

“A Priest Like No Other”

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Based upon John 11:17-44; Hebrews 4:14-5:10 (Lenten Series Part III)

One of the overarching themes of Mary Doria Russell’s book The Sparrow,¹ the book which our church book group is reading this month, is that when we find ourselves in a very different context or culture from our own, we must be careful not to assume anything when we strive to learn from or communicate with others. Our basic assumptions and their basic assumptions about the nature of the world, the role of individuals within it, the way that things work, or the best way to resolve problems, may or may not be the same. So if we operate out of our paradigm without first taking the time to learn about theirs, we risk misunderstanding, giving offense, being offended, or worse. Russell’s book is set in the context of human beings encountering a civilization on a different planet. But this particular cautionary lesson also serves us well as we strive today to understand what the author of *Hebrews*, who wrote in a very different time and place, wants us to understand about Christ. Up until now, as we have been considering the various roles of Jesus in Scripture for Lent, we haven’t had to stray too far from the familiar in order to understand what it means that Jesus fulfilled the roles of prophet and “Antidote Savior.” We know enough about the Old Testament prophets to be able to understand that Jesus as Prophet came to challenge the way things are and the way that we live. We also know enough about modern medicine to be able to understand that if Jesus equated himself with a famous antidote in Jewish history, he must have been trying to warn us about sin’s destructiveness, and to assure us about the life-saving power of God’s grace.

When we get to the role of great high priest, however, which the *Hebrews* text gives to Christ in today’s Lectionary text, we are truly stepping into a different world. As theologian William Placher has observed, in the world of *Hebrews*, the holiest worship site of all, the Temple, was filled not with angelic choirs, but with “animals being herded to their deaths... the cries of dying birds and beasts... and the stench of blood.”² It was a world in which pretty much all people believed that to be in right relationship with God one had to offer regular animal sacrifices. It was a world in which people of faith believed that to seek to experience the presence of God was to risk death, and that therefore intermediaries, called priests, were necessary to mediate between God and the people. In the First Century, people sought out God and performed rituals to earn their salvation, not to have a personal relationship with the divine. Such a thing was not thought possible.

In our day, the practice of animal sacrifice seems barbaric and theologically offensive. Why would a loving God demand a slaughtered lamb or dove? It’s not like God even ate the animals. Oh, those poor animals! For us, Reformed Protestants, there is no need for any kind of intermediary between us and God. If we want to talk to God we just do. We pray to God in our cars, in our bedrooms, and on the golf course as if God were our best friend, our spouse, or our caddy. For us as Presbyterians, the term “priest” does not conjure up an image of Christ; it conjures up an image of Roman Catholic men in white collars who hand out wafers in Mass to Catholics only. We don’t have priests in our tradition in part because we don’t have Mass.

¹ Russell, Mary Doria, The Sparrow (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

² Placher, William C., Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 132.

Communion for us is not a reenacted sacrifice, it is a thanksgiving meal. So when the author of *Hebrews* joyfully proclaims that Christ is the great high priest of the order of Melchizedek, who saved humanity from its sins by offering a perfect sacrifice of himself, that statement may make us feel more confused or queasy than comforted. Would the God we know in Christ really demand his own son's murder in order to forgive us our sins? Perhaps we should just forget about the priest role today?

It's tempting. But since "priest" is one of the three important offices of Christ that John Calvin identified, I think it's better for us to seek better understanding of this foreign world instead of skip it. To start let's begin with that title, "great, high priest." In Jesus' day, the Jews had a "high" priest and the Gentiles had "great" priests. So if Jesus was a great high priest, that isn't the *Hebrews* author using hyperbole, or heaping ecclesiastical epithets on Jesus the way some pastors today are called "the very Reverend so and so." The title "great high priest" was the author of *Hebrews*' way of saying that Jesus was not just a priest for the Jews; he was a priest for the Gentiles also. So already we discover we are talking about very different kind of priesthood from that of the Roman Catholic Church. Jesus was a priest for all.

