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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
March 22, 2015
5th Sunday in Lent

Scripture Lessons: Numbers 21:4-9, Passion: Jesus Is Crucified
Hymns: 140, 148:1-5; 171:1-6; 377:6,10 (242)

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord
and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Hebrews 4:14-16

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed
through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our
confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot
sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as
we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the
throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in
time of need. (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen.

In Christ Jesus, God my Savior, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: What makes him so great?

This is a question that we might ask about many different people,
or even groups of people. It might be asked about a political
candidate running for president. What makes him (or her) so great
that I should vote for him? And people will give us their *opinion*
about this other person's qualities that lead them to conclude that
this is the right person to trust with a great responsibility.

This week we are in the middle of “March madness” when basketball fever takes over much of our nation, and people have their favorite teams. Again one might ask what makes Kentucky or Wisconsin or whichever team is another’s favorite so great. Turn on the TV and it isn’t hard to find a commentator who is eager to share his opinion about why this team is greater than another. Of course there will be another commentator who will hold to a very different opinion about the matter, and we wait to see how it all plays out in the tournament.

Today we address this question as it is applied to Jesus. What makes Him so great? First and foremost let us realize that this is **not** a matter of personal opinion. It is a matter of truth, and a matter of faith in that truth, a faith that is attacked and often undermined by this world as they view Jesus very differently than does the child of God. They look at Jesus as being just another person in history and the life story of Jesus as being a mixture of fact and fiction, truth and myth. Many assert that we should “demythologize” Jesus. Then the answer to the question about what makes Jesus so great is once again brought down to a discussion of human opinions, opinions which may or may not be true; opinions in which your conviction is no more legitimate than a very different conviction held by someone else.

Our conviction concerning Christ is based upon the truth of God’s Word inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is not the relative truth of human opinion. Today is Passion Sunday in which we consider Jesus’ greatness in light of His sufferings. However, our text for this Passion Sunday also leads us to consider Jesus in His role as our High Priest in His office as the Christ. Religions of the world very commonly have priests. A priest’s function is twofold. The one is that the priest offers up sacrifices to God on behalf of the people. The other is the priest offers up prayers or intercedes with God on behalf of the people, then bringing God’s response back to the people. The Old Testament priesthood, including the office of High Priest, was established by God at Mount Sinai as a part of the ceremonial law, all of which foreshadowed Jesus.

Jewish believers in the early church were being challenged concerning their faith in Jesus and a major part of that challenge was their desertion of the Old Testament ceremonial law and the

functions of the temple priests, and especially the High Priest in favor of Jesus. The words of our text (as well as the rest of the Epistle to the Hebrews) were written to lead one to --

THEME: Comprehend Jesus' Greatness as Our High Priest.

First, let us consider this fact --

I. Jesus Has Entered the Presence of God.

The first verse of our text makes it clear that Jesus is great as a High Priest both in what He actually managed to accomplish and as a matter of who He actually is.

Hebrews 4:14 “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”

What makes Jesus so great a High Priest? Well, He has passed through the heavens. What's that all about? It comes down to what was actually accomplished. In a recent Lenten sermon meditation we considered the miracle of the curtain in the temple being torn in two at the moment of Jesus' death. At that time we discussed how significant it was that the barrier between God and man was removed by Jesus, which was something none of the High Priests descended from Aaron could do. They all entered into a little room that only represented the presence of God, taking with them the blood of a goat. Jesus presented the sacrifice for sin of His own holy precious blood directly before God the Father in heaven above. As we look ahead from the crucifixion to Jesus' ascension into heaven we see Jesus make this final approach into the presence of God also according to His human nature. The way back to heaven was cleared for Him from the moment that the sacrifice was made for the sins of the whole world.

Every word counts as we look at this verse of our text and consider what it is that makes Jesus such a great High Priest. **He is Jesus!** The Son of God wasn't “Jesus” until the incarnation, until He was born of the virgin of Mary. In the incarnation the Son of God took upon Himself our human nature and became our brother. To be a great High Priest for us He had to be one of us entering into the presence of God on our behalf. But He had to be more and better

than the rest of us. So we know Jesus, the Son of Mary, as also being the Son of God. It was the fact that He was and is the Son of God incarnate that made the blood which He offered to God in His death on the cross a sufficient ransom price to redeem all mankind. His offering was infinitely superior to any other offering, indeed to all the offerings presented by the descendants of Aaron as the High Priests of the Old Covenant.

That is the truth of our salvation to which we must hold fast. We must never be tricked into thinking something less of the sacrifice Jesus made, led to believe that we still need to contribute something or endure some suffering to make this salvation complete. Jesus is the One who passed through the heavens, opening the way for us to come to God.

However, a High Priest also needs to minister to the needs of His people. He needs to relate to them. Jesus was true man, but can He really relate to us? Does He understand the pressures we face, and the trials of life we endure, and the temptations and lusts of the flesh with which we struggle on a daily basis? Maybe this would be an area where the Old Testament High Priest was superior. No, Jesus is our great High Priest because --

II. He Sympathizes with our Weaknesses but Without Sin.

Hebrews 4:15 “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

This is such an important quality for a priest to possess, that he understands where his people are coming from, and understands their struggles. I believe this can be an area of weakness for us in our faith, especially in times of trouble, and temptation, when we need this assurance of faith the most, that we may not perceive this in Jesus. Hold on to our profession of faith without wavering. Know that Jesus does understand. Whatever situation we are in, or struggle of faith we are facing Jesus does sympathize with us in our weaknesses.

