

THE ONGOING MINISTRY OF JESUS

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 8:1-6

20th Message

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PBCC is not a liturgical church. We don't follow an order of service that is printed in a service book. Some of you have formerly been in liturgical churches. Anglicans and Episcopalians use the *Book of Common Prayer* or one of its recent derivatives. All over the world they are using the same liturgy, in communion together, albeit in different languages. Similarly, Roman Catholics use the Missal and are no longer restricted to using Latin. Mainline Presbyterians use the *Book of Common Worship*. Most of these liturgies have deep roots in the past. In such liturgical churches the liturgist leads the congregation in the liturgy, following a liturgical calendar. Many use the same set of Scripture readings each Sunday, the most common being the Revised Common Lectionary which follows a three-year cycle.

This is not our practice. Yet in some ways we are liturgical because we do follow an established order. We have our own liturgy, one with very recent roots. We do follow the same order each week and each month. The first Sunday of the month we have communion; the third Sunday we have a partner moment. Very occasionally we make a significant change such as moving the announcements from the middle to the beginning.

The Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches call their Eucharist liturgy the Divine Liturgy. They do so because they see their worship as being in communion not only with all other such churches around the world, but also with the worship going on in heaven by the departed saints and the angels. What they do on earth is seen as mirroring what is happening in heaven. This is reflected in architecture. Some of you have been with me to Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul; some of you have been there on your own. The vast interior space of that building was designed to correspond on the earthly level to heaven above. And the worship in that space was in parallel with the worship in heaven above.

The Book of Revelation shows the worship in heaven. God and Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain, are at the center, receiving the worship of a vast assembly. This worship is led by the four cherubim, God's throne attendants. The twenty-four elders join in, followed by a vast angelic choir, then a multitude beyond counting of human beings from every nation, language, tribe, and tongue, who have faithfully completed their life on earth. God and the Lamb at the center receive this worship, this heavenly liturgy.

The risen, ascended, and enthroned Jesus is worshiped. Yet in other respects Jesus is also himself the chief worshiper. He presides over a liturgy. As we will see today this is the perspective of the Book of Hebrews. In the previous two Sundays we have covered 7:11-28 in which the preacher has shown the inadequacy of the law, the priesthood, and even the covenant that God gave Israel. These were all good and gracious gifts. But ultimately they could only be temporary because they were weak and ineffective. They didn't work; they couldn't work. Something better is needed. Jesus fits the bill because he has been made perfect forever. God has appointed him as high priest in a new order of priesthood. He is the only priest that is

necessary.

The beginning of chapter 8 marks a major transition in the book, turning from Jesus's appointment as the better high priest (5:1-10; 7:11-18) to his better ministry as high priest (8:3-10:18). The first two verses form a transition between these two major sections. They look back and they look ahead. Our text for today is 8:1-6, beginning with these transitional verses, 1-2.

I. Jesus the Minister (8:1-2)

¹Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ²and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. (Heb 8:1-2 NIV)

At last we get the preacher's main point, more than half-way into his written sermon! At the end of the previous chapter he has written, "it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest" (7:26 ESV), or "Such a high priest truly meets our need" (NIV). The Levitical priests did not meet these needs. The preacher now emphatically affirms, "We do have such a high priest." He wants us to be in no doubt of how completely Jesus satisfies what we need in a high priest.

He makes two points about this high priest, drawing on the two verses in Psalm 110 that are so important for understanding Hebrews. This high priest has two roles; he has a dual identity.

First, Jesus has "sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." This is a near-verbatim repetition of a line in his magnificent opening sentence: "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3). There he is referring to the Son. Here he is referring to Jesus the high priest. In both cases he is alluding to Psalm 110:

The LORD says to my lord:

**"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet." (Ps 110:1)**

He quotes this explicitly at 1:13 in showing the superiority of the Son to the angels. And this verse is quoted or alluded to in many other places in the NT. Indeed, this verse is quoted more frequently in the NT than any other verse. Sitting at the right hand of God's throne in heaven implies that the Son participates in God's rule, and that God is bringing all things under his rule. He is bringing everything together in Christ. The risen and exalted Son is the King. Jesus, made perfect forever, is the human being who is granted the rule over God's creation that God intended for Adam in the beginning.

The fact that the Son who is the exalted Jesus has sat down implies that his work is done. It is finished. It is now God who is at work subjecting all things to him, uniting all things in him.

