

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? ¹² For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. ¹³ He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ¹⁵ And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, ¹⁶ one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is declared:

*“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”*

¹⁸ *The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.*

²⁰ *And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ²¹ but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:*

*“The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest forever.’ ”*

²² *Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.*

²³ *Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ²⁴ but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

²⁶ *Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ 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 7:11-27)*

What Kind of Priest Do We Need?

A couple of years ago, I was visiting someone at the hospital. There were a number of family members there – most of whom I didn’t know. It was kind of a tense situation and I was trying to calm things down. I wasn’t getting very far, when one of the family members said, “Listen to the priest!” That statement stuck in my head because I’m not usually called a priest. We Lutherans rarely use that term for our clergy. For the most part, we prefer the word pastor – shepherd – because it has an overtone of care and concern for the flock. The word priest, I think, calls up more of an image of offering sacrifices and ceremonies. Yet, we do have a very real priest. In fact, we Lutherans believe that in one sense we are all priests. In another sense, we have one great high priest. What does the word “priest” really mean? It means someone who can approach God. So usually, it means a go-between between us and God, someone who does offer sacrifices and prayers on our behalf. This morning, our reading from the book of Hebrews is all about the great high priest that we have. I’m going to try not to get too bogged down in Old Testament history and rituals this morning, although it’s impossible to discuss this chapter without some of that. But behind all that discussion is a very simple question: **what kind of priest do we need?**

I.

God gave priests in the Old Testament at Mt. Sinai. God made Moses’ brother, Aaron, the first high priest and all the priests of the Old Covenant were his descendants. Aaron was a member of the tribe of Levi and the whole tribe was dedicated to serving the Lord, so our reading talks about a “Levitical priesthood.” But the priests God gave in the Old Testament never came close to truly meeting our needs. At best, they could only represent the work that our great high priest does for us. Our real priest is Jesus. **What kind of priest do we need? A better priest than the Old Covenant gave.**

Now, my point is not to be anti-Semitic or even overly critical of the Old Testament priesthood. At its best, it was a tremendous picture of Christ and his work. That's really why God commanded it. They were a teaching tool that God made to engrave certain concepts into their minds and hearts. Those concepts are absolutely fundamental to understanding what Jesus came here to do. So even though we have no interest in reviving Old Testament worship with all its blood and gore, we do need to “get” what God was saying with the Old Testament priesthood, because when we “get” that, we “get” Jesus.

The thing that took up the most time for an Old Testament priest was offering sacrifices. God gave chapter upon chapter commanding multiple different kinds of sacrifices. There were at least four different kinds of bloody sacrifices – sacrifices where you killed an animal and drained its blood and burned all or part of the animal's body on the altar. Every one of those bloody sacrifices was a picture of Christ offering himself on the cross to pay for our sins. God commanded morning and evening sacrifices, sacrifices for every Sabbath day and holiday, sacrifices for personal sins and different life events. God drenched his people in the blood of animals so that they would see that in the blood of Christ all our sins are washed away.

But that priesthood was just a symbol. So it was only temporary. And it couldn't actually take anybody's sins away. No lamb or bull butchered and burned actually forgives you. Because God was driving home essential concepts, he built the entire Old Testament priesthood on the most elaborate system of laws ever devised. Again, practiced rightly, it prepared God's people to see Jesus when he came. But sadly, over the 1500 years from Mt. Sinai to Christ, sinners drifted farther and farther away from God. They went through periods when they ignored those laws and so they weren't learning the lessons. And they went through periods when they were so concerned about splitting hairs in their obedience to those laws that they began to believe that their effort made them acceptable to God. So they lost the true meaning of the laws.

But God always wanted them to see the true meaning so he made something happen. Almost 700 years before God established that Old Testament priesthood at Mt. Sinai, he introduced Abraham to a man named Melchizedek. God tells us nothing about Melchizedek except that he was a priest of God most high. Abraham gave an offering to him and Melchizedek blessed Abraham. Then the centuries passed and God gave that covenant at Mt. Sinai and set up the priesthood that the people of Israel knew so well. Then five hundred years after that – so more than a thousand years after Abraham met Melchizedek – God had King David write a psalm in which he said that God swore that the Messiah would be a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. God was telling his people to understand the symbolic nature of the Mt. Sinai Covenant and to realize that true priesthood doesn't depend on ritual or on bloodlines. It depends on God's gift.

