

Hebrews 1:1-3 Jesus Is Our Great High Priest! Ash Wednesday February 14, 2018

By Pastor Kenneth Mellon, Trinity Lutheran Church and School, Pleasant Valley Rd., West Bend, WI

God's final Word has come to us in Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. Amen.



We read from God's letter to the *Hebrews 1:1-3*: ¹ *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,* ² *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.* ³ *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

Dear People of God in Christ, our great High Priest,

If you have your bulletin open, you are wondering what the picture is above our sermon verses. It is a replica a Tzitz? A Tzitz was the golden plate that was fastened to the head of the high priest of Israel. The words say: "Holy to the Lord." Recently, a group in Jerusalem made a replica of the Tzitz and of the garments of the high priest. They want all to be ready because they think a new high priest will appear to serve in a new temple in Jerusalem. This is an empty hope for people who have rejected Jesus as the Christ. We don't need to wait for a new high priest. We have Christ, who is holy to the Lord. Hebrews tells us: "We have a great high priest" now! That Jesus is our High Priest will be the focus for our Lenten series. Today:

Jesus is truly our Great High Priest.

1. He is qualified to serve. The book of Hebrews was written to encourage Jewish Christians who were suffering for their faith. Because of persecution and rejection by Jews, they were tempted to turn back to Judaism and replace Christ's work with works of the law. The author of Hebrews gave these wavering believers a simple message: Jesus is better than anything Israel had in the past or could offer in the future.

It states, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son." (v.1-2) God had spoken through people like Moses, David, and Isaiah. He spoke through them over many years and pictured Jesus' coming in many ways. Old Testament prophecy was like a puzzle with each of the prophets contributing a piece. As a person put the pieces together, the picture portrayed Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

The Jews were familiar with the qualifications for a high priest. He had to be man from the tribe of Levi and a descendant of Aaron. The high priest was unique from other priests. He wore the golden *Tzitz* and other colorful jeweled garments as he performed his duties. So, the Jews would question if Jesus could be the great High Priest. He wasn't a descendent of Aaron or from the tribe of Levi. He didn't wear special clothes. As the God/man, He was holy, which the high priest's white robes signified. He had no sin.

Hebrews urged these Jewish believers to consider Jesus' qualifications. It states, He was "appointed heir of all things and through [Him, God] made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." (v.2-3) Aaron and the high priests who followed him couldn't hold a candlestick to Jesus as the Light of God. Aaron received 10% of offerings from the people. Jesus is heir of all things. Aaron in his white robes represented a holy God. Jesus was God. He told His disciples, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." (John 14:5) The Old Testament high priest prayed for the people to sustain them. Jesus is the one who powerfully provides and defends God's people to sustain them. The conclusion: Jesus is the greatest high priest.

2. Jesus is a High Priest who purifies us. Hebrews says of Christ: *“He provided purification for sins.”* (v.3) The Old Testament stated, *“The priest who is anointed ... as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments and make atonement for ... all the people of the community.”* (Leviticus 16:32-33) This verse describes the Day of Atonement, when the high priest annually offered the blood of a sacrifice on the Ark of the Covenant. By this, God promised to forgive the people’s sins. This forgiveness was not based on the work of the high priest. He was only a type of Christ. Forgiveness was based on the work of Jesus and the sacrifice He made once for all at the cross.

Jesus illustrated how He purifies people on the night He was betrayed. As Jesus gathered with his disciples to celebrate the Passover, *“[He] got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist”* (John 13:4). He took off His outer garment to work as if He was a slave. He should have had fine clothing like the gold and jeweled garment of the high priest. But He humbled Himself. Paul wrote, *“Being in very nature God, [He] did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...”* (Philippians 2:6-7)

We see the Son of God on the floor washing the feet of his disciples, cleansing them of dirt. In this act, we have a symbol of a greater purification that Jesus would provide by his blood. When Peter refused to have Jesus wash his feet, Jesus said, *“Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”* (John 13:8) Jesus was talking about washing away Peter’s sin. To provide that purification, Jesus would go lower than to the floor. He would hang in shame on Calvary’s cross; and by his death, he provided purification for the world’s sins. Page 3 As sinners, we don’t want anyone to see our sins. But our sins stand out before God like a wound in the middle of our forehead. We haven’t betrayed Jesus like Judas or denied Jesus like Peter. But, like all Jesus’ disciples, we are full of sinful pride. We don’t want to lower ourselves for others. We want to be served and to be honored above all. The Bible warns: *“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”* (1 Peter 5:5) We need to be purified of our sinful pride and the sins that result from it. The only one who can do that is Jesus our great High Priest. The blood of God’s one and only Son is applied to our hearts, mouths, and hands and we are cleansed from every sin. By faith we plead like David: *“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.... Wash me and I will be whiter than snow.”* (Palm 51:2, 7)

3. Jesus is a Great High Priest whom we will join in glory. Our verses state of Jesus, *“After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”* (v.3) The fact that Jesus was raised from the dead and is at the heavenly throne to rule over all things assures us that His forgiveness of sins was complete. Peter later preached of Him: *“Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”* (Acts 2:36) What motivated Jesus to suffer and die for us? He knew what was ahead. He would share the glory He won with all who believe in Him. The Bible states, *“For the joy set before him He endured the cross, scorning its shame.”* (Hebrews 12:2) That joy includes us. Jesus prayed as a high priest in John 17: *“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me....”* (17:24)

Is the glory that we will receive a reward that we earn? No, that’s impossible. Our selfishness, false pride, and disobedience would surely disqualify us from earning such a reward. But because Jesus humbled himself and purified us from our sins by his blood, we can be certain that we will have glory with Him.

When Jesus returns in glory and we stand before Him as our judge, we will be glad that He is our Great High Priest. He spent His life on earth interceding for us before His Father. He will do the same on the last Day. He can save us because He is God’s perfect Son. He has made full atonement for our sins. And He will keep His promise to share His inheritance of heaven with all who believe in Him! We won’t need to be wearing a Tzitz like the Old Testament high priest. For in Christ, our Savior and great High Priest, we are now holy to the Lord. Amen.