In verse 2 the preacher says something quite different about this

high priest: he is a minister in the sanctuary, implying that he is a priest, indeed the high priest. This ministry as priest is in fulfillment of Psalm 110:4,

**The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.” (Ps 110:4)**

So Jesus is simultaneously King and Priest. As the eternal Son, who took on full humanity, becoming a little lower than the angels, he has been enthroned far above the angels as King. As Jesus, the human who has been made perfect forever, he is actively at work as a minister in the heavenly sanctuary.

Jesus our high priest is a minister in the sanctuary. The Greek word the preacher uses for *minister* is *leitourgos*, from which comes our English word *liturgy*. Literally it means work (*ergon*) of or for the people (*laos*). In the Greco-Roman world it referred to one who performed public service at his own expense whether in civic society or in a religious cult. He, and they usually were men, was a benefactor, giving for the benefit of the people. In Israel's Scriptures it is used of the ministry of the priests on behalf of the people unto God in the tabernacle and the temple. It is an interesting term to use of Jesus. NIV translates the noun with the verb *serves*; other translations better use the noun *minister*.

The realm in which Jesus is acting as a minister is the sanctuary, that is the true tent. The reference clearly implies the tabernacle, which was a tent. Moses erected the original tabernacle at the foot of Mt Sinai, following God's instructions given him atop Mt Sinai. But this true tent is pitched not by Moses, not by a human being, but by God. As we will subsequently find out, this true tent is in heaven, in God's presence. Jesus's liturgical activity is not on earth, but ongoing in heaven. There Jesus is both seated as enthroned Son and actively at work as minister in the sanctuary. He is both Son and Priest.

2. The Ministry of Jesus (8:3-6)

Next the preacher differentiates the ministry of Jesus from the service of the former Levitical priests.

³Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. ⁴If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁵They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” ⁶But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. (8:3-6)

The long central section about priesthood began with a job description:

Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. (5:1)

Three things are stated here about the high priest. He is a) one of the people, b) represents the people before God, and c) presents offerings to God to deal with sin. He mediates between the people and God. In beginning this second section about the ministry of Jesus our high priest, he repeats the third aspect, what the high priest

does: “Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices” (8:3). This was true for the Levitical high priests. The Law, that is Torah, the Mosaic Law given at Mt Sinai, gave instructions about the many different gifts and sacrifices to be brought by the people through the priests to God. The liturgy of sacrifices followed a liturgical calendar.

It is true also for Jesus as high priest: “it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer.” But he can't offer the same gifts and sacrifices as the former priests did. He doesn't qualify as a priest under their Levitical system. It is as if there is a non-compete clause. He is of a different tribe, appointed to a different order of priesthood, by an oath not without one, not under the law, within a different covenant, and he ministers in a different sanctuary. What could he offer? There had to be *something*. *Something* is vague; it is undefined. The preacher has already told us that Jesus offered himself (7:27). But in this section (8:1-10:18) he delays providing an answer until he has first described what the Levitical priests offered. Only then will he identify what Jesus offered: he offered himself (9:14).

These priests serve in the sanctuary, in the tabernacle, following the liturgy prescribed by the Law. Unfortunately NIV described Jesus our high priest *servicing* in v. 2, the same English word as here. This implies that Jesus and the priests are similar. But the preacher is careful to distinguish Jesus's current ministry in the true tent, and the Levitical priests' service in the earthly tabernacle. He uses two different words to distinguish these two activities. The term used of Jesus in v. 2 is a more exalted term than that used in v. 5 of the priests. Most English versions do maintain this distinction, rendering Jesus's position in v. 2 as *minister*. Jesus is a *minister*; the Levitical priests and high priests *served*.

The Levitical priests offered the gifts prescribed by the law. Again, as I said several times last week, the Law and the Levitical system of priesthood were gracious gifts from God. This included the sanctuary where they offered their gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the people. This was where God put his presence among his people. But this sanctuary was inferior and temporary. These priests serve in a copy and shadow of the things in heaven. A shadow is not real. You can see it but you can't pick it up and handle it. It is an illusion as it were, created by light illuminating what is real, and thus casting a shadow. The earthly sanctuary where the Levitical priests served, though it was tangible, physical, and in that sense real, was not the ultimate reality. That was in heaven. When Moses was atop Mt Sinai with the Lord, he told him this when he gave him detailed instructions for the tabernacle. The preacher quotes:

“See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” (8:5)

