

Title: Christ, the perfect Priest
Text: Hebrews 1.3
Theme: Our perfect priest
Series: Advent 2015, #2
Prop Stmtnt: Christ offered the perfect sacrifice on our behalf when he offered up himself.

How do you react when you are overwhelmed? Instinctively, we do what? We take in air and hold it. Then we release it with a cry. If we are overwhelmed with joy, the cry is one of praise and celebration. If we are overwhelmed with grief, the cry is one of anguish. This week as I have prepared this sermon, I have been overwhelmed and I long for you to be overwhelmed. Here is what I mean. In this Advent series, I am preaching on 5 different aspects of Christ but I want to do more than just inform you of these, I long for your hearts to be captivated by them. I want to address some deep truths about God that you might have deep love for God. Let me give you an example.

Let's say that you are an athlete and are very competitive. Every person you meet in your sport is someone whom you are sizing up because you are thinking about how you could beat him or her. But, one day, you watch a runner, or a soccer player, or a gymnast or tennis player whose skill and talent level is light years ahead of you. You watch with total amazement. All sense of competition is gone because it is replaced by wonder and awe. The same thing happens to musicians. You are good compared to others around, but if you get to hear the best in the world, you feel like a beginner. You are in awe.

Let me take that to another level. Let's say that you have been invited to a ball. You know, one of those high-culture, exclusive-crowd, royalty-present events. You stress over what you are going to wear, how you are going to be received, and what you are supposed to do. But once you and the other guests arrive and are announced, there is one princess who makes her entrance who is nothing less than stunning. Her beauty and grace is only matched by her charm and humility. Every single person is completely taken with her. You have never witnessed a more beautiful person in all of your life. But, her beauty does not give you a sense of envy; it evokes a sense of wonder. When she enters the room, you hold your breath. You release it in awe.

I am convinced that when you see with your heart the beauty of Christ, that your response will be one of wonder and joy at being overwhelmed with One whose perfections and graces are knee-buckling, heart-stopping, mouth-gaping and soul-rapturing. He is beauty in holiness and one the chief reasons why is because Christ is our perfect priest.

Read Text:

This morning I am preaching on the subject of Christ being our perfect priest (Advent series). The writer of Hebrews introduces this idea here in the end of 1.3 and expands on it quite a bit in the rest of the book. What do you think of when you think of a priest? I suspect that many of you think of an unmarried man who wears a long black robe and performs religious ceremonies in a quiet, clean and contemplative manner. But, when you

read the Bible, you realize that Old Testament priests were more like butchers, home inspectors, physicians and lawyers. Prophets stood before the people and spoke on behalf of God. Priests stood before God and ministered on behalf of the people. While some handled incense, most handled knives. When the children of Israel would sin the only means by which they could be forgiven was through the sacrificial system that God established. This meant that the people had to bring sacrifices to the tabernacle (later the Temple) in order that the priests of the tabernacle could sacrifice these lambs, or pigeons, or other offerings on behalf of the people. The day at the tabernacle began with a morning sacrifice and concluded with an evening sacrifice. The rest of the day the people would come and stand in line with their animals and the priests would offer them up to God on behalf of the people.

The priests were the ones who executed the animals by hand and prepared them for sacrifice and even did the sacrifice itself. They cut and separated out the various parts of the animal. Their job was not quiet, clean and contemplative. Their outfits were carefully designed by God and given to Moses. And their outfits did not include gloves. The job was messy, gory, bloody, and smelly. Their hands, clothes, faces were covered in blood and splattered with other animal parts. You will never understand the New Testament until you read the Old Testament. You will never understand Jesus unless you understand the role of the priest in Israel. Why is there all of this information in the books of Exodus and Leviticus about sacrifice? It is all there because sin is such a serious problem. This is one of the most beautiful things about Christ. He takes sin seriously.

