

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested[a] as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

5 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; 3 and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. 4 And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. 5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; 6 as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” 7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus[b] offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

FIRST READING Revelation 21:1-6

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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home^[a] of God is among mortals. He will dwell^[b] with them; they will be his peoples,^[c] and God himself will be with them;^[d] ⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“Mark #4 Spirit-Inspired Worship

We study today from Hebrews, a book which has earned the reputation of being a masterpiece, profound, mystifying and moving. Its content, however, is theologically dense. We do not know the author of this elaborate sermon, nor do we know to whom it was preached. But we do know that whoever the intended audience was, they were a people who were exhausted, worn down and out from walking the walk. As Thomas Long says, *“They were tired of serving in the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, of trying to keep their prayer life going, even tired of Jesus.”*¹ Scripture says that their *“hands drooped and their knees were weak”* (12:12). The sermon exhorted them to worship once again. It did this quite simply not by scolding them to buck up in the face of their spiritual weariness nor to reorganize their mission structures nor to update their worship services. No, the Preacher, the writer of Hebrews, simply preached the nature and meaning of Jesus the Christ!²

Today’s lesson is very appropriate to our 4th mark, Spiritual Inspired Worship, for in worship, we, like the audience of old, are called into the presence of Jesus, our great High Priest. Let’s start by reviewing a bit of the language and tradition surrounding a priest. The definition of a priest, any priest, is to be a “bridge-builder”. They are to look in two directions at once...facing God on behalf of the people and facing humanity on behalf of God! The priest is to approach God and humbly and passionately (because he is human too) take the people’s offerings (i.e. prayers, symbols of their repentance, deepest needs and hurts, thanksgivings) into God’s very presence. The priest is also to represent God to the people. The question which the Preacher asked the readers was *“Is Jesus qualified for the office of high priest?”* His answer to his own question was an emphatic *“yes”*.

Jesus, he said, not only faces God, but he “passed through the heavens” and goes into the very throne-room of God, and because of who he is, divine and human, he carries not just a sympathy but a solidarity with the human condition to lay before God...our need, our distress,

¹Thomas Long. *“Interpretation: Hebrews”* (Louisville: John Knox Press; 1997), 62-69.

²Thomas Long.

our pain, our infirmities, our hunger for justice, our cries for peace. Jesus stands at the altar of heaven praying “with loud cries and tears” for himself and all humanity. In addition, Jesus fulfills the other part of the definition since he, as God’s son, represents fully God’s holy presence among us. When humanity looks into the face of THIS priest, we see the God who has stooped down from the holy heights to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. This is GOD who bore our human lot and was subjected to suffering. Believers see an advocate who understands, one to whom we can pray and be confident that we will receive mercy and help.

A story entitled “The Man and the Birds”, originally published by Louis Cassels and made famous by Paul Harvey, helps in making this point. It’s a story about a man who refused to attend a Christmas Eve service with his family because he did not believe in the Incarnation, God becoming flesh for us. The man remained at home that evening, where it began to snow heavily. Suddenly, he heard what he thought was someone throwing snowballs against his window. Going outside to investigate, he found a flock of birds trying to fly through his window as they sought refuge from the storm. He hoped they’d find shelter in his barn so he made his way there. He opened the doors and turned on the light, but the birds stayed outside. He created a trail of bread crumbs for them to follow into the barn, but that did not work. He tried to shoo them into the barn, but that effort also proved unsuccessful. “If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety,” he thought. And just at that moment, the church bells began to ring, and the man sank to his knees. “Now I understand. Now I see why You had to do it,” he whispered as the snow fell upon him.³

The Preacher of Hebrews, wanted his audience to understand that Jesus’ credentials spilled over the top, exceeding those of a human priest so much so that he additionally stated that Jesus was appointed by God as other priests were, but that his priesthood was not temporary like theirs. His was forever. This is why he said that Jesus is a “a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek”. You see, early in the OT Melchizedek is mentioned as being the King of Salem. His name means “king of righteousness and peace”. He was thought to have had no

