

We are now about six weeks into our Journey Together through the Bible: One Word, One Year, and whether you are keeping up or not, it is good that we are reading the Bible together, the whole Bible. We are people of the Book, the whole Book, both the Old and New Testaments, and already we have seen that there are themes introduced early in the Scriptures that we will follow throughout. One of those predominant themes is the issue of “blood sacrifice.” We saw it last week in the text Brodie used from Genesis 4 where God honored the sacrifice of an animal which Abel brought over the sacrifice of grain brought by Cain. That distinction led to murder, so we know we are talking about something of significance here. We will continue to follow the theme of the blood sacrifice all the way through the Old Testament and it underlies the central question of our New Testament faith, “Who is Jesus Christ, and what did He come to do?”

Our initial response may be to say that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, and while that kind of personal experience with Jesus is powerful and beautiful and life changing, I’d even say essential for us on an individual basis, we must also remember that Jesus is not only MY personal Savior, He is also Savior of the whole world. Not only is He Lord of MY life, He is also Lord of the universe, before Whom the whole of heaven and earth will one day bow down.

Turning to the Westminster Confession of faith, a standard of reformed faith written in England in the middle 1600’s, we read that Jesus came to fulfill His God-ordained purpose as “prophet, priest and king.” We know that He fulfills the role of prophet by being THE ONE who speaks for God, THE ONE who calls all people back into a right relationship with God by faith and obedience. And He alone is legitimately called KING, not in a geopolitical sense, but in the sense that He is the LORD and Ruler of the universe, THE ONE Who sits on the throne of heaven, and all things are under His feet.

But what does it mean to say that Jesus is “the priest?” The 25<sup>th</sup> question of the Shorter Catechism asks, “How does Christ execute the office of priest?” The answer given, ‘Christ executes the office of priest in His once offering up of Himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us.’

Now, what really does that mean for you and me today? Since we believe that Jesus is God’s own Son, that when He speaks God speaks, and when He acts God acts, then it only makes sense that Jesus’ message and ministry were consistent with the message and ministry that had gone before Him. As we’ve seen, Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. It is good for us to remember that Jesus was a Jew. He was living and practicing His faith within a faith community and tradition, just as we are. So, when we read the Old Testament we are reading the Scriptures which Jesus would have read.

So, think with me for a moment, what is your deepest heart’s desire for your spiritual life? For most of us, it is to enjoy an intimate, authentic relationship with God; to live our lives in accordance with His will and purpose; to be able to worship Him in truth and confidence; and for our family members and friends to enjoy this same kind of relationship with God with us. It is safe to say that is what people of faith have desired through the ages. The problem is, we can’t enjoy that kind of intimate, authentic relationship with a Holy God because of this issue in our lives called “sin”. By sin, we mean not just the bad things we do or the good things we fail to do, but the recognition that there is a fundamental brokenness or disharmony in our relationship with God that impacts all of our other relationships, and try as we may there is nothing we can do to deal with that brokenness. Sure, we can “try to be good as we know we should”, but we know all too well that our feeble efforts at “self-help” merely deal with the symptoms of this life-threatening disease called “sin”. So, unable to heal ourselves, we need something or someone to fix what is broken within us. We need something or someone to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, namely, to restore us into a right relationship with God.

In the Old Testament, the faith tradition which Jesus understood and practiced, the means established to deal with human sinfulness was the system of sacrifice, and it focused on the work of the priests, most specifically the High Priest. We are at least somewhat familiar with how this system worked. The people would confess their sin to the priest, who would then require them to offer a prescribed sacrifice- a bull, a goat, a dove, depending on the severity of the transgression. He would then sacrifice the animal before the Lord for the forgiveness of their sins. The priest, in effect, served as the mediator or the intercessor between God and the people. The priest, in effect, faced two directions: toward God on behalf

of the people, bringing their sacrifices and offerings, and toward the people on behalf of God, as he pronounced the forgiveness of their sins which we know only God can grant.

That was the daily function of the temple priest, but then there was one designated as the High Priest, who had a special responsibility. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest, representing not any one individual but the whole community, would enter into the most sacred place in the temple, an inner sanctum called the Holy of Holies, the place where it was believed God lived among His people. From the time of Moses and the 40 year sojourn in the wilderness on, no one was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, save the High Priest, and he only once a year. Prior to his entering, he was required to perform an elaborate ritual of sacrifice and purification, for he would be carrying with him not only all of the year-long accumulated sins of all of the people, but also his own sins into the presence of a Holy God. Every year on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would take two perfect animals, generally a lamb and a goat, and in the presence of all the people he would sacrifice the first animal, the lamb, to the Lord as a “sin offering”, believing that there was life in the blood and the shedding of blood was the means of forgiveness. He would then lay his hands upon the head of the second animal, the goat, and he would confess all the sins of the people and transfer their guilt to this animal which was then marked and driven out into the wilderness, away from the community. That animal came to be called “the scape goat.”