It was the job of priests in the First Century to perform the rituals associated with animal sacrifice in order to "reconcile" the people with their God. God never needed to be reconciled with the people; God was always with the people. But people believed then that they needed to be reconciled because their sins created an obstacle to their relationship with God. Note that I did not say that God needed to be appeased. We hear this language often, but there were really two main reasons for the sacrificial practices in Jewish Law and neither one of them had to do with paying off God to avoid being struck with divine lightning bolts. The first was to remind the people of their covenant promises with God. Think of sacrificing as an ancient equivalent of a gratitude journal combined with a marriage renewal ceremony. "I remember; I am grateful; I choose you," the act of offering a sacrifice proclaimed, and on the Day of Atonement, "I'm sorry." The second reason was to enable the people to have some kind of relationship with God that they otherwise would not have been able to have.

In Judaism, God was considered so holy, so otherworldly and perfect, that people believed that if a sinful person approached God directly, the person would be incinerated by God's holiness, which, by definition, cannot tolerate or include sin. For lack of a better example, think of it as if God were an MRI machine and sin were metal in human bodies. You can't go into a MRI if you have metal in your body because the MRI will magnetize the metal and yank it out, harming or killing you. The people believed that God was so holy and pure, that God's holiness would destroy the sin in the room, and with it the people who embodied it, not because God was angry at them, not because God needed blood, but because God was holy. So there needed to be an intermediary chosen by God who could convey to God the people's wishes, concerns, and apologies, and relay back God's forgiveness, love, and support. That intermediary was the priest. Since he was following God's commands, after he performed a sacrifice for his own sins, the priest could then serve as kind of a protective shield between God's holiness and the people. He carried the people's "Thank you's," "I'm sorry's," and "I am in need" requests in their sacrifices to God, and by virtue of having performed their legal obligation for them, was able to assure them that they were OK with God. But even he wore a

rope around his ankle when he went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, in case he died in there. No one else was allowed to go in, so the people needed a way to be able to pull him out if necessary.

The first priest was Moses' brother Aaron. His successors were all supposed to be Levites. But by Jesus' day, that tradition of having God's designees serve as the priests had fallen by the wayside. The high priest, who served in the Temple and was alone allowed to go into the Holy of Holies, was a political appointee, and more often than not, a corrupted one at that. So, the people did not feel heard or represented. They weren't even sure if they were or could ever be in right relationship with God. Likewise among the Gentiles, there was a sense of always needing to perform sacrifices to appease all the many gods, but never feeling for long that the gods gave a fig about them or their needs. Remember the story in *Acts* about how the Gentiles even had an altar "to an unknown god?" They had to cover all their bases to feel safe.

Imagine then, how exciting it was for both the Jews and the Gentiles to learn via *Hebrews* that in Jesus, they had "a great high priest" unlike any other, a priest of the order of Melchizedek, who was called by God, sin free, and sympathetic to humanity's weaknesses! Melchizedek was neither a Levite, nor a political appointee. He was a mysterious, almost divine figure. According to *Genesis*, he was both a priest and the king of Salem, the city of Peace, who shared bread and wine with Abraham, and then, after Abraham gave him a tenth of his belongings as a tithe, disappeared. (Gen. 14:18-20). Melchizedek was sort of a messianic figure for the Jews, holier than ordinary mortals. So for Jesus to be associated with him was to say that he was a super priest. He had divine authority unlike any other, and because of that, was able to do something that no priest before could ever do. He was able to make the sacrificial system unnecessary by creating a new covenant. Thus, *Hebrews* effectively proclaims: "From now on Jesus will be our reminder of God's covenant. We don't need to make any more sacrifices, and we don't need to worry about approaching God with our sins because Jesus our priest was not just holy and divine, he was also fully human and sympathizes with our weaknesses. So, our priest is our savior and our advocate."