³ Anon. “The Man and the Birds.” <https://www.manandthebirds.com/> (accessed 2/28/2020).

father or mother, and was therefore eternal. Melchizedek was a priest too, but not a priest of the house of Levi (the tribe assigned the role of being priests) since he predated Moses. But, of course, neither was Jesus a Levite. Jesus was of the house of Judah. So, ultimately, what the Preacher was saying was that Melchizedek was a king and non-Levitical priest with no beginning nor end. He was a foreshadowing of the Great High Priest to come, Jesus.⁴

The Preacher additionally stated that human priests can be very good people, but as humans, they are flawed. However, Jesus was, in his obedience and suffering, sinless. Human priests have to repeatedly offer sin sacrifices of bulls and goats, but Jesus provided a once and only sacrifice... of HIMSELF on the cross! Human priests don't save anyone; they mediate forgiveness. Jesus, however, **is the source of our salvation.**

Yes, indeed, Jesus meets and far exceeds the credentials for the office. He is our GREAT High Priest. So, the question is: how does this change things? How might being once again confronted with these truths be helpful in reinvigorating them...revitalizing the Preacher's exhausted audience, those so tired of doing church? How might it help them to be once again "called to worship" with new eyes and ears, to make themselves open to the Spirit to worship and make worship a priority in their personal and communal lives? Well,

- Might they not have rediscovered that, as John Calvin said, "*There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.*"⁵ And might they not have rediscovered that where they best encounter this awesome God, this Great High Priest, is in worship?
- And couldn't they have been reaffirmed that in worship TOGETHER, in community, a Christian finds their BEST personal response to God, that is, to stammer praise, to joyfully acknowledge God's presence in the world and in their lives?
- And maybe, most critically, might they not have been reminded that in worship, they, whose hands were drooping and knees were weak, could surrender it all to Jesus? They could trust, TRUST, TRUST their burdens to the One who has nailed them all..all of their exhaustion

⁴ Thomas Long.

⁵ Anon. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/157718-there-is-not-one-blade-of-grass-there-is-no> (accessed 2-28-20)

and all other weights...our sins, our doubts, our frailties, whatever keeps us from God...to the cross, as he has there, himself, been sacrificed. They could walk from worship unburdened, feeling loved and free, feeling the Spirit to have moved in their midst, transforming and empowering them to reenter the world afresh to face another day, to live for Jesus once again.

*John Ortberg, Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, said it's like driving a car. He remembers it was a "scary day" when he and his wife took their first child home from the hospital. He put their little daughter in the baby seat in the back of the car. "She seemed so small there, so fragile to me that I drove home on the freeway going 35 mph with the hazard lights flashing the whole time." The next "scary day" for him was when she turned 16. That's when he handed her the keys. That's when she moved from the passenger seat to the driver's seat. Until then John was in control. He chose the destination. He chose the route. He chose the speed; but when he gave her the keys, his daughter was in control. If he trusted her to drive the car, he had to let her take control. (repeat) "A lot of people find Jesus just handy to have IN the car, AROUND so that they can call on him just in case they require his services," Rev Ortberg says. "They want him available but don't want him to control their life. They don't really believe. They don't really trust."*⁶

Yes, for those Jewish Christians, a reminder that our Great High Priest is the One whom they can trust, who shows us the nature of God, was what they needed. Friends, how about us? We worship each week here together. Are we entering this space, stepping onto this holy, sacred ground, preparing ourselves to encounter the Living God, our Great High Priest? And here, in community, are we hearing the gospel and being presented with God's promises? Are we finding our best personal response to God, that is, to really praise with a joyful acknowledgement of God's presence in our lives? If so or if not, how might the church help us all to better engage in more Spirit-inspired worship such that we and those around us can be sent out to be living sacrifices for Christ and to frankly...with our love change the world? And

⁶ John Ortberg. "True Freedom" <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2009/june/totalfreedom.html>. (accessed 2-28-20).

finally, a personal question: are you able to trust and give over your burdens to Jesus here, to give over your life, the keys to your car? Can you let him nail those to the cross for you?

Some things to ponder... *....and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

To God be the glory. Amen.