

Spirit-Inspired Worship

Read Hebrews 4:9-5:10

Our focus text for week five of our 7 Marks of Vital Congregations Study is the Hebrews text describing Jesus as the Great High Priest. Let's start with a little background. Who is this mysterious Melchizedek? He is mentioned a couple of times in the Old Testament: once in Genesis 14:17-22 when a king by the name of Melchizedek meets with Abram and again in Psalm 110.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is a letter which is really a sermon written by an unknown author to a group of Jewish Christians, who are addressed as Hebrew people. Their new church (maybe in Rome) was in crisis and many of them were reverting back to their Jewish roots. Some of them were recalling stories of the good old days of worship in the temple: the rituals, the priests and high priests, the Holy of Holies. We miss the old ways sometimes. Right now we are missing in-person worship and handshakes and hugs. This new thing God has done in Jesus Christ has left some Hebrews still doubting or in fear of persecution.

Melchizedek is a character the Jewish audience are probably familiar with. His name means King of Righteousness and he was also a king, King of Salem which translates to King of Peace. Over the centuries all kinds of qualities were attributed to him: he was pre-existent, superior to Abraham, even superior to the Levitical priests, he was immortal, and later some said equal to Christ! Melchizedek was most likely an actual person from around 8,000 years ago who did meet Abraham and then stories about him became a legend and all kinds of other attributes adhered. Some of the saints we celebrate today, St. Nicholas (Santa Claus) or St. Valentine are legendary as their characters have morphed into something more elaborate than the original. They become larger than life with their own group of followers and dare I say idol worshippers!

The writer of Hebrews is describing how Jesus Christ is our high priest. Christ didn't replace the old covenant. The new covenant in Christ is a continuation of God's salvation history to bring all people to a saving grace. This is important for us today because our roots are in Jewish history.

So what are the qualifications for high priest?

1. The priest must have common ground with the people served, commonality with the people you are serving
2. Priesthood is a divine calling.

So while the temple priests offered animal or bird sacrifices on the altar and prayers on behalf of the people, priests too were led to sin through corruption. Jesus warned of the

leaven of the Pharisees and spoke out against their double standards. In this system temple sacrifices had to be made over and over again every day.

Jesus meets the first qualification because in Christ, Son of God who is divine and human we have a person, one with us, who is one without sin! So Christ's sacrifice on the cross is a one-time, once-for-all sacrifice for us. Last week we read the foot-washing text in the Gospel of John where Jesus humbled himself to be the servant of all. Christ came to serve not be served.

Secondly, Christ was obedient to his divine calling. We can say "Yes" he qualifies on both counts as a high priest. The sermon to the Hebrew church goes on to check all the boxes for them: Christ is your high priest, Christ is your King, and Christ is your Prophet and fulfillment of the prophecies. Jesus has replaced the sacrifices of the temple priests. He is now our true priest.

The good news for us today is that there is no other name by which we are saved. Jesus Christ is the name above all names, Pioneer of salvation and perfecter of our faith. Therefore worthy to be praised. Amen!

Jesus Christ as person of the trinity with God the Father and God the Spirit now sits at the right hand of God. We are invited to pray before his throne of Grace, as Jesus taught us to do, boldly, believing that we have already received, Jesus said, "we do not have because we do not ask". God needs to hear from us. And while every prayer that Jesus prayed did not get answered, think of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, God's will was done.

The encouragement for us today is not to lose our will, nor lose our way, to stay on the path, on the journey with Jesus. To persist in our faith formation and not grow weary.

One way we recharge and nurture our souls each week is gathering together as the beloved community in Christ who is head of the church: being in the word, with the Word, worshiping in Spirit and truth and the prayers of the people which are the heart of worship. The first few verses read this morning remind us to make Sabbath time, take Sabbath time. We make time for a whole host of other things! During Covid self-isolation I pray people are re-prioritizing what makes a life and what makes a life worth living and to recognize the gift we have in creation and all God's creatures and the promises of God who promises eternal life and eternal rest at the last.

Jesus didn't abolish Sabbath rest, it is still the fourth commandment last time I checked. God rested and we should too, free from guilt, and in grace and gratitude for all God has done in Christ. Amen