

SERMON TITLE: "Meditations on the Cross: The Great High Priest"
SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 27, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

So, over the past few weeks, have you been meditating on the cross? I know that's what we've been doing here. But I'm wondering if, outside of church also, have you found yourself looking at a cross and thinking more about it? I hope so!

One of the people who has been worshiping with us over Facebook Live lives in Colorado. Alyce sent me a photo of a 5" cross that her niece gave her. The niece made the cross in a ceramics class. It's quite fancy with lots of decorative features. I looked up the style of the cross online and discovered that it is a "Bottony Cross." That's not botany, like plants. It gets that "Bottony" name because of the three button-like knobs on the ends of the horizontal and vertical pieces of the cross. In keeping with the liturgical color for Lent, Alyce's niece colored the Bottony cross purple.

As artistic crosses come in many decorative varieties, so do they symbolically represent a variety of understandings of what happened when Jesus died on the cross and how we believers receive salvation through his crucifixion. Just like artists interpret through clay, wood, paint, and a variety of other media—so do Christian theologians interpret through scriptures, songs, stories, academic articles, and devotional literature. Some of us even teach Sunday school lessons and preach sermons as ways to share our meditations on the cross.

So far in this Lenten sermon series, we've pondered what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians that the weakness and foolishness of the cross had become the power and wisdom of God. Then we read from the Gospel of John that Jesus was lifted up high on the cross so that we might have life through the love of God. And, last Sunday, we reviewed what First Peter and some other scriptures have to say about Jesus, the Lamb of God who died on the cross, so that we might have

freedom from sin. Our salvation through Jesus is so multi-faceted that no one image would ever be able to tell the whole story. But, fortunately for us, today's scripture text from the Letter to the Hebrews adds yet another angle. This morning, I invite you to meditate on the cross with me through the prism of Jesus the Great High Priest.

1--BACKGROUND ON HEBREWS & LEVITICUS

This image of Jesus as the Great High Priest is unique to the Letter to the Hebrews. Of the 66 books in the Bible, only the Old Testament book of Leviticus and this New Testament book of Hebrews give so much information about the role of priests and their responsibilities in regard to making sacrifices. Other books of the Bible emphasize more the role of the prophets, the kings, and those who studied and taught the law and the Gospel. But throughout all that time, priests were important leaders of worship, who performed rituals of purity and forgiveness that carried important meaning like our sacraments of baptism and holy communion do today.

In Leviticus, the sacrificial responsibilities were assigned to Moses' brother Aaron and to those Hebrew men known as the Levites. In those days, they didn't yet have a temple. They were still wandering around in the wilderness, and their acts of worship and sacrifice were done in the sacred tabernacle tent. Later, after King Solomon oversaw the building of the temple in Jerusalem, the priestly functions were centered there. When the Babylonian exile was over and the Jews returned home and rebuilt Jerusalem, the priests again made sacrifices in the temple for the sins of the people. During the time of Jesus and the disciples, Herod's newly-restored Temple was the central location for Jewish sacrifices. The Romans destroyed that temple in the year 70, however, and it was never rebuilt.

Bible scholars and church historians aren't sure whether the Letter to the Hebrews was written just before or after that destruction. But whether that Jewish worship center was still standing or not, the Letter to the Hebrews clearly supposes that now, through Jesus, there's a better temple in the heavens. And there, in that heavenly temple, is where our Great High Priest advocates for us.

2—GREAT HIGH PRIEST IS ONE OF US

The message of the letter to the Hebrews is complicated. The writer himself even says that “it’s hard to explain” (5:11). But one thing that we can readily see is that the Great High Priest is able to sympathize with us because he’s one of us. Hebrews 4:15 says that our salvation through Jesus Christ is possible because he was tested as we are. In Hebrews 5:2, we are told that every high priest “is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward [because] he himself is subject to weakness.” Jesus, our Great High Priest, is no exception to that. In verse seven, we see that during “the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, . . . and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” Verse eight tells us that “Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered.”

