

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 9:11-14)

Jesus is Better than Any Other Priest

For six weeks, here at Peace, we've been talking about Jesus as our Great High Priest. Every one of those sermons was pointing to today, when Jesus finally does what a priest is supposed to do. The whole idea of a priest is based on a sad truth: sinners cannot come into God's presence. We need someone to stand between us and God. God instituted the Old Testament priesthood to keep his people at arm's length so that they would not suffer his wrath. For 1500 years, those Old Testament priests brought blood sacrifices so that they themselves could approach God at least for a moment. But it was never enough. No Old Testament priest could really wash sin away. God's people needed a better priesthood. And God gave the entire Old Testament program of worship and sacrifice to teach them that truth. Then when the time was right, he sent that greater High Priest. Good Friday commemorates the fulfillment of all that God was saying through all the countless sacrifices and all the priests who served at his altar. Only one man could fulfill all that: Jesus. **Jesus our Great High Priest is better than any other high priest.**

I.

The writer to the Hebrews says, **"When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation."** What does he mean that those good things are already here? When the people brought all those sacrifices in the Old Testament, they were symbolically acting out the death of Christ and the forgiveness that comes from it. By the time the book of Hebrews explains all this to us, the fulfillment has come. Christ has lived and died and risen again. In fact, he ascended into heaven decades before these words were written. So the good things the Old Testament believers were waiting for are already here for us.

Jesus brought them. How did he do that? He went through a greater and more perfect tabernacle. Before King Solomon built the first temple, Moses built the tabernacle. It was the worship space for Israel, but since they were on the move, it was something that could be moved. It was a very elaborate tent. But God gave the floorplan for the tabernacle, so it served as the floorplan for Solomon's temple and for the second temple that was built when the Jewish people came back from exile. The tabernacle and the temples were built with a series of sacred spaces. The closer you got to God, the more sacred the space. The most sacred space was a small inner room called the Most Holy Place.

At God's command, Moses put the Ark of the Covenant in there and God taught his people to think of him as being inside that Most Holy Place hovering above the ark. So when you went into the Most Holy Place you entered the presence of God. But all through the Old Testament, God told his people that no sinner could come into his presence or he would die. So the Most Holy Place was hidden behind a thick curtain. No one could go in there, no one could even look in there, not even the priests. Only the high priest could go in and that only once a year, on the great Day of Atonement. Even then, tradition says they tied a rope to his ankle to pull him out if he died in there.

All that was really just a symbol. You can think of the tabernacle or the temples as a kind of model of heaven. The Day of Atonement was designed to represent Jesus going into God's presence with the sacrifice he made on Good Friday. Now, Jesus didn't actually offer his sacrifice in the temple. He offered it on the cross, in a place the most Jews would have considered to be unholy. But in a very real sense, Jesus entered God's presence on the cross. He made the payment God required of us. And then he gave up his spirit and died. Since his payment was done, he did not go to hell. He said, "Father into your hands I commit my spirit." He entered God's presence in heaven. No matter how rich the tabernacle and the two temples were, nothing on this

earth can compare with heaven, the true throne room of God. **Jesus is better than any other high priest. He entered a better sanctuary.**

II.

Jesus only had to do that once. The Old Testament Day of Atonement was supposed to be celebrated year after year. Again and again, a sinful, human priest had to offer a sacrifice that paid for his sins and then go in and offer another one that paid for the sins of the people. In addition to that, the children of Israel were supposed to bring thousands of blood sacrifices for their sins, daily, weekly, monthly. The neighborhood around the tabernacle must have reeked with the smell of blood and burning flesh. It was never enough.

The writer to the Hebrews mentions another kind of ritual that God's people had to follow: the water of cleansing. They had to sacrifice a red heifer, something so rare that one has not been born to a Jewish family in the last two thousand years. They burned it to ash and then mixed the ash with water and some other ingredients. Then when a person was unclean, the water was sprinkled on them to make them clean. Clean in what sense? Obviously, not clean like a bath. This wasn't for kids who were playing in the mud. God taught them that sin made them unclean. Death made them unclean. If they were unclean, they couldn't go into the tabernacle, not even into the parts people were allowed to come to. They couldn't offer sacrifices. They couldn't approach God at all. So they needed to be cleansed.

The writer to the Hebrews points out all that the sprinkling and all those blood sacrifices all those high priests brought for 1500 years could only cleanse you externally. To be clean on the inside, we need more. We need the sacrifice Jesus brought: himself. Jesus' blood shed on the cross washes us clean in God's sight. It takes away all our sins. Because of Jesus' blood, you and I can now stand in the presence of God as holy and righteous. And we know that because we have been sprinkled personally with his blood. In our baptisms and in the preaching we hear, Jesus comes to us and gives us the faith that trusts in what he has done. And God calls us holy. God says that we are paid for in a way that no animal sacrifice could ever have done. **Jesus is better than any other high priest. He offered a better sacrifice.**

III.

And naturally, that sacrifice changes us. In the Old Testament, God was always concerned with more than just going through the motions. He demanded a sacrifice to atone for sins to teach his people just how big a deal sin is. It cost them plenty. If you were a farmer or a rancher, bringing one of your best animals and burning it up was a pretty expensive way to show how sorry you were for your sins. But that doesn't even come close to what it cost God to pay for our sins: he sent his Son to die for you and me. Jesus laid down his life for our sins. While God's forgiveness is free and absolute, it is not permission to keep on sinning.

God loves us so much that he paid the price to get us out of slavery to sin. Now, God has reached into our hearts and given us faith that knows we are free from hell and going to heaven. How should we respond? The writer to the Hebrews says, **"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"** Jesus cleanses our consciences. Jesus gives us peace to replace all our guilt.

When you have a clean conscience, you want to serve God. All those blood sacrifices were intended to tell the people that God would not leave them in their sins. God wanted them to serve him with joy. Sadly, many Jewish people missed the whole point and made the Old Covenant all about how carefully they could keep the laws. They imagined that if they obeyed the dietary laws and the purity laws and the worship laws, they were the good people, the people God would take to heaven. What was the effect? Guilt. Jesus says they loaded people down with burdens they couldn't carry. All those demands for obedience only tortured their consciences.

Jesus takes away our guilt. So he gives us a better reason to serve God. And God values the service that comes from faith. It may be true that a person who is trying to work off guilt will seem to do bigger and greater things. He or she might spend endless hours at church doing everything that needs to be done. He or she might write enormous checks that fund our ministry. But there is no peace in that. And God takes no pleasure in people trying to work off their guilt. God is looking for faith. He's looking for lives that change because Jesus had forgiven us. He's looking for love and peace and joy. In Christ, he gives us all that. Only Jesus could set us free to serve God in love. **Jesus is better than any other high priest. He inspires better service.**

Many years ago, on another Good Friday, a woman who had become Lutheran as an adult asked me, "Why do we call Good Friday *good*? What's good about it?" When you think about the events that we gather

to remember every year on Good Friday, which ones would you call “good”? The scourging? The crown of thorns? The warning to the weeping woman that they would wish they had not lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem? Or the crucifixion itself? Taken on their face, they’re all terrible. But Good Friday is good because of what those things accomplished. It’s good because of the outcome: Jesus won forgiveness and life for us. He did that by fulfilling the imagery that God built into the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices. In fact, on Good Friday, Jesus is both the sacrifice and the one who offers it, the priest. Jesus is Our Great High Priest. He offered the only sacrifice that could set us free. Amen.