think, even though he interacted with a world full of sinners day in and day out – lovingly calling both friend and foe to repentance and faith – he nevertheless remained set apart by not sinning. In doing this, he could be both the friend of sinners and the sinless one, who would win the righteousness we would need to stand before God.

Yes, Jesus is exactly the priest we need – the only one who could reconcile us to God. How so? The author of Hebrews explains: ²⁷ *Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices on a daily basis, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. In fact, he sacrificed for sins once and for all when he offered himself.*

Jesus is the perfect priest, who offered the perfect sacrifice for our sins. And what sacrifice was that? The sacrifice of himself! I mean, when you think about it, do you really believe that any of the animals offered on Israel's altar could truly atone for our sin? Of course not! Only Christ could atone us, because only he is both human like us and also true God. Only sinless Jesus could

truly free us from our sin, guilt and shame – reconciling us to God – because only he could offer the perfect sacrifice of his life in place of ours.

And this is exactly what Jesus did. When God the Father looked at Jesus on the cross, he saw us and struck him with the full fury of his wrath. Jesus suffered. Jesus died. Most importantly, Jesus rose from the dead – proving beyond any shadow of a doubt that God the Father accepted his sacrifice on our behalf.

Jesus' resurrection declares the redemption of all – regardless of who they are or what they have done! Whoever looks to Jesus in repentance and faith is forgiven of all sin. Such a person no longer needs to fear God's wrath and anger, but can approach the LORD through Christ – confident of his mercy, forgiveness and eternal love.

There are many voices in the world trying to lure us away from Christ – claiming that only they can give us true hope, meaning and happiness. Many of these voices even try to paint the LORD as an unmerciful, unloving God – claiming that we have no sin to repent of, that we are perfectly fine in and of ourselves. But is this the truth?

We certainly don't seem fine, as we hear news reports about all the crime, sin and sorrow people commit against other people. I certainly know I'm not fine, as I consider all the pride, anger and selfishness that is in my own heart. And the Ten Commandments proclaim that we are not fine – as we constantly fail to show both God and our neighbors the love that God's law commands us to show.

And what about the claim that God is unloving? The way I see it, if willingly taking the place of the very people who vehemently hate you in order to save them by suffering for their punishment and dying in their place isn't love, then I don't know what is.

Yes, Jesus truly is the perfect priest we need – the one who has shown us perfect love by offering himself up in our place as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. And because he rose from the dead, we can be confident that he continues to live as our forever priest – interceding on our behalf, so as to save us forever, as the author of our text writes in verse 24:

Part Two: An interceding priest, who is able to save us forever.

²⁴ *But because this one endures forever, he has a permanent priesthood.*

Jesus' work did not end on the cross. No, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to be our forever priest – guiding and working through all history for the good of those who hold on to him in faith, as verse 25 states:

²⁵ *So for this reason he is able to save forever those who come to God through him, because he always lives to plead on their behalf.*

Jesus died for all. There is not a person on this earth for whose sins he did not pay the price of redemption. But the sad fact is that, even though Jesus paid for the sins of all, not everyone wants or accept his forgiveness. For whatever reason, either they don't want to believe in Christ or they don't want to believe that they need him.

But those whom come to him, that is, those in whom the Holy Spirit has awakened genuine repentance and faith through the preaching of his word and administration of his sacrament, these Jesus is able to save forever.

What that means is this: regardless of what sins they have committed in the past, what mess they find themselves in the present, or what temptations they will face in future, Jesus will make sure to safely deliver them through it all to himself in heaven. Regardless of the evils that surround them, the crimes they have been victims of, the dangers that threaten their lives, and all the suffering and sorrow they undergo on this sin cursed earth, Jesus is able to keep his promise to work in all of it for their eternal good.

Why? Because he lives to always plead to his father on their behalf. He is constantly asking for their forgiveness, even when they fail to ask. He is constantly asking his and their Father to watch over their souls – souls that he purchased with his blood and sealed as his own through the water of baptism and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And don't imagine Christ's pleading being something like a child asking his Dad for something he is unsure his Dad will give. No, Jesus intercedes for us as one who is coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. His will is God's will and God's will is his, since he is God.

Because this is the case, we can be fully confident that God will keep his promise – that no matter what sorrow or heartache, trial or tribulation we face on this earth, God will use it for our good. Our forever priest will keep his promises to save us forever, so that we can confidently confess with the Apostle Paul: *The Lord will rescue me from every evil work and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever.*ⁱⁱⁱ

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, do you now understand why, at the beginning of this sermon, I asked: Isn't it great to have a forever priest, who loves you dearly? I asked it, because this is exactly what we have in Jesus – a forever priest who, through his once-and-for-all sacrifice of himself, reconciled us to God. We have a forever priest who rose from the dead and lives in heaven – listening to our every prayer and plea. We have a forever priest who is constantly interceding for us – working in all things to safely deliver us from this life of labor, home to himself in heaven.

And why does Jesus do this for you? Simply put: because he loves you. Take heart in this and rejoice in Jesus, your forever priest. Amen.

ⁱ Romans 6:23 EHV

ⁱⁱ Hebrews 4:15 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Timothy 4:18 EHV