These are real, human experiences. Just as “every high priest was chosen from among mortals,” so was Jesus our Great High Priest born in human flesh. A very important part of what made Jesus our Great High Priest is that he wasn’t given any shortcuts. Jesus was the Son of God, yes, but that didn’t give him extra privileges or the ability to avoid pain. He wasn’t deferred or exempted from service. Born in a stable in a lowly family, Jesus put in his time, learned to obey, and gained perfection through what he suffered. So he has a natural basis for empathy with our struggles and has the ability to offer us mercy and grace and to encourage us to hold on to our faith.

3—SINLESS, CHOSEN, FOREVER

But coming from among mortals isn’t the only reason Jesus has the ability to serve as our Great High Priest. If being human were enough, then every high priest would have been great, and Jesus would have been no different. Jesus was qualitatively different, and that’s why we worship him as divine, as well as human. As Hebrews 4:14 tells us, Jesus was tested in every way like us, but he was able to get through that “without sin.” In Hebrews 5:9, we read that Jesus was “made perfect.” No one can say for sure how much of that sinlessness and perfection came from Jesus’ humanity, and how much of it was because he was divine. But it’s clear that Jesus was unique.

All high priests were called by God, but Jesus wasn't just called to be a high priest. He was also chosen and called to be God's Son. And Jesus wasn't a high priest whose life and service came to an end. According to Hebrews 5:5, Jesus was "a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." This reference to Melchizedek is complicated, so I'm not going to try to explain it all to you in this sermon. But the basic idea is that, like that mysterious priest and king mentioned just briefly in the book of Genesis, Jesus was definitely in a different and better league than other high priests. Jesus' intercession wasn't done with animal sacrifices that had to be repeated over and over again, day after day and year after year. Unlike other high priests, Jesus didn't have to make atonement for his own sins first before he could offer cleansing and redemption for his people. Because Jesus had made the greatest possible sacrifice of his own perfect life, that was enough forever. No more sacrifices need be done on earth because our Great High Priest now intercedes for us eternally in the heavens.

4—GREAT HIGH PRIEST AS PIONEER AND PERFECTER OF OUR FAITH

So, what does all that mean? Since all of Hebrews is one big treatise, it makes sense to look ahead to see what the goal is. In chapter 12, we find the advice to keep "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." We are advised to "consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart." The writer of Hebrews points out that, "in your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood . . . Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed."

Physical healing is always nice, and we sure know about some weak and painful knees that could use some relief, right?! But we can tell that this is a spiritual metaphor. Our Great High Priest doesn't want to cleanse us of sin just to have us get all messed up and dirty again. Our Great High Priest wants

to heal us of our propensity to sin. The goal for this pioneer and perfecter of our faith is that we would follow in his footsteps, that we would learn obedience in our suffering, that we grow in perfection, and that we would remain faithful to our end, just as Jesus did.

In Hebrews chapter six, the author indicates that, when we get stalled and stuck in the basics and don't make progress forward in our faith, we risk falling away. Such lack of faith holds Christ in contempt and risks crucifying him again. It's time, the author writes, to stop falling away, and to get on with what's really important. The Great High Priest gave himself on the cross as the best possible sacrifice forever and always. Nothing more needs to be done there. Now it's just time for us to be faithful like Jesus was. The best way to honor him as our Great High Priest is to accept his merciful atonement and follow Jesus' excellent example in faith and good service.

CONCLUSION

At the time the Bible was written, animal sacrifice had been and still was a huge part of being a religious person—not only in Judaism, but also in the Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and other religions of the region. In fact, early Christians were accused by the Romans of being “atheists” because they didn't perform sacrifices to a deity. But Christians knew that they didn't need to shed any more blood. Jesus' death on the cross had shed enough blood already. That one perfect act of atonement would forever provide the mercy and inspiration we Christians need. May this be true for us as we meditate on the cross of our Great High Priest.