

FINDING TIMELY HELP

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 4:14-16

Eleventh Message

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PBCC is a low church. Perhaps you're familiar with this language of low church and high church. We don't have liturgy or elaborate ritual like a high church. No bells and smells. No priests in fancy robes. We don't even ordain. Like other Protestants we affirm the priesthood of all believers, yet we don't call ourselves priests. And we are suspicious of church leaders who do. Didn't priesthood get left behind with the Old Covenant? Priesthood seems strange to many of us.

We also affirm that Christ fulfills all three covenant offices that were previously filled by different people in Israel under that Old Covenant: the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Each was a mediator between God and his people. Each was of the people, but didn't necessarily represent the people. The prophet and the king represented God to the people; the priest represented the people to God. Hebrews presents Jesus in all three roles.

The prophet represented God to the people. His role was to proclaim God's word, to say, "Thus says the Lord!" The people didn't always want to hear that word. Hebrews begins with God's prophetic word:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Heb 1:1-2a NIV)

Over a long period of time God spoke to his people through many different prophets. But now he has spoken a greater word. He spoke this word not just through his Son, but even as his Son. Jesus himself is the word which God has spoken to us.

That first sentence continues with a seven-fold description of the Son. The sixth statement is: "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:3). Later we read that he is "now crowned with glory and honor" (2:9). God has installed the risen Jesus as king. Not just any king, but the highest king, King of kings. As our Scripture reading (Phil 2:6-11) affirmed, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name," so that ultimately everyone will bow and confess that he is Lord. The king was supposed to represent God in ruling his people. Ideally he led the people in righteousness and justice.

Jesus was God's prophet and his word incarnate. The risen Jesus is exalted and enthroned as king. This identity of Jesus as both prophet and king is affirmed not only in Hebrews but throughout the NT. However, the presentation of Jesus in the third office, as priest, is unique to Hebrews. It is by far the most important of the three offices in this book. Yet I think that most of us understand little about how Jesus serves as high priest. In part this is because Hebrews is a difficult book that is rarely preached. We have our favorite verses, to be sure, but much of the book is unfamiliar. It is also because most of us are unfamiliar with the world of priests and how they function. The institution of the priesthood for ancient Israel is given in Leviticus and Numbers, territory into which we rarely venture. So even if we do read into the central section of Hebrews we don't understand the background context of Old Covenant priesthood

against which the priesthood of Jesus is to be understood.

We get a first hint of Jesus as priest already in the fifth statement of the same opening sentence: "he provided purification for sins" (1:3). This is the role of a priest.

Today we come to a major transition in the Book of Hebrews. The preacher has already briefly mentioned Jesus as high priest (2:17; 3:1), but now he turns his full attention to this topic. His presentation of Jesus as high priest covers six chapters (4:14-10:25), so we will be in this material for a considerable time. There are two aspects to Jesus's high-priestly ministry. There is a one-time ministry whereby he has provided purification for sins once and for all on our behalf. And there is an ongoing ministry of intercession on our behalf before the Father in heaven. Notice that two-fold use of "on our behalf." The prophet and the king acted on God's behalf. The priest acts on the people's behalf, representing the people before God.

Our text today is the preacher's introduction to this major section on Jesus as high priest:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Heb 4:14-16)

The central section on Jesus as high priest is clearly demarcated by this introduction and by a very similar conclusion (10:19-23).

In this introduction the preacher twice states that we have a high priest, and twice gives an exhortation based upon this fact: let us hold firmly our confession, and let us draw near to God.

Though this is the introduction to the next six chapters, *therefore* and *since* anchor us in the previous chapters. They refer back to chapter 2 where Jesus is first described as high priest:

For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (2:16-18)

There are numerous connections between this passage and our text, 4:14-16.

Therefore also refers back to the previous paragraph that we looked at last week (4:12-13). God's word lays us open to his penetrating gaze. So we need an advocate, a mediator to act and speak on our behalf. We have one in our great high priest.

A priest serves as a human mediator between the human and the divine realms. The interface between the human and the divine is

dangerous territory. It is dangerous to be too close to God. This was especially so for ancient Israel, because God wanted to dwell with his people: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” But how can a holy God dwell with a sinful people? Won’t the holiness of God consume the sinful people? Won’t the sinful people contaminate the holy God? It seems a recipe for disaster. Yet this is what God wanted to do: dwell in the midst of his people. The infinite Creator with his finite creatures. This is God’s ultimate goal, that he and his people dwell together. That he draw his people into his eternal glory.