As Jesus walked through His earthly sojourn He didn't do so with an unfair advantage of calling upon His divine power to make

things easier. He worked, from the time of His youth He worked right next to Joseph building things, and learning His trade, and later supporting a family. And yes, that means He not only sweat but also endured blisters and sore muscles, and setbacks in projects, and all that goes along with hard manual labor.

When Jesus began His public ministry and His work became much more spiritual, He still had all the frustrations of being misunderstood, and verbally attacked, and rejected as the Messiah. During this Lenten season we are actively reviewing how His public ministry reached both its climax and greatest test. He faced sufferings which we can't even imagine, agony of spirit as well as gruesome sufferings inflicted to His body. Men reviled Him and spit in His face and lied about Him, and cursed Him, and denied Him and betrayed Him. He suffered greatly as He languished on the cross, with the pain of scourging still screaming through His consciousness. And then, on top of all that, Jesus was rejected and spurned by God at that critical time.

So don't start thinking even for a moment that Jesus doesn't really understand what it means to struggle with the problems or challenges or disappointments or pain of life. He sympathizes with us in our weaknesses.

Oh, yeah, don't think for a moment that Jesus got a pass when it came to temptation. The devil focused his attention of Jesus like no one else since the first Adam who fell in the Garden of Eden. The devil's temptations immediately after Jesus was baptized and openly endorsed as the Christ by God the Father were intense. Those temptation went on for forty days as Jesus was fasting in the wilderness. We are told of the different temptations the devil threw in Jesus' direction at the end of those days, and we are told how Jesus' defeated those temptations, not using His divine power but rather the power of the Word of God. Later the devil used Peter and the other disciples to try to dissuade Jesus from His mission of redemption. The devil used the verbal and physical abuse of all those who had a hand in Jesus' sufferings to tempt Him to respond to sin with sin, curse with curse. Jesus was even tempted by His enemies to abandon His mission and simply save Himself. Jesus was tempted like we have never been tempted. He knows what it feels like to be tempted **under pressure**. So Jesus knows what we

feel and He is our **great** High Priest because He does sympathize with us in our weakness.

Of course there is a difference, a big and important distinction between us and Jesus that doesn't take away from His greatness but adds to it dramatically. **He didn't sin.** He was absolutely, totally successful in dealing with the temptations and distresses, and trials of life in a perfectly God-pleasing manner. Now yes, that is important for us as it pertains to the quality of the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross, a sacrifice that was perfect because **Jesus was holy, harmless and undefiled, separate from sinners** (Hebrews 7:26). But there is another aspect to this: a great High Priest has to know how to win, and lead us to victory over the devil. Our High Priest was successful in thwarting the temptations of the evil one and He is there to help us defeat the devil in our lives. Jesus is that great High Priest!

So what does all that get us? When I was young there was a dismissive expression that went something like, "**Yeah, great, that and a quarter will get you a cup of coffee.**" Well, besides the point that I can't even get a senior cup of coffee at McDonalds for a quarter, what does Jesus being a great High Priest get me? Is it just an ethereal concept without any practical value? That is how most people in the world would regard this truth about Jesus, and our faith in Jesus. Quite the opposite is true. This is a most precious truth for us in life. As our High Priest --

III. He Gains Us Access to the Throne of Grace.

Let's read again the conclusion to our text:

Hebrews 4:16 "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

By passing through the heavens Jesus opened the way to God. By redeeming us from sin, He restored our relationship of peace and harmony with God. Through faith in Christ God is our dear Father and we are His dear children. Therefore we are encouraged to come to God with boldness and confidence. God's throne is now a throne of grace. We are not going to find dismissal and rejection and condemnation before God's throne. With Jesus as our High Priest

we will find mercy. God will have compassion for us in our every trouble. He cares for you. He loves you with an everlasting love. He loves you with such a great love that He has acted on that love by delivering you from sin, death and the devil. All this is founded on the truth of Jesus being that Great High Priest who lives to make intercession for us before the throne of God (Roman 5:34).

That is not the end of God's grace toward us. It rather reveals the continuing greatness of His grace toward us. When we need the power of God to deliver us, He promises that it will be there, because of Jesus. Recall these precious words from –

Romans 8:32 “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”

We are assured by the salvation that has come to us through our great High Priest that the words of the prophet are forever true.

Nahum 1:7 The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; And He knows those who trust in Him.

The Lord is our stronghold. He will and does take care of us through life's troubles. We trust Him not only because He is Almighty God and so commands our trust, but He has proven Himself to us as being perfectly trustworthy. Jesus has gone before us through the heavens. As our Brother He presents our every need before God the Father. Together they care for us even while the Spirit strengthens our hearts and perfects our prayers. All this grace is ours only because of Jesus. Peter's exhortation presents the right conclusion to the matter.

1 Peter 5:6-7 Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, 7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

What makes Jesus so great? I pray that now you better comprehend exactly what it is that makes **Jesus so great** as our High Priest, and our Lord. As our Brother He alone has gone through the heavens, presenting the perfect sacrifice for sin before God the Father. He who now sits at the right hand of God understands us perfectly and

sympathizes with us in our weaknesses. He is the One who has gained us access to throne of God's grace that we might have the perfect connection to the help we need from God. Indeed, Jesus is our GREAT High Priest!

AMEN.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.