I. **He takes your sin seriously and personally.**

He takes your sin seriously and personally. Your burden, your weight, your grief, your struggle, your brokenness, your failures and all of the consequences of your sin and the sins of others are understood by him at the deepest level. It is very good news to consider the fact that he takes your sin seriously and personally. Why is that such good news? It is good news because it means that he cares deeply about you.

Jesus is like the teacher who cares more about your grades than you do because she wants you to apply yourself. Jesus is like the coach who cares more about your effort level than you do because he wants to see you excel. Jesus is like the parent who is driven to help you see what is important in life and wants you to be prepared to face it. Jesus is like the doctor who cares more about your blood pressure, diet, cholesterol and overall health than you do. Jesus sees sin for what it is and he knows what it does to you. He knows the price of it. He knows the road that it will take you down. He knows all of the stories of isolation, loneliness, fractured minds, grieving hearts and broken promises. He knows the anguish and pain of soul and body that comes from our rebellious hearts. He takes sin seriously. Jesus is a perfect priest because he takes sin seriously.

Now plenty of people have criticized the OT sacrificial system as being crude and barbaric, but its rawness and shock is only because sin is so toxic and evil. Our world uses lighting, staging, camera angles, fantasies, make-up, tantalizing promises, music, stories, provocative poses and powerful images in an effort to give sin a makeover. It

makes sin look good. It makes it look desirable, necessary, helpful even. But when you read the details of the Old Testament sacrificial system and you realize how all of that mess, gore and bloodshed was a preview of the shocking death of Christ, then instead of being offended and disgusted at the gore, you start to see the truth. You start to see that God is offended and disgusted and nauseated with your sin. Sin doesn't look quite as appealing then. And it shouldn't.

God created the Old Testament sacrificial system to do several things. He wanted us to have a healthy fear of and view of sin. Sin contaminates. Sin is like an infection. Sin is like MRSA for the soul. Some of you know this firsthand. You know that once an infection like staff or MRSA takes hold that it is maddening to get rid of. If you are going to get rid of it, you need a physician to be alarmed at the gravity of your condition. You need that physician to be aggressive in treatment and thorough in follow-through. The Old Testament sacrificial system shows that sin is a serious matter. But the Old Testament sacrificial system shows you something else. It reveals the fact that the payment for sin is death. The payment for sin is death because it is so serious. Instinctively we know this. When something bad happens, we have a built-in response that says, "Somebody has to pay for this." And the highest payment that can be made is one's own life. But the OT sacrificial system revealed that the payment for sin could not come from you. It had to come from another. Your sin had to be credited to someone else who would offer up his life in your place. Jesus is a perfect priest because he takes your sin seriously and personally. Jesus is a perfect priest because...

II. **He is unlike any other priest - ever.**

A. **He is all in, all the time.**

He is never distracted or diminished. He is never disinterested or disconnected. He is never taken up with another matter so that he does not have time for you. A group of us were in Ukraine this summer serving Jerry and Kellie Bengé and the other missionaries they serve with. Outside of one of the Orthodox churches we saw a priest who was sprinkling holy water on people who came up and gave a little donation. We stood at a distance and watched. The priest was on his cell phone and while he managed to hold his phone with one hand and splash water with the other, it is obvious that he wasn't giving any real thought to what he was supposedly doing for the people. It's like the sign I saw recently, "*If you ever need a slightly disinterested and unsympathetic friend, I'm here for you.*" That's a great comfort, isn't it?!

But think of it. Let's say that you are deeply burdened about the sin that is prevalent in your life and you go to a priest for some help and he is distracted by other things. He has not helped you. If anything he has caused your burden to be even heavier. But Jesus was never and is never distracted. He understands the seriousness of your sin much more than we ever will even in our most contrite moments. As a man he fully sympathizes with our needs and as God he is never disinterested or distracted.

