

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (members from Immanuel, Burns also present)

Good Friday

April 3, 2015

Text: Hebrews 4:14–16; 5:7–9

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

We moderns have a hard time relating to the Biblical person called “the priest.” We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves, however. They don't make priests like they used to. The Roman Catholic Church calls their pastors “priests” but they aren't that similar to what the Bible calls “a priest.”

The Biblical priest, quite literally, was a bloody man. Depending upon his assigned responsibilities, the Biblical priest sacrificed animals day in and day out. That was part of his job. He offered lambs, sheep, pigeons, oxen and other animals in sacrifice upon God's altar in Jerusalem. I'm not interested in being voyeuristic nor do I want to be insensitive or gross. But the priest, depending upon the type of animal sacrifice and the occasion for the sacrifice, would slice the animal's throat and drain its blood. That blood would be applied upon the altar while the body would be burned upon that same altar. The priest was involved in a bloody, messy business.

But then again, sin and disobedience and God's appointed solution, is likewise a bloody, messy business. The atonement for sin can only take place through the shedding of blood. Leviticus 17:11 describes it like this, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it (i.e, the blood) for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.”

The difficulty we have with relating to Biblical priests is that we don't bring animal sacrifices to Church. I think we can all say joyfully, “Thanks be to God we aren't.” I have no interest whatsoever in offering animal sacrifices. But what's lost or obscured in all this is a fruitful understanding of the events that took place on that first Good Friday. Our lack of experiential understanding of what Biblical priests did hinders the teaching found in tonight's Epistle reading about the Lord Jesus. Hebrews 4:14 says this, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”

Jesus, the Son of God, is our great high priest! And yes, He did what all Biblical priests were called to do: offer blood in atonement for the sins of God's people. The huge difference, and it makes all the difference in the world, is that Jesus doesn't offer an animal on the altar in Jerusalem's temple. He offers Himself on the altar of Calvary's cross. Jesus is both our great high priest and our sacrifice. He sheds His blood as the atonement for our sins. His body is offered as the atoning price for sin, iniquity, and unrighteousness. In His body, Jesus absorbs the sins of the world. And with the world's sin affixed firmly upon Him, Jesus dies and takes them away. For this reason, the evangelist John describes Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). That's no poetic license or figurative expression. Jesus is God's Lamb. He literally takes the sins of the world.

Dear saints of God, you have a great high priest who took your sins upon Himself. In love, He atoned for them. He has taken them away. Isaiah said this about Jesus, "Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows (53:4)...and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (53:6)...Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin (53:10)...and he shall bear their iniquities (53:11)...yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors" (53:12).

Make no mistake about it, Jesus took away your sins. And the glory of Christ's gospel is that those sins can never be brought back! The blood of Jesus washed them away. His body was broken and given unto death so that they could never haunt your life again. Tonight, you can sleep with a clean and clear conscience. You are forgiven in Christ. You need not fear death or suffering or any evil. For you are filled with His resurrection life. Whenever the devil or your guilty conscience throws you sins back in your face, simply say, "Jesus is my great high priest. He bloodied Himself and took away my sins. Go see Jesus if you want to talk about my sins. All I know is what He told me, I 'have become the source of eternal salvation for all who believe and obey'" (c.p. Heb 5:9).

And so the writer to the Hebrews encourages us by saying, "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16). We approach God's throne cleansed by the blood of our great high priest, the Lord Jesus. That's why we are confident that God the Father hears our prayer and gives us the help we need.

Jesus gives us His righteousness. Jesus gives us His life. All that was pleasing about Jesus is given to you so that you are now pleasing to God the Father. As the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, so the Holy Spirit descends upon you and me and all of God's people.

Our great high priest doesn't withhold any good from us. All that He is and does, He gives to us freely and abundantly. Knowing what Jesus did to save His people, rest secure in the peace and love of the Father.

God is no longer angry over your sins. Martin Luther once said, somewhat provocatively but wisely, that when our hearts feel that God is wrathful, then idolatry immediately follows. For we either despair utterly believing that God is not loving or forgiving and so fall from faith. Or we make self-chosen ways to please God which He has not provided. (c.p. LW 12:378-379). Either way turns the true God, who desires that all be saved through faith in His Son, into an idol of our own choosing.

We heard what Jesus said on the cross moments before He died... "It is finished!" Those are priestly words. The sacrifice is complete. No other blood need be shed. No other sacrifice is required or desired by God. It is finished! The great high priest, the eternal Son of God, has spoken; He has offered His sacrifice: Himself for you. And that's all that's needed; yea, more than what's needed.

Because of Jesus, our great high priest, let us with confidence draw near the throne of grace. Because of Jesus, let our prayers be bold and confident. Because of Jesus, let our praise be triumphant and glorious. Because of Jesus, may His kingdom grow and flourish among us. Our high priest has done all things well. Glory be to Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.