

*Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; <sup>24</sup> but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. <sup>25</sup> Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

*<sup>26</sup> Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. <sup>27</sup> Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (Hebrews 7:23-27)*

### **Jesus is our Eternal High Priest**

When I was growing up, my mom used to talk about her favorite pastor. He had a good German name – Gerhard Struck. I think he confirmed her. I only met him once, when I was in high school. He was a fairly elderly man by that point so I never really got to see him in action. He died many years ago, now. When I was growing up, my mom used to keep photo albums for each of us kids – she called them our “Baby books.” In mine, there is a letter written by the pastor who served us when I was five. It’s a short note wishing me a happy birthday and it has a quarter taped to it. That quarter is still there. That pastor’s name was Jeschke. I have very faint memories of him because he died years before my mom’s favorite, Pastor Struck. When I was in high school, the pastor who serving us then retired and we called a man right out of the seminary. His name was Glen Hieb. He was full of excitement and enthusiasm and he kind shook our little congregation up. Today, he serves right outside of Cleveland. He’s been a pastor since 1980, so for 38 years. And you can tell that the years are catching up with him. He’s still a very sharp, very gospel oriented pastor. But he’s not the young, energetic man who talked the president of our congregation into taking his little private plane and flying all the way to the far side of Wisconsin for my high school graduation. I don’t know how much longer he’ll be able serve on this side of heaven.

Time takes its toll. We pastors serve for a moment and then we’re gone. This morning, we’re celebrating Easter by reflecting on the fact that the Old Testament high priests had the same problem. If you came to our midweek Lenten services this year, you know that all through Lent we focused on Jesus as our great high priest. Today, we see the difference between him and us that makes Easter so necessary: we die. Jesus did, too. But Easter is all about how he defeated death and what that means for us. To put it in terms of our reading this morning: **Jesus is our eternal high priest.**

#### **I.**

The Jewish historian Josephus, who lived just after the time of Christ, lists 83 high priests who served between Aaron, the first high priest and the destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70. There’s no way to know how accurate his list is, but it makes the point: no high priest could continue in office. Every sinner has to die. But Jesus was different. As the writer to the Hebrews says, he lives forever, so he has a permanent priesthood. Now, we gathered here on Friday because Jesus died, too. His physical body was just as dead as ours will be some day, certainly, just as dead as all those 83 high priests that Josephus listed. So how was Jesus different? He rose. He did more than just going to heaven when he died – although he did do that. Easter is the celebration of the fact that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. God broke death’s hold on him. Jesus staked his claim to be our high priest now and forever because death can never claim Jesus again.

That’s what makes him the Savior we need – he can “save us completely” our text says. And why did Jesus rise? The writer to the Hebrews says, “**Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.**” The key is that he was holy, blameless, pure – set apart from sinners. In America today, Easter Sunday morning might not seem like the time to think about our sins. We just had Lent to do that. Easter is about bunnies and kids looking for Easter eggs and finding out what kind of treats are in our baskets. And I’m not opposed to any of those things. I have literally hundreds of pictures of my kids looking for Easter eggs over the last 23 years. I love my chocolate Easter bunny. But Easter has no meaning if we forget the difference between Jesus and us. He was holy. From the moment he entered this life until the moment he died, he never once did or said anything sinful. He never had a sinful thought or desire.

Think how different that is from us. We try to be good people, right? You come to church. Many of you send your kids to our Lutheran elementary school or high school. You don't rob banks or sell drugs to kids. You try to be nice and helpful to strangers. But can you really stand before a holy God and say that you haven't sinned? That you've never said something thoughtless or hurtful? That's you've never done anything selfish or egotistical? The truth is, even if you could make those claims, it wouldn't be enough. God judges our hearts. He sees our sinful thoughts – even the ones we never act on. He knows our lusts and our evil desires and the hatreds that we hide away from everyone else. All that sin deserves his punishment in hell.

But Jesus was holy. All his words and actions, all his thoughts and feelings were perfect. He had no sin at all. So the writer to the Hebrews says, **“Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.”** That was Good Friday. Jesus sacrificed himself, once for all, to pay for all the sins of all people who will ever live. No Old Testament priest could do that. No New Testament pastor could do that either.

In the Old Testament, when people sinned, they were supposed to bring a sacrifice to pay for that sin. The blood of the sacrifice washed their sin away, at least symbolically. Even the high priest had to do that. Once a year, he was allowed to go into a special part of the Jewish temple – the Most Holy Place. It was an inner room where the Ark of the Covenant stood. God taught his people to think of him as being inside that Most Holy Place hovering above the Ark. No sinner could go in there without dying. But once a year, the high priest had to go in and present a sin offering for the people. But first he had to bring a sin offering for himself, so he wouldn't die. Jesus didn't have to do that. He had no sin.