B. **He is without sin.**

Every Old Testament priest had to go through a ceremonial cleansing in order to be cleansed of his own sin before he could offer sacrifices for the sins of others. The efficacy (the ability to produce the desired result) and integrity of the sacrificial system depended to a degree on the purification and cleansing of the priest. What would happen if you went to the tabernacle to offer a sacrifice and the priests were not cleansed, but were in fact living in blatant sin? In order for your sacrifice to be accepted, your sacrifice not only had to be the right kind of a sacrifice, but it had to be offered in the right way. So, I got to thinking about that and ended up discussing this with a couple of the staff. Let's say that the priests, who were offering sacrifices on the day that you came to the tabernacle, were not ceremonially clean. It sounds like the ability of that sacrifice to accomplish its purpose was to some degree influenced by the spiritual condition of the priest, right? All of that simply points out the limits of the sacrificial system. The OT sacrificial system was not the real deal. It was a temporary drama that illustrated what the real sacrifice was going to be like. It had limitations and one of those limitations was the priests themselves. But not so with Christ.

Jesus never had to confess his own sin. In fact, an amazing thing always happened with Jesus. We read in the OT that if someone came in contact with a dead person, then they were considered to be unclean for a certain amount of time. After which they had to be ceremonially cleansed. If a person came in contact with a leper or other kinds of sickness or even mold they too were considered to be unclean. Do you see the pattern? When the clean came into contact with the unclean, the unclean would win and the clean would then be considered unclean. And if the unclean would touch the clean, then there would be more unclean. But something happened with Jesus that was unlike anyone else. When Jesus touched the unclean, Jesus did not become unclean. Jesus did not shy away from touching the unclean, he initiated contact. He reached out and touched people. And when he touched lepers, they were restored to health. When he touched dead bodies, they were brought back to life. Unclean has no power over him because he is without sin.

C. He is eternal.

The other priests could only serve until they died. As I mentioned earlier, some priests were better than others, but even the good ones died. But, as the sinless, eternal Son of God, Jesus was uniquely able to offer up the perfect sacrifice.

Hebrews 7.23-24 says, "The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever." And because Jesus is all in, all the time, perfectly sinless and eternal, he was not only able to perfectly perform as a priest, he was also, as a perfect priest able to offer up the perfect sacrifice.

D. He offered up the perfect sacrifice.

The sacrificial system was influenced by the integrity of the priest offering the sacrifice as well as the integrity of the sacrifice itself. The requirement to offer a lamb without spot

or blemish was to illustrate the fact that only a perfect sacrifice could satisfy the righteous demands of God. But, a perfect animal was still an animal. Animals, in the end, could not pay for the sins of humans. Only a perfect sacrifice that was of the same nature of the guilty could fully and finally in our place.

As God, Christ was perfect. He was perfectly pure. He was without sin. He could pay for the sins of others because he did not owe anything for his own. You experience this financially. Let's say that you are in debt. You've racked up credit card debt, or student loans, or whatever to the point that everything that you make is going to service that debt. And you have a co-worker whose child has a serious medical condition and people at work are collecting funds to help out. You want to give, but you can't give. You have your own debts. Do you see what I mean? But our problem is worse than that. There is nothing that we can do to even service the debt of our sin, much less pay anything toward the principle. Christ, however is perfect and he is of the same nature as we are. Therefore, he did not have to offer up a sacrifice for his own life, which meant that his offering was perfect, but because he was a man, his sacrifice was able to take the place of every human being who would ever believe on him.

As God, he was perfect. As man he was able to die in our place. As God his sacrifice was infinite in its scope and infinite in its depth. As man it satisfied the wrath of God against man. No OT priest could do that. Christ came. He was our perfect priest.

III. **He completed the mission.**

A. **He sat down.** (v.3)

He sat down because he completed the job. He completed the job so well that there is nothing left for you to pay.