So what do you think? Have I kept my promise not to get bogged down in Old Testament history and ritual? Maybe not. Why should we care today about all this? What does it mean for us today? We all need a priest. We're all sinners. Every day, we prove that. We can't make it one hour of one day without sinful thoughts and feelings and actual sinful words and deeds condemning us. We're all guilty. We need the right go-between to bring us to God. Sadly, we live in an age that believes that all paths lead to God. It doesn't matter what church you go to, it doesn't matter if you're a Christian or a Moslem or a Hindu as long as you're a good person. And if we're talking about respecting our neighbors and equal rights under the law, I agree. But if we're talking about getting to heaven when we die, nothing could contradict the gospel more. The prevailing idea in our society is that everyone is a good person (except maybe terrorists and child molesters) and as long as you're a good person, as you understand being a good person, you are going to get to whatever heaven really is. So you are your own go-between, you are your own priest. You don't need a Savior to pay for your sin and bring you to God. If that's true, we're wasting our time here.

But it is not true. All roads lead to hell except one: the road through Christ. He is our great high priest whose blood washes us clean and brings us to God. Now, it is true that all of us who trust in him then do become priests in our own right. We have direct access to God through Christ. We don't need our pastor or some human priest to offer sacrifices or to pray for us. We are his children. But that's only because Jesus has already brought us there. He is not only the best possible priest, he is the only true priest we can ever have.

II.

So God told David that another priest was coming, like that ancient priest Melchizedek. God had also told David that a King was coming, descended from David. Both the priest and the king would be the same person, the Christ, the Messiah. David foresaw that Priest-King dying and rising and giving us eternal life. Today, we don't have to see that by prophecy, as something that someday God is going to make happen, in

some way that we can't imagine. God has already done it. God saw our need and he filled it with his Son.

What kind of priest do we need? A priest who lives forever.

Jesus is the fulfillment of that better priesthood. In fact, to show how much greater his priesthood is, the book of Hebrews says, **“Another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.”** Jesus was not a descendant of Aaron and so he could not be an Old Testament priest. Yet he was a priest because his life was indestructible. We all understand what that means, right? Even though Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, he rose. The Bible says that the Father raised Jesus, but it also says that Jesus raised himself. Only God has power over life and death. Only God could raise himself. The priest that God sent is a perfect go-between for us, because he is the Son of God who came down to us and became man. He can bridge the gap that sin makes between us and God because he stands on both sides of it. He is the judge who will send sinners to hell. But he is also the priest who sacrifices himself to pay for all the sins of all the world, to pay for you and for me. He brings us to God.

To make sure that we understand that Jesus is that priest, that his blood does pay for us, God swore an oath. Think about that for a minute. When do you swear an oath? Your wedding vows were an oath. When people are installed into offices – pastors, political leaders, police and military service members and many others, they take an oath. But on a more basic level, when we say, “I swear to God!” what are we trying to say? That our words are true. When would you do that? When it's vital that the person you're swearing to believes you. If someone accuses you of breaking your wedding vows, if someone accuses you of betrayal or theft or some other crime, you might say to your spouse, “As God is my witness, this is not true.” There is a certain humility about that oath. You are asking the person who hears to trust you. God does that for us. The maker of heaven and oath, the judge who will decide if we go to heaven or hell, he comes down to our level and swears an oath so that we will trust him. He binds himself with a promise to us.

The book of Hebrews puts it this way: **“And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’ ‘Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.’** Notice that the oath that makes Jesus the guarantee of a better covenant, the guarantee that our sins are gone and we will live, is an oath that God the Father swore to his Son, not directly to us. He swore that Jesus would be a priest forever. Jesus would forever stand in our place, forever represent us to God, forever cover our sins with his blood. God swore that oath to his Son who is the only person in the universe who could insist that he keep it. That oath means that we are free.

So God gave us a greater priesthood than any other could ever be. The book of Hebrews points out the greatest weakness of Old Testament priests: they died. But Jesus will never die again. He conquered death and now he will live forever as our priest. So he can always take our prayers to our Father in heaven. He can always stand in our place when we sin and we appeal for forgiveness. He always has the ear of his Father in heaven.

All human priests are sinners, by definition. But Jesus is **“a high priest [who] meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”** All his life long, Jesus lived the way we humans are supposed to live. His heart and mind, his word and action, were always perfect. Jesus earned the life he gave us. Because he did that, he is exalted above the heavens. The Son of God no longer appears as a baby in a manger or as a suffering criminal on a cross. Now he is seated at the right of his Father in glory. His glory is greater than any glory on this earth, greater even than the glory of heaven itself because it is the glory of the Son of God.

That glorious Son of God is our high priest. He does not need to do what the Old Testament priests did: offer sacrifices day after day. Think what it must have been like to live in Jerusalem when the temple was there. All day, every day, they were offering sacrifices. They slaughtered and burned animals. In the area nearby, you had to smell burning flesh all the time. You would've seen a constant stream of smoke going up from the altar where those animals were being burned. It never stopped. But now it's over. We need no other sacrifice, because Christ the perfect sacrifice has come. Christ offered himself so that we will live. Now, all our sin is paid for. All the sin of all the world is paid for. That is the priest we need. We have him. He makes us priests who can approach our God with confidence because now, in Christ, we have access to God and we will live with him forever. Amen.

