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Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY
Advent II – Midweek (dual parish service with St. John’s, Kimball, NE)
December 9, 2015
Text: Genesis 14:17–20; Hebrews 7:1–3, 11, 14–28

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

Our midweek series, Jesus: Our Prophet, Priest, and King, continues tonight. In particular, we will consider that Jesus is our Priest. Of these three divine offices – prophet, priest, and king – I suspect that Jesus being our priest may be the most difficult for us to appreciate even though it’s the one that we interact with the most. I’ll explain what I mean by that in just a bit.

In Sunday School we learn about various prophets and their preaching ministries: Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Isaiah, etc. We also learn about Israel’s great kings: Saul, David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Ahab, etc. and how they ruled God’s people well or not so well. But we don’t learn too much about Israel’s priests. Can you name any? Maybe Aaron, the brother of Moses. What about Melchizedek? Ever heard of him? You will tonight!

Who are biblical priests and what did they do? For now, let’s just say that priests are men called by God to lead God’s people in worship, prayer, and praise. The priesthood that we generally think about in the Bible is the priesthood established by God through the tribe of Levi, one of the 12 sons of Jacob. Moses and Aaron were both from the tribe of Levi and Israel’s high priest were to come from Aaron’s family. It was a priesthood established under the Law of Moses. We read about the functions and duties of their ministry primarily in the OT books of Exodus and Leviticus.

In short, they were to lead God’s people in prayer, praise, and sacrifice. Day after day they offered up prayers and sacrifices on behalf of God’s people. They were intercessors: working, praying, and worshipping for the benefit of the redeemed of the Lord. The Levitical priests came before the Lord, according to God’s command, in order to stand in the place of the entire people of God. And there they prayed and sacrificed and worshipped on behalf of the people. And the priests were to guide the congregation in living a holy life of repentance, faith, and good works. In short, they were to be a blessing of the Lord to the Lord’s beloved people.

The Levitical priesthood which I just described, forms, in part, our understanding of Jesus' priesthood. To be sure, Jesus prays for and intercedes on behalf His beloved people; that is, He speaks to God the Father on our behalf. The apostle Paul declares in Romans 8:34 that the crucified and resurrected Jesus is "at the right hand of God (and) is interceding for us." I'd like you to think about that for a moment.

Jesus prays for you!! Can there be a more encouraging thought? "Dear Father, *insert name* belongs to Me. You gave him/her to Me. My blood washed away all his sins, iniquities, and rebellion. My resurrection life is his/hers. Remember him/her. Send Your Spirit to enliven his/her faith. Dispatch your holy, powerful angels to be his/her ministers of grace and protection. And bring him/her, at last, to the glory of the inheritance promised to all your people." Such a promise, that Jesus intercedes for us should make us shout to the highest heavens in thanksgiving. And you mustn't forget that Jesus gave us a most beautiful and powerful example of His intercessory prayer in John 17. It's marvelous. Go home and pray it knowing that it's the Lord Jesus' prayer for you to the Father!!

And Jesus certainly led His disciples in worship, true worship. It was the Lord Jesus who said that all who would worship the Father must do so in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24). He joined His disciples in the synagogue worship where God's Word was read and proclaimed. And there He proclaimed God's Word with such authority that the congregation was amazed (Mk. 1:21–22)! Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is certainly a prime example of the priestly Jesus teaching His people what a life of repentance, faith, and holiness are all about (Mt 5–7).

Jesus also offered up a sacrifice to God the Father for the forgiveness and atonement of the people's sins. What is unique about Jesus' priestly service is that He offers up Himself as the sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world (c.p. Jn 10:17–18). The Levites offered up myriads and myriads of sacrifices but Jesus offers only one: Himself on Golgotha's cross. His sacrifice is sufficient unto itself for the restoration and renewal of the entire universe.

To be sure, the Levitical priesthood under the high priestly lineage of Aaron was a great gift from God. As good as it was, it doesn't quite describe the priesthood of Jesus adequately. Our Lord did all the things priest were required to do. But Jesus does more. His priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood and the high priesthood of Aaron. To see this, we must turn to Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is one of those mysterious, enigmatic persons that we know very little about. But what we know is most significant, world changing, in fact. We learn of him in Genesis 14. He's described as the king of Salem and a priest of God Most High. He appears to bless Abram after a battle he won over five kings. And then Melchizedek disappears. We don't hear of him again until Psalm 110, tonight's psalm.

In this beautiful Psalm, a prophecy of the Messiah, a prophecy of the Lord Jesus, we learn that God the Father promises His Son, the One who sits at His right hand, that He will be "a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." Amazingly, this Psalm of David, written during the time when the Levitical priesthood was in full service, the Lord declares that the Messiah would not only be a priest, but that His priesthood would not follow the pattern and order of Aaron! It will follow that mysterious order of Melchizedek, from Genesis 14.

The writer to the Hebrews, picks up on this prophecy and makes a great number of powerful connections. Look at vs. 3, "He (i.e., Melchizedek) is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever..." In other words, the author is already beginning to make the astounding conclusion that Jesus remains forever. He's the eternal Son of God, without the limits of time. And as the eternal Son of God, Jesus fulfills what Melchizedek only represented: an eternal, unbound, and universal priest who ministers on behalf of the world!

Vs. 11 asks a very logical question, "Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?" The only reasonable answer is that something was insufficient about Aaron's priesthood. Something more perfect was needed. Twice (vs. 17, 21), the author quotes Psalm 110:4, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." The Melchizedekian priest is stated clearly and without doubt in vs. 22, "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant."

Ok, pastor, it's Wednesday night in Advent. We've had a great time of food and fun downstairs. But, it's kind of getting late. Why should we be concerned about mysterious, ancient priests – Aaron and Melchizedek – who somehow pointed to the priesthood of the Lord Jesus? I'm so glad you asked.

Vs. 24–25, “He (i.e., Jesus) holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” Wow! Jesus is able to save us “to the uttermost” because He holds an eternal priesthood through which He always – notice that word – always intercedes for them.

Levitical priests were mere mortals. They were on duty for a certain time and then went home. Eventually, they died. And the sacrifices they offered were animals and grain. But this Melchizedekian high priest, Jesus, the eternal Son of God, is both God and man. He does not grow weary or tire. He always lives and intercedes to the Father for us. And the sacrifice He offered – His own body and blood on the cross – once for all, in one fell swoop atones for the sins of the world, past, present, and future.

Every time we pray “forgive us our trespasses” or receive the Lord’s Supper for the forgiveness of our sins or remember that in our baptism we receive the forgiveness of sins unto eternal life, we are appealing to the eternal high priesthood of Jesus, a priesthood established after the order of Melchizedek.

So maybe we don’t know all the names of the Biblical priest. No matter. We know the name of the Great High Priest, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And that’s knowledge unto salvation, joy, atonement, and eternal bliss.

✠ 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.