Many of you know that my wife likes our house to be clean. And I like our house to be clean too, but I like to be able to sit down once in a while. 'Know what I mean? Cathi doesn't like to sit because somewhere in the house there might be a dust particle floating in the air, threatening to land on the floor. The ongoing threat of that dust particle threatens her ability to sit down. Not me! I can sit down just fine. But the fact that I can sit down when she doesn't feel like she can sit down doesn't always sit well with her. So, we have this ongoing scenario (I will call it.). I will make a move toward the couch and for a moment it looks like I am going to make it and sit down. Cathi will say something like, "Hey can you help me with something?" or "Could you do me a favor?" Now, if I was perfectly sanctified, I would say "Sure honey, whatever you want." Most of the time, however, I say something kind of remotely related to a phrase like that but I say it by faith. In other words, I believe that it is the right thing for me to say and I say it in hopes that my heart will catch up to it. But, honestly, I just wanted to sit down. It's been a long day, apparently not long enough, I guess. So, here goes. Let's say that Cathi asks me to blow out the garage. You can't have dirt in the garage because it might get on a shoe. If it gets on a shoe, it might get on the doormat, which is what I thought doormats were for, but apparently not. But if they get on a doormat, then they might get inside the house.

And if it gets inside the house, then no one can sit down. So, I get my leaf blower and go into the garage and blow it out. Then I go inside and attempt to complete the first down and sit down. Then comes the rest of the conversation. “Did you blow out the garage?” And I think, “Whaddyamean did I blow out the garage? The blower sounds like an F-14 Tomcat starting up in a bathtub. Of course I blew out the garage my ears are still ringing. But, she doesn’t mean did I blow out the garage. She means, did I blow out the garage like she would blow out the garage. Did I get behind the wagon and the mower and the boxes in the corner that I was supposed to throw away or burn last month? Did I move the car and get behind the trashcan? You see, in order for her to be able to sit down, she wants to know that I did the job the way that she would do the job. Now, there are plenty of times when I have not done the job like she would, so she asks. At that point you know what I am tempted to do, don’t you? I am tempted to dust the kitchen floor with the leaf blower, right? Not really, I am tempted to just say, “Hey you go blow it out if you want.”

But, here is my point. Jesus did the job so well, and so perfectly, that he sat down. He sat down because there is nothing left to pay. There is nothing left to do. He sat down. He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. How did he get there? He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high because the death that he died paid so perfectly for our sins that he was raised from the dead as evidence that the bill was paid, the debt was cancelled and the payment was accepted. He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high because we was not only raised from the dead, he was raised back into heaven. He ascended back to heaven because his mission on earth for his first coming was completed. He finished that job and he sat down. Do you know what that means? That means that you can sit down! If Jesus is so confident that your sin has been paid for, that he sat down, you not only can sit down, you must sit down.

But there is something else going on. Jesus is no longer dying for us. He already did that. But, what Jesus is doing is interceding for us.

B. He intercedes. He represents us before the Father.

Now, let me connect a couple of dots for you. Most of you are from a Roman Catholic background. You grew up surrounded with statues, icons, paintings and images of Jesus dying. The crucifix is a prominent feature because in Roman Catholic theology, Jesus is crucified again and again and again every time the Mass is performed. As many of you know, there is no assurance that your sins are forgiven because the death of Christ is not seen as being sufficient. You are told that you have to do your part too and no one ever knows if they have done enough. The fact that Christ has died once and for all for your sin is not taught. Therefore, there is no confidence and no security in Christ. But, that brings out another related issue. Since Christ is depicted as continually dying, Roman Catholic theology largely ignores what is actually doing right now. He is not dying for us. He already did that. He is representing us. He is our priest, in heaven, right now. He is before the throne of God right now, on my behalf and he is there so much, he has his own chair! That is where he sits. That is his place. He is still in my place. He was born in my place. He lived in my place. He died in my place. He rose again in my place. He was ascended in my place and now he sits in my place and represents me before the Father.

What does that mean? It means that when you and I sin, that the Father looks at us through his Son.