For ancient Israel the interface between the divine and the human was the tabernacle. Israel was living in tents as they journeyed from Egypt to the land of Canaan, from the land of slavery to the land of promise. So God instructed Moses to have the people make a tent so that he could dwell and travel with his people. This tent or tabernacle also served to transfer the divine presence from Mt Sinai to Mt Zion, its final resting place.

The tabernacle was a tent surrounded by a courtyard. The tent was divided into two chambers: the outer Holy Place and the inner Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies. In this inner chamber was the ark of the covenant symbolizing God’s presence. The two-chambered tent and the courtyard formed a three-tiered structure of holiness.

The tabernacle was set in the midst of the Israelite camp. Moving outwards from the courtyard was first the priests, then the Levites, then the other tribes of Israel, three per side. Beyond them, outside the camp, were those who were unclean. Far beyond the camp were the other nations, notably Egypt, from whose land they had come, and Canaan, into whose land they would enter. It was highly-structured space. The holiness of the space increased from the nations on the far periphery inwards to the Most Holy Place in the middle.

In the tabernacle God embraced his people by placing his presence in their midst. But the tabernacle was also about exclusion. The three zones of the tabernacle itself were demarcated by curtains. These served as barriers to entry. They excluded most and admitted only a few. The people were told to draw near to God, but they could only come so far before their path was blocked by a barrier.

Israelites could bring their sacrifices to the courtyard entrance, protected by a curtain. They could go no further. They could not pass through the curtain. They would kill the animal then hand it over to the priests, who were able to pass through, taking the carcass inside the courtyard to the altar of burnt offering. Priests could pass through the second curtain into the tent only if they had priestly business inside. And only the high priest could pass through the innermost curtain into the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place, and then only once a year. He had to take burning incense with him so the smoke veiled his sight; so that he couldn’t see any further in.

So the tabernacle was about both exclusion and embrace. God and his people dwelt together but it was an arrangement full of danger. Priests mediated between the people outside the tabernacle and God’s presence in the inner chamber.

The supreme act of mediation occurred once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would pass through the inner curtain into the Most Holy Place. He took with him the blood from two animals, one for his own sin, the other for the sin of the people. This blood of purification he would sprinkle on the cover of the ark of the covenant, usually known as the atonement cover or mercy seat. Then he would return outside. This language and imagery of the Day of Atonement permeates these central chapters of Hebrews.

Jesus as high priest is our mediator. He has “ascended into heaven” (NIV). Literally, he has “passed through the heavens.” Each year the high priest passed through the inner curtain into the Most Holy Place, and then came back out. But with Jesus it is as if the horizontal spatial structure of the tabernacle has been turned vertical. Jesus passed through the curtain of the heavens into the true sanctuary. He is now exalted above the heavens (7:26). He has entered into God’s rest, into God’s very presence. The preacher will return to this entrance several times.

Who is this high priest? He is Jesus the Son of God. Jesus, the Son incarnate as a human being, as one of us. Risen and exalted, he remains Jesus; he did not put off his humanity when he entered God’s presence. He took his humanity into God’s presence. He is the Son of God, present with God from the beginning, agent of God’s creation. He is on the side of the Creator not the creation. In Jesus the Son of God, the human and the divine meet. He is the perfect mediator. He is the perfect high priest. He is one of us but now in God’s presence. He is there for us. Having entered once, he is still there. There he sat down at God’s right hand, indicating finality.

Since we have such a high priest, the preacher’s exhortation is, “Let us hold firmly our confession.” NIV has interpreted this confession as “the faith we profess.” What is it? This confession is first mentioned in 3:1, where Jesus is described as the apostle and high priest of our confession. As *apostle* he is the one sent from God into our world to become human like us. He has now returned to God as one of us to be *high priest*. This is the truth we hold on to. It is bedrock reality for us: that the Son was sent into our world to be one of us, Jesus the man; and that this Jesus is now in God’s presence as one of us.

Verse 15 explains the importance of holding this confession because of the sort of high priest that we have. He is described first negatively, what he is not, and then positively, what he is. The negative statement is actually a double negative, making it a positive statement. Our high priest is able to *empathize* with our weaknesses. Most translations state that Jesus *sympathizes* with us. The original NIV was the same. But NIV now has *empathizes*. Sympathy and empathy are not the same, though they are easily confused. I’m no psychologist, but I think of them as sympathy feels *for* someone else in their suffering, whereas empathy feels *with* that person. It takes someone who has been through what we’re going through to empathize with us. Many more can sympathize. I think the NIV is right to make this change. That Jesus our high priest is able to empathize with us, not just sympathize, is made clear in the second statement: he “has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Jesus was just like us: “in every way, just as we are.” This is an echo of an earlier verse: he had to *be made like* his brothers and sisters *in every way* (2:17). Made just like us in every way. His full humanity extended to being tempted in every way, just like us. This is why he can have empathy with us in our temptation. Not just pity. Not just sympathy. Not just compassion. But deep empathy: he understands. He knows what temptation is like. He has been there. Just like us.