This is a quotation from Exodus 25:40. As we heard in our Scripture reading (Exod 25:1-9, 40), the Lord instructed Moses to receive voluntary, free-will offerings and contributions from the people, “everyone whose heart prompts them to give.” Then he told Moses what they were to do with these offerings:

“Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.” (Exod 25:8-9)

At the end of the initial instructions, the Lord repeated this general principle:

“See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” (Exod 25:40)

So what did the Lord show Moses? What did Moses see? I don't think he necessarily saw a physical tabernacle, or a model of such, in heaven. But God showed him something that adequately represented heavenly reality in a way that could be replicated on earth. The tabernacle was more than just a physical structure, a two-compartment tent surrounded by a courtyard. I mentioned last week that the language used of Moses assembling the component parts into the finished tabernacle (Exodus 40) is similar to the language of the Lord making the cosmos in Genesis 1. This stands to reason since many now recognize that Genesis 1 describes the cosmos that God creates as a temple into which God puts his image: a human being that represents him in the world. The tabernacle did not have an image in it. Instead God's *shekinah* glory, his indwelling presence, his glory cloud, was pictured as enthroned between the cherubim with the ark of the covenant as his footstool. The tabernacle was heaven on earth, where God was present among his people. Yes, it was a physical structure, but it was so much more.

Solomon subsequently built the temple in Jerusalem as a more permanent place for God's presence. He followed the *pattern* (the same word) that David, the man after God's own heart, wrote down for him. Solomon clearly understood that the Most Holy Place was the earthly pole of a vertical axis to heaven.

The tabernacle which Moses erected and in which God put his presence, and the temple which Solomon built and in which God put his presence, were great gifts from God. They were real physical structures, but they were copies and shadows of the real, of the true.

It would be easy here to fall prey to Platonic thinking. The Greek philosopher Plato used the language of shadow and reality, starting with the image of a fire throwing shadows onto the wall of a cave. For him, too, reality was in the non-physical realm, the realm of Ideas. The Ideas were the reality, of which all earthly things were mere shadows. The ideal, then, is to be liberated from the physical world of shadows into the non-physical world of Ideas. So Plato and his followers denigrated the physical world. They believed the soul is trapped in a physical body from which it needs to be freed. This thinking has had a deep influence on the Christian world. It is common to think that when we die we will be freed from this evil world and go to heaven, there to be with Jesus in a non-physical realm. The evil world will be destroyed by God. But for many this sounds unappealing: sitting on a cloud strumming a harp for eternity.

The Biblical view of creation is very positive. In an act of love and generosity God created a physical cosmos, which he repeatedly observed to be good, indeed very good. Yes, evil has entered into the world, bringing with it disorder. But God's ultimate intent is to restore order to the world, indeed to make this world even better than it was. God's intent is to fill the earth with heaven so the two realms are joined together. God will then be fully present with his people. This is the vision of the end of Revelation.

It will be the end of shadows. C. S. Lewis entitled the last chapter of *The Last Battle*, the seventh and last book of his Narnia Chronicles, "Farewell to Shadowlands." The world gave way to a realm that was not non-physical but was even more real and physical as they went "further up and further in." Lewis presents a similar vision of "heaven" in his book *The Great Divorce*.

Meanwhile, Jesus our high priest is fully present to God, having passed through the heavenlies. He is there as a human being.

The preacher closes the paragraph by showing the superiority of our high priest to the former Levitical priests (v. 6). Jesus has

obtained a superior ministry. Again the preacher is careful with his language. This ministry is *leitourgia*. So Jesus the *leitourgos* (2) has obtained a *leitourgia* (6). This time NIV well-translates the word as *ministry*. Jesus the *minister* has a *ministry*. He has this superior ministry insofar as he is the mediator of a better covenant. And this better covenant is established on better promises. Better ministry, better covenant, better promises. Everything about Jesus and his high-priestly ministry is better. This better ministry, better covenant, and better promises will be developed in the next few chapters. Next week we'll look at the better covenant (8:7-13).

Jesus the minister has a ministry in God's presence. He is the mediator between God and his people, an arrangement made possible by a new covenant. He interfaces between God and us. As the eternal Son he is one with God, enthroned at his right hand. As the human Jesus, made perfect forever, and empowered with indestructible life, he represents us to God. He is one of us, he acts for us, and he presents offerings on our behalf—the three features of the high priest identified in 5:1. There are two aspects to this ministry before God and his representation of us. First, he has offered himself as a one-time offering that is efficacious for us forever. It's an offering that works. It brings perfection. It deals with the problems of sin and death. Secondly, he has an ongoing ministry on our behalf, providing access to God. He speaks for us to his Father. He continually offers us and our actions to God.