That's why death couldn't hold him. We die because death and hell are the penalty for sin. But Jesus was holy. He only died to pay for us. He rose to say that his payment was enough. He rose to say that all our guilt is gone. He rose to change the nature of our death. Death is the scariest thing there is. Even we believers wrestle with it. I once served a dying Christian who had known the Lord all his life. One day he said to me, “Pastor, I'm so afraid.” Death is terrifying because it is the first taste of the punishment for sin and it's supposed to lead straight into hell. But when Jesus died and rose he freed us from the punishment. There is no hell for you and me. It still exists but we're not taking that elevator when we die. We are going to jump on the elevator that only goes up. We will close our eyes here and open them in heaven. And when Jesus comes back, he will raise us from the dead and we will live with him in a new and perfect world forever.

So when we feel the fear that that Christian felt, God gives us an answer: Jesus and his promise of eternal life. And that man was glad to hear it. Most Christians I serve who are dying find themselves free from fear because they know they're going home. Easter promises us that. It promises us that we will see Jesus the moment our lives end here. It promises us that we will rise and live with him forever. And it promises us that between now and seeing Jesus, he will watch over us and care for us always. **Jesus is our eternal high priest. He meets all our needs.**

## II.

But the story doesn't end when Jesus rose. Jesus didn't just do something great in the past. He rose to do great things for us today. He rose to represent us before God forever. That's the whole point of that high priest picture. In the Old Testament, the people couldn't come into God's presence. They were kept out of that Most Holy place. They really couldn't even offer their own sacrifices. They brought the animal to the temple and a priest offered it for them. That is what it means to be a priest – you serve as a Go-Between. The high priest was the ultimate Go-Between. He spoke to the people for God and he spoke to God for the people. .

But all those Old Testament priests were really just imitations of the one Great High Priest who was coming. God let them serve as Go-Betweens, but even their service was only valid because God chose to see Jesus in the sacrifices they brought. And God chose to see Jesus when they approached him in prayer. That's the other way they represented the people to God. They went to the Lord and prayed, especially when the people had sinned and they needed forgiveness. God heard those prayers because that high priest represented Jesus, the Great High Priest who intercedes for us today.

There was incident in the Old Testament that demonstrated how important it is to have someone intercede for us when we sin. While the children of Israel were in the wilderness, a man named Korah led a rebellion. God sent a plague to destroy the rebellious people. God even told Moses and Aaron to move away from those people. But Moses told Aaron to get a censor full of hot coals from the altar and to intercede for the

people. Aaron ran – he ran! – to stand between the plague and the people. He interceded with God for them and saved the lives of thousands of people.

But Aaron could only do that because God is a God of mercy. He could only do that because all the sacrifices of the Old Testament were really proclamations that Jesus coming to sacrifice himself for our sins. The lesson for us is that every time we sin, Jesus stands between us and God's wrath. Every time we allow our evil desires to get the best of us, every time we feel guilty for the wrong that we have done, we have Jesus pleading with God the Father to forgive us because Jesus died and paid for our sins. And God always does.

Then we have Jesus appealing to God for us every time we pray. We all understand how important it is to have someone pray for us. I can't count the number of requests I get to have me pray for people and I try to do that for every single one. Every Sunday here at church, we pray for people who are sick and hurting. I suspect we all pray regularly for our spouses and children and for family and friends and members of our church. God hears and answers all those prayers.

But why? Because of Jesus. Jesus' sacrifice means that we all can now come into God's presence. You can pray directly to him and he will hear and answer you. But there's another way to look it: Jesus brings our prayers to God. He is our Great High Priest and every time we pray, Jesus goes to his Father and says, "This is one of ours. This is your child. This is what he or she needs. Let's answer this prayer." The beauty of it is, he doesn't have to convince God to do that. His Father gave him that job because he wants to hear and answer those prayers. God the Father assigned our prayers to the one person who can always stand before him. So even when it's hard to see, never doubt that God has heard and will answer your prayer. Easter teaches us that, too. **Jesus is our eternal high priest. He intercedes for us.**

Last Sunday, the junior choir sang in church. When the kids sing, I always sit back there behind them and quite often, I think about how old those kids were when I first came to be your pastor. The 8<sup>th</sup> graders weren't even in school yet. When those kids are my age and they think about growing up here at Peace, I will probably be in heaven. But that's OK because we pastors aren't the ones who really do the work when the gospel is preached. Jesus does. We are his servants. Our job is simple: point you to the one Great High Priest who will always be there behind every pastor who ever serves you. Jesus is that eternal high priest, the one that time can never touch, the one whose ministry death can never cut short. He is the one who died and rose and now stands before God for us. Celebrate his life and victory today. Amen.