People point out that Jesus wasn’t actually tempted in every way just like us. He was never a woman, never married, never had kids, never on social media. He never worked in the pressure cooker of Silicon Valley, or many other situations we face today. On the other hand he faced unique temptations because of the power at his disposal. Temptations that we will never face. I have never been tempted to command stones to become bread, to jump off the

pinnacle of the temple to be caught by angels, or to aspire to world rule. These were real temptations that Jesus faced. He faced them because of his unique position as the Son of God. These were things he could actually grasp at if he wanted to. “If you are the Son of God...,” said Satan twice. He was indeed the Son of God. He could take advantage of these things. But would he? Would he use that status to his own advantage? Would he act in a self-referential manner? Would he act for himself?

To understand this statement that Jesus has been tempted in all ways just like us, it is helpful to remember the context. We first read, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). What is this temptation? The nature of temptation is identified in 3:7–4:11. The Israelites that God brought out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses were tested or tempted in the wilderness. They had heard God’s voice, but would they remain faithful to that voice? “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (3:7, 15; 4:7). They did not heed God’s voice; they did harden their hearts. They gave in to temptation and failed the test. They were unfaithful and disobedient.

Every temptation or test comes down to this. Will we keep hearing God’s voice? “If you are the Son of God...” said Satan. Would Jesus listen to Satan? Especially as he was in great need, after fasting forty days and nights. He himself suffered when he was tempted. He suffered in the wilderness. He suffered in the garden of Gethsemane, what we call the Agony in the Garden, agony meaning struggle. This marked the beginning of his Passion, what we call the final 18 hours of his life from Gethsemane until his burial in the tomb. Passion sounds a benign or even positive word. But in its original context it means *suffering*. Jesus suffered when he was tempted.

Because he suffered when being tempted in every way just like us, he is able to do more than sympathize with us. He empathizes with us. He has been where we are—just like us. He is able to help.

The one way in which Jesus was not like us is that he was without sin. Some ask how he can really be like us if he did not sin. In resisting temptation and not sinning, he was being truly human. In resisting temptation and being faithful to the end he was restoring true humanity to the world. A disobedient human is a broken human. If he had given in to temptation there would have been no resurrection. When Jesus died sinless, Death held one on whom it had no claim. If he had sinned, Death would have had a claim. The resurrection was God’s vindication of him and a defeat of death—because he was sinless. If Jesus had given in to temptation there would be no exaltation and enthronement. He would not be the perfect high priest because his own sins would need atoning for. He would have been just one more unfaithful, disobedient, sinful, rebellious human being. Just like Israel. Alas, just like us.

But we have as high priest “one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Thanks be to God!

In v. 16 the preacher gives his second exhortation. It is introduced by *therefore*, based upon having such a high priest. “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence.” We have seen that for Old Covenant Israel God’s presence with his people was as much about exclusion as about embrace. The various categories of people could draw near, but only so far before they found their way blocked. Access was limited. If you were impure, unclean, diseased, or damaged you could not draw near at all; you were beyond the camp. The tabernacle was simultaneously a place of exclusion and embrace. It was a fearsome thing to get too close to God. When the high priest entered the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement

he had bells on the hem of his robe so the people outside would know that he was still alive in the presence of the awesome God. When Isaiah “saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne,” he was undone. “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips...and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” (Isa 6:1, 5). It was a dangerous thing to get too close to God.

But now, under the New Covenant, we are invited to draw near, to approach God. We can do so because we have a mediator between us and God, an advocate for us before God. Jesus has already entered into God’s presence, his rest. We will enter into that rest at the end of our earthly journey. We are in the process of entering. We have started that entrance, but we are not there yet. Meanwhile, we are invited to draw near in faith. How near can we draw? Through the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. Through the curtain at the entrance to the tent. Through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. Into the very presence of God through Christ Jesus. We draw near.