This was the High Priest’s function in the community and he performed this service once a year, year in and year out, as the means to deal with the sin problem of the people and to restore them into a new and right relationship with God. The problem was, it was temporary. It was provisional. It only lasted a brief time, until the people, or even the High Priest himself, sinned again, and the relationship with God was tainted and broken, until another sacrifice could be offered.

While we may not fully understand or even approve of this solution to the problem, we do understand the need. We understand what it feels like to be cut off from God because of our sin. We know that we, too, need a means by which we can deal with the brokenness and disharmony of our lives, but we also admit that we need a more permanent solution than this. As John Stott writes, “We don’t need rules, we need deliverance. We don’t need education, we need a change of heart. We need power, not advice. We need spiritual power. We need a Savior.” Enter Jesus Christ, who came, not to abandon this ancient system of dealing with human sinfulness, but to fulfill it, to perfect it, to make it complete and lasting, making the old system obsolete. Jesus came to be our Great High Priest, once, for all.

All of this is background to our lessons from the book of Hebrews where we discover three ways in which Jesus is our Great High Priest.

First, **He did for us what we could not do for ourselves.** Just as the sinful people could not enter the Holy of Holies but needed the High Priest to act on their behalf, neither can we, as sinful people, stand in the presence of a Holy God. So, Christ has gone before us as our mediator and intercessor. He has offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice and by His blood He has paved the way for our salvation. In our faithful imagination, we can picture Jesus, standing before the throne of God, offering up our broken human condition and making intercession for us. He faces God on our behalf, for, as we read in Hebrews, “*We have a Great High Priest who understands all of our weakness. He has been tested just as we are, yet is without sin.*” (4:15) And at the same time He turns toward us, as the very Son of God, and offers us the free gift of God’s love and forgiveness as we turn to Him in faith.

Do you remember the Gospel writers telling that when Jesus was crucified “*the veil of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom*”? (Matt. 27:51) Do you know what veil they are referring to? The veil that hung in the inner sanctum of the temple as the entrance to the Holy of Holies, the veil that separated the people from entering for themselves in to the presence of God. Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He has borne our sins and opened the way for us in to the very presence of God.

Second, we see that He has done this “**once for all**”. Whereas the sacrifice of the old covenant had to be repeated daily and annually, the sacrifice of the new covenant in Christ is established “**once for all**”. We read in Hebrews 9: “*He entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood, thus obtaining eternal salvation.*” Whereas the old covenant was temporary, provisional and transitory, the new covenant in Christ is timeless, permanent and eternal.

I wonder with you, what of what we are doing here today is temporal and what of it is eternal? Everything around us is passing away: hard as it may be to imagine, but this building, this sanctuary, these people. These are not the things we are to hold on to. The only thing around us here that is eternal and timeless is our worship of God. So we must follow our Great High Priest in to the sanctuary that will never pass away in order to worship the God whose mercy is never-ending.

Third, Jesus, the Great High Priest, has **secured our salvation with His own blood**, not the blood of animals. The ancient system of sacrifices established that there is life in the blood. Something or someone had to die in order to deal with the brokenness of our sin. So Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the old covenant when He assumed the part of the sacrificial lamb, the perfect sacrifice, and willingly laid down His life for our sakes, in order to restore us to a right relationship with God. Remember the first time John the Baptist publicly recognized Jesus, he said, *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”* (John 1:29) This is the answer to our question as to Who He is and What He came to do. *“Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners”*, the likes of you and me.

Why did He do it? Because He loves us. We read in Romans, *“God proves His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* (5:8) He did it because, even more than we desire it, God desires to have a pure and unbroken relationship with us, not just for a moment or a lifetime, but for eternity. But in order for that to happen this problem of our sinfulness had to be dealt with, **once and for all**. God knew that there was nothing we could do to fix the problem, so **He did for us what we could not do for ourselves**. He came to us in Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest, and **by His own blood**, He made the eternal sacrifice for our sin. The veil that once separated us from God was torn in two, from top to bottom, God’s action on our behalf. As the old hymn tells us, He “opened the life gates that all may come in.”

So then, let our heart’s desires be fulfilled, *“Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, and there receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*(4:16) And *“let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who has promised is faithful.”*(10:23) This is the Good News of the Gospel: the way has been opened for us by Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest, once for all.