Now, many of you grew up being taught to pray to Mary and the saints and now you can see why can't you. If Jesus was still dying, who represents you? So, this whole theology of praying to Mary and the saints was developed. It really is sad. My heart sings when I read of the faith of Mary. I love reading the account of her life. Like the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11 she believed God's word and we stand on the shoulders of people like her from generations past. We ought to thank God for her. But, if my salvation and standing is based on the righteousness and intercession of Mary, I am going to hell. She cannot help me. But my salvation is based on Christ, and his death was sufficient. And now, he represents me before the Father. The one who died for me is the one who claims me. He owns me as his own.

What is behind all of this? This is amazing that Jesus is this and Jesus has done this and Jesus is going this, but why? Why is Jesus all of this? Why is he such a perfect priest? This incredible aspect of the ministry of Christ is a specific expression of his love. If you were to bore down into the very heart of the relationship that the Father, Son and Spirit enjoy, you would hit a geyser of love that would explode. It is that explosion that created the universe, the earth and the human race. It is that explosion of love that was behind the plan of God to send Christ to this earth to be our priest and to plan it. That love that explosion of love, that person of love - Christ is the beautiful One who is wonderful beyond words. He is stunning. His grace and charms, his power and skill is glorious.

Conclusion

- Believe what Jesus believes about salvation.

Jesus believes that his death was sufficient to pay for your sin. Believe that. What I mean is, believe that and do not add anything to it. There is nothing left for you to add. Our salvation is not Christ based on Christ plus anything. Believe it.

- Believe what Jesus believes about forgiveness.

Some of you have a big disconnect on this. You believe that Christ has died in your place, but you want to believe that you have to prove that you are worthy of his death. You look at your life and you are disappointed and embarrassed over things that you've done or keep doing. You say things like, I know that God has forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself. Listen, I say this in love, I really do, but that statement is obscenely arrogant. You probably don't mean it like that, but think about it. Who is more offended at your sin, you or God? The person who is more offended is the person who is more righteous. And since God is infinitely righteous, God's offense at your sin is infinitely greater than yours. Since God is infinitely offended at your sin and has forgiven it because of Christ, who are you to act as if your standard of righteousness is higher than God's? The same thing holds true when we are unwilling to forgive or unwilling to be ready to forgive others. When we say that we cannot forgive someone else we are

arrogantly acting as if our threshold of righteousness is higher than God's and we are guilty of placing our word above his. Beloved, believe that Jesus believes about forgiveness. He sat down! The payment is made. Even if you died on a cross, it wouldn't pay for a thing. So stop punishing yourself or others. How do you do that? Look at Jesus. Look at Jesus. He is not on the cross, he sat down.

- Believe what Jesus is doing for you right now.

Right now he is owning you. Right now he is claiming you. Right now he is representing you. And what is more, the Father is not against you. The Father loves the Son and the Father loves those whom the Son loves. The Father wants you to be represented by the Son. The Son is not holding back the Father's anger against you. The Father's anger at your sin was satisfied by the death of Son. The wounds of Christ stand as a testimony to that reality. The Son is the valve that unleashes the flood waters of the mercy of the Father on your behalf. Accept that. Enjoy that. Revel in that.

- Fulfill your ministry as a priest.

The church is described by Peter as being a royal priesthood. That means that we are a kingdom of priests. I've taught you that the church is the local embassy of the kingdom of Jesus. Jesus is the perfect priest with a capital "P". We are little priests. He is the perfect one, and we are imperfect ones, but we are priests nonetheless. What does a priest do, he represents people before God. He goes to God on behalf of the needs of others.

Christ stands perfectly in your place and invites you to come and enjoy being in the presence of God. Take advantage of that and go. Go in prayer and represent one another. As a member of this church you have a priestly minister to pray for one another and that is a glorious ministry. When you pray for one another, you are looking like Jesus.

So, here is my charge. Will you seek to cultivate this as part of your personal ministry in the church? Before you leave today, ask at least one person, "How can I pray for you?" And if someone asks you that, let them know. Then pray for the person, right there. Seek to do that every time we gather on Sundays. Every one of us brings a level of burden and discouragement with us. But, we have a great high Priest who is in our place. Let's go to him and let's go to him for one another.