The Levitical priests engaged in acts of service. But there is no longer such a priesthood. No longer are animals being offered up to the Lord as sacrifices. Instead, the NT affirms that we are all priests in that we all engage in acts of service to the Lord. Jesus gathers up all this service, done in his name, and presents it to his Father.

God placed the first human in the garden. This was a sanctuary, where God walked in the cool of the day, where he interacted with the humans he had made. There in the sanctuary he commissioned the first human to worship him and keep his one commandment. We usually think of that commission as working and keeping the garden. But the text is clear that God had done all the work. It is better to see the human as called to worship the Lord by keeping the one commandment. A life of worship lived out in obedience amid the bounty of God's provision. Now we all as God's people worship or serve the Lord in all that we do. And we do so "in Christ" as his people empowered by his Spirit. What is the service we bring to the Lord?

First, we worship or serve God in our praise, what we usually think of as "worship." At the end of Hebrews the preacher writes:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. (13:15)

High priests were appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices (5:1). Jesus has offered himself as the one effective offering once and for all. We now bring our offerings of praise. In doing so we are imitating Jesus, of whom it was earlier said:

"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises." (2:12, quoting Ps 22:22)

In identity with God, Jesus declares God's name, his greatness, to us. In identity with us, whom he is not ashamed to call his brothers and sisters, he praises God as our worship leader. Commenting on this verse, John Calvin wrote, "as soon as God becomes known to us, his boundless praises sound in our hearts and in our ears... Christ leads our songs, and is the chief composer of our hymns."¹ He is our

liturgist.

As we bring our praises we are echoing our older brother who sang God's praises. As we sing our praises Jesus presents them to the Father. As we gather to worship we do so in Christ and so our worship is presented to God by him.

Part of our call to worship was from 1 Peter 2:

you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Pet 2:5, 9)

We declare the greatness of God, offering up our praise of him. Jesus our liturgist gathers up our praises and presents them to God.

Second, we offer our prayers. As we pray "in Jesus's name" he presents our prayers to the Father. There are several aspects to our prayers. First, praise and thanksgiving, which, in sung form we usually think of as worship. We also bring our petitions: we need God's help. A major purpose of Hebrews is to encourage us, since we have such a great high priest who has ascended on high, to approach God's throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace in time of need. Which is all the time: when we're facing temptation, or being tested, or are discouraged, or on the verge of giving up faithfully following Jesus. Our petitions include bringing our confession. We do all this in Jesus's name. When we do so, Jesus our high priest gathers up all our prayers and presents them to his Father.

Third, we offer our lives. We are to live out our entire lives "in Jesus's name," united with him. We have participated in his death and are participating in his life. As symbolized in baptism, we have died to our old selves, and been raised to new life in Christ, his life transfused to us through the Spirit.

The tabernacle where priests brought their offerings was a shadow

of heavenly realities. Under the new covenant we do not bring our offerings of praise, prayer, and our entire lives to an altar or structure on earth. The NT says that our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). This is often misunderstood to imply that we shouldn't feel at home in this world anymore. Instead, it implies that we, as those on earth who are in Christ, are living in a colony of heaven. The purpose of a colony is to extend the influence of the home city or country. So, in Christ we live our lives in a piece of heaven on earth. We are to extend the influence of heaven on earth—another affirmation of the goodness of the created world. Jesus our liturgist gathers up all that we do in his name and presents it to his Father. This implies that all that we do is liturgical, that all time is sacred time. There is no ordinary time.

Jesus brings God down to us humans, and he gathers us humans in himself before God. He is our one and only priest, indeed our high priest. He is the minister with an ongoing ministry in God's presence. He is one of us, acting on behalf of us, and presenting offerings, first the offering of his own self once and for all, and then the offering of our lives lived in his name. Everything that we do in Jesus's name he is offering to his Father.

The main point is this: we do have such a high priest. He sat down at God's right hand, where as a minister he continues his ministry in God's presence. Our worship, indeed our entire lives, is "the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father."² Our high priest brings us into God's presence.

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1549), transl. John Owen (1853), on 2:12.

2. James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 30.