We approach with bold confidence. We encountered this word translated *boldness* or *confidence* in 3:6. It is a key word in Hebrews. Yes, it means confidence, but especially in the presence of someone of high rank. Because of our high priest, we draw near to God with the confidence that we can be there, that we belong there. The confidence that God welcomes us, that he is pleased to see us there. As I said a few weeks ago, it’s a confidence that many Christians lack. We don’t feel that God is pleased to see us. This is one reason why understanding the high-priestly ministry of Jesus is so important. It assures us that we are welcome in God’s presence. This assurance is why Charles Wesley could write, “Bold I approach the eternal throne.”

Perhaps some of you are familiar with a famous series of photos from sixty years ago. They show President Kennedy working at his desk, the Resolute Desk, in the Oval Office while his son John Jr plays there in his presence. Young John Jr had this bold confidence to draw near and enter his father’s presence, even into the Oval Office, the epicenter of executive power. This is the confidence that we can have, drawing near in Christ Jesus to the true center of executive power.

With this sort of bold confidence we approach the throne of grace. Seated there is one who does not confer shame upon us, which is what we might instinctively feel. He does not give a look that tells us we shouldn’t really be there. He confers grace, favor, and honor on us, because we are in Christ. Because the risen Lord Jesus is there for us. We are his brothers and sisters. Jesus is not ashamed to own us as such, and so God is not ashamed to own us as such, his beloved sons and daughters.

There is a purpose to this drawing near: “so that we may receive mercy and find grace.” This is what God delights to do, to show mercy and grace. He revealed himself to Moses as “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exod 34:6-7). Jesus is “a merciful and faithful high priest” (2:17).

The purpose of this dual gift of mercy and grace is to provide timely help. Ever since the earliest English translations, before KJV, this phrase has been translated as “to help in time of need.” Literally it is well-timed help. Help that is provided at just the right time. Timely help. The right sort of help for the right time. What time is that and what sort of help is needed? We are told at the end of chapter 2. Because Jesus suffered when tempted, just like us, “he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). So, it is help to resist

temptation. “Have we trials and tribulations?” we sang. Yes, we do, all the time. Timely help is help when we are being tempted, so that we can overcome. It is help to keep us following Jesus. Help to endure and persevere. Help to remain faithful as we continue our earthly pilgrimage. We are always in need of such help. And God in Christ is eager to give us this help, because he wants us to be faithful. He wants us to faithfully finish the journey so that we do enter fully into his presence—because he wants to dwell with his people.

In his conclusion at the end of the high-priestly section, the preacher repeats his main points. “[S]ince we have confidence to enter...and since we have a great priest...let us draw near... Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess” (10:19-23). Notice the repetition of key terms: having a great high priest, let us draw near, confidence, and holding on to our confession. The preacher wants his brothers and sisters, and us also, to know how fully welcome we are in God’s presence through Jesus our high priest. Let us boldly draw near.

He immediately continues:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together...but encouraging one another (10:24-25)

Hebrews is full of exhortations. One can summarize these exhortations into two. Firstly, look to Jesus, see him there; come to Jesus, draw near. Secondly, encourage one another and meet together; we are in this journey together as we walk this life of faith.

Today is the first of our two Connection Sundays. The focus today is connections here within the church family. There are many ways for us to meet together to encourage one another.

Some of the earliest artistic depictions of Jesus were as the Good

Shepherd caring for his sheep, even carrying one on his shoulders. But when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it became increasingly common to portray Jesus as a king, and to place his image high up in the dome of a church or cathedral. This type of image is usually known as Christ Pantocrator, Christ Ruler of All.

Such is the image I am using for this series. It is a beautiful late Byzantine mosaic of Christ Pantocrator in the cathedral in Cefalù, Sicily. But Christ became so exalted that he was far off. He ceased to be a mediator. He ceased to be one of us. He ceased to be approachable. There was a need for a mediator to the mediator. To some extent, Mary was exalted in order to fill this role. Petitions were directed to her so that she might petition her son. Also a human priesthood developed to mediate.

This is a far cry from Hebrews with its presentation of Jesus the Son of God. The eternal Son became just like us in every way, including temptation, save without sin. Now exalted through the heavens to God’s right hand, he is not far off. We are bid to draw near, to approach. He is approachable. And when we draw near we find one who not only sympathizes with us, but who empathizes with us. As the hymn says, “Jesus knows our every weakness.” Therefore he is able to empathize with our weaknesses and provide timely help, just the right help at just the right time. Timely help so that we keep following him faithfully. We need this help all the time because we face temptation all the time. Jesus our high priest is able to help. So let us look to him together as we walk this life of faith together.

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