The reason we Presbyterians believe now that we do not need an intercessor to approach God and do not need to offer animal sacrifices to God, the reason that we think in terms of pastor instead of priest is because the early Christians believed and argued that Jesus broke the mold. He reset the religious thinking of his day and ultimately of our own by making God approachable by everyone and God's love accessible to everyone. He made the priesthood about sympathy and transformation, instead of about sacrifice and accounting. So if you want a mental image of what it means that Jesus was our priest, I suggest that instead of picturing men in collars or animal sacrifices, you think of Jesus in the story of the raising of Lazarus.

Lazarus was one of Jesus' best friends. Like John, Lazarus was thought of as "the one whom Jesus loved." So when Lazarus died, Jesus' first response was a very human one. He wept. It wasn't the gentle weeping of a man who was sad but secretly knew in his heart because he was God that death was no big deal. In the Greek, Jesus' weeping is described in angry terms. He was furious, furious about losing his friend, furious at death, furious at the brokenness of the world which causes us to experience so much pain and suffering. Jesus cried

with true understanding of what death means to us, and then he decided to do something about it, and brought Lazarus back from the dead.

Now I'm not saying that Jesus as priest will bring everyone back from the dead. He doesn't do that, obviously. But in this one story, we do see that because Jesus was both human and divine, he was able to do what others could not. He took the side of humanity and met it with the grace of God. When we affirm that Jesus was the great high priest, we affirm that he stands with us before God not as a shield but as a sympathizer. He is someone who feels our pain, who knows our temptations, who understands our fears. He stepped into our world and truly got the human condition because he experienced it. He stepped into our world so that there would be no more misunderstandings about God being so holy and otherworldly that God could not understand how unbelievably hard this life can be sometimes, and so that we would know that it is not God's desire to incinerate us or punish us, but to know us and forgive us.

What a difference this can make knowing that God understands our world! I've been thinking for obvious reasons these past few weeks about how the fact that I now know what it feels like to have a concussion will change how I pastor to people who have them. I will be so much more sympathetic simply because I have experienced how many problems a concussion causes. Well magnify that by all of humanity, and that's what we get in Christ. Jesus experienced hunger, fatigue, stress, and anger. He felt physical pain worse than most of us ever will. He felt grief, tasted the pain of human judgment, and experienced injustice. He knew temptation and understood fear. Because of all of this we know that we do not need to fear God or think of God as a wrathful judge who needs to be appeased. Because of all that Jesus experienced, we know that we can have a relationship with God through him. He is our advocate and our means of grace.

There is an oft-told story that was written by a surgeon named Richard Seltzer about a young woman who had a tumor on her cheek. In order to excise the tumor, Seltzer ended up having to cut a nerve in her cheek. So, one side of her face drooped slightly and her smile was crooked. After the surgery, the woman looked at herself in a mirror and said, "Will my mouth always be like this?" "Yes," Seltzer said. "I had to cut the nerve I'm afraid." Then the woman's husband said, "I like it, it's kind of cute," and bent over to kiss her, carefully twisting his own lips to accommodate hers. It is a sweet story, and one which captures well the power of love. But it is in Seltzer's reaction that we get a glimpse of what it means for us that Jesus is our priest. Observing the young man, Seltzer wrote, "All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god."³

In Jesus Christ, God came to meet us where we are. God accommodated Godself to us so that we would know that we do not need to fear that our imperfections will provoke God's wrath or make God stop loving us anymore. God didn't come and die on the cross because God needed someone to suffer or some blood to be spilled in order to love us. God came because God knew that humankind needed a sacrifice in order to understand and truly believe Jesus' professions that they were loved and forgiven despite their sins. "This is the last one," the

³ Anderson, David, "God's Christmas Kiss," Finding Your Soul: Real Faith, Real Life Blog, posted December 24, 2013, retrieved March 14, 2018 from <http://findingyoursoul.com/2013/12/gods-christmas-kiss>

author of *Hebrews* proclaimed. “No more blood spilling. No more fear of incineration. From now on you will remember the covenant with a cup and bread, the elements Melchizedek offered Abraham. From now on, you will approach God through Christ, who became a priest so that from now on you will know that nothing on earth or in heaven can separate you from the love of God.” Thanks be to God! Amen.