

Sermon, March 21, 2021
5th Sunday of Lent

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we blessed to welcome back Betty Mattingly and her son Tom and daughter Mary Reisinger who are again blessing us with special music. Hopefully, we'll be back worshipping in person soon. We've been laying in supplies and watching the positivity numbers go down. We will continue to post the service online as well. Meanwhile if you would like to help support our ministries and keep our benevolence commitments, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Now for today's stupid joke.

Two rabbis were talking, and one was lamenting what he described as the decline of morality in today's world. He said, "In every wedding I have officiated in the last decade, the couple had already been living together. He said, "I certainly didn't live with my Sarah before we got married. You?" The other rabbi said, "I don't think so. What was her maiden name?"

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, our redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Hebrews, the fifth chapter.

Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the twelfth chapter.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.

Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder.

Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

First things first, when the author of John refers to Greeks, he doesn't mean people from Greece. He's talking about Hellenistic Jews—that is those who were Jewish by birth but raised and educated in the Greek-speaking Greek-thinking civilization of the Roman Empire.

Of course, they were still Jews. Why else would they come to Jerusalem for Passover? But I really don't want to talk about those Greeks this morning. I'd like instead to spend a little time with the book called Hebrews. Why? Mostly so I can say the name Melchizedek a couple more times. But also because we'll be reading a lot from Hebrews later this year, and are some things you might want to know about it.

If you have a copy of the 1611 King James Version of the Bible, you'll see that today's second reading came right out of "Paul's Letter to the Hebrews." Which is funny, because scholars nearly unanimously agree that the book we call Hebrews is not a letter, is not written by Paul and wasn't addressing any group that would self-identify as "Hebrews." In fact, I doubt there has ever been such a group.

In Biblical times their neighbors mostly called them Judeans, Israelites or Jews, meaning people of the former kingdom of Judah. Like most civilizations in history, in the Near East they named their neighbors—both friends and enemies-- but didn't really have a good name for themselves. We are simply "us." And if you aren't among the "us," then we'll probably identify you as what sort of "them" you are.

Today we call ourselves "Americans," for lack of a better name. But Canadians, Mexicans and Argentineans for that matter are from the Americas too, aren't they? Still "United States-ians" sounds a bit awkward.

Most Native Americans today self-identify using common tribal names, but it wasn't always so. Many clans initially referred to themselves merely as "us," "the people," "the original people" or like in the book and movie, "Little Big Man" the "human beings." Other people, even other friendly tribes were just something else.

Many tribal names still used today were actually given them by their neighbors. Apache is a corrupt Spanish transliteration of the Zuni word for "enemy." The Sioux got THEIR name from a French corruption of what their neighbors called them: The enemy.

It's an unfortunate yet common perspective among human civilizations. We are the "us--the human beings." Those folks over there? They are the "them--the enemy."

Truth is, Hebrew is the name of a language, not a people. To call a group "Hebrews" was probably at one time like the Amish calling us "The English" because of the language we speak. But today the term "Hebrew" is used mostly by Gentiles who mean it in a derogatory fashion. So to clear things up, when referring to this particular group of "thems" the Old Testament people of ancient Israel were the "Israelites;" In the New Testament, Judeans. Citizens of the modern state of Israel

are Israelis. Those who are descendants of the Biblical Kingdom of Judah and practice its religion are Jews.

Please don't call Jews 'Hebrews.'" In fact, we probably shouldn't call this BOOK Hebrews either. Because if you do a word search of the Book of Hebrews, one word you won't find anywhere in its thirteen chapters is "Hebrew." The book originally had no title. The name came from a later scribe, probably one of those "thems" of the third century.

And even by the second century most Church Fathers recognized that Paul didn't write Hebrews. The Book itself makes no such claim, and the grammar, syntax, style and vocabulary are much more sophisticated than any of Paul's letters.

In fact language scholars say Hebrews is one of the best-written of all the twenty-seven Greek books of the New Testament.

Although Hebrews isn't really a book. For that matter, it's not really a letter either. Fortunately the anonymous author tells us exactly what Hebrews is. In the original Greek, it a

τὸν λόγον τῆς παρακλήσεως

--meaning a "word of exhortation." In other words, Hebrews is a sermon. And like most sermons, Hebrews is sometimes tedious and boring. Like this sermon right now. But it is tedious only because the author is systematically making some very complex theological points.

And it's boring only because we don't have much knowledge of the intricacies of Levitical law or exactly how the Jewish Priesthood operated or was viewed by the people. Plus we aren't in the predicament facing the preacher's immediate audience.

Written probably much later in the first century, this second generation Christian preacher was trying to convince the third generation to keep the faith through what was undoubtedly a very difficult time.

The way three of the gospels and Paul told it, Jesus was supposed to come back and establish his kingdom very soon—like any day now. But this was generations later, and still no such kingdom had come.

The text hints that this community was facing persecution because of its Christian faith, probably at the hands of both the Romans and the other members of their community of Hellenized Jews. Greeks, as John would call them. The temple had been destroyed, never to be rebuilt again.

After seven centuries Judaism was no longer a priest-led, temple-based sacrificial cult. Instead it was transitioning to the synagogue-based Rabbinic Judaism of today.

Jesus' main religious beef had been with temple authorities, right? Well they were no longer in the picture. Meanwhile the zealots responsible for a failed Jewish revolution had been killed or scattered. Romans and Jews were starting to get along again, and both saw those Christians as "them" and potential trouble-makers. Emperors like Nero sure didn't care for them, and neither did many of the Synagogue-leading Pharisees.

So since Jesus hadn't in fact come back, why NOT rejoin neighbors and relatives and old friends who gathered at neighborhood synagogues to celebrate the Sabbath and festivals. Maybe this Christianity wasn't going to measure-up to what they had hoped for.

Enter the Preacher of Hebrews, saying "Not so fast." First he exhorted them to remain steadfast in the faith. And then he warned them that rejecting the faith in Jesus given them by God's grace was a sure-step into the eternal consuming fire. He then gave them a different way of looking at Jesus. A way unlike any other in the New Testament.

John Calvin loved the Book of Hebrews. Martin Luther, not so much. Luther said that since the theology of Hebrews is unlike any other New Testament work, maybe Hebrews didn't even belong in the Bible.

While the other books present Jesus as Son of God, Son of Man, Prophet, savior, suffering servant and Messiah, Hebrews uniquely describes Jesus as a heavenly High Priest. A priest who in heaven does exactly what the temple priests used to do on earth: serve as intercessor before God, and offer sacrifices on their behalf to atone for sins.

Said sacrifices were no longer grain, oxen, turtle doves or sheep as in the temple. Instead Jesus offered up HIMSELF on our behalf, as the heavenly eternal sacrificial lamb.

Unfortunately Hebrews has been misinterpreted and misused by certain Christians over the centuries. Some have said this book proves that Christians have replaced Jews as God's chosen people, and that Jews are then pretty much no longer important to God, or for that matter necessary in this world.

So from the Crusades through the Inquisition through the Holocaust, millions of Jews have suffered, been brutalized and murdered by so-called Christians who believed in a false doctrine called supersessionism. With the age-old claim "We are us. You are them." In other words, "we are God's people now. You aren't."

That was certainly never the intended message of Hebrews. The author was instead addressing entirely other concerns. Like "sure, Jesus lived, died and was raised in the past; and will come again, someday, in the distant future." But where is he, and what exactly is he doing for us in the here and now?

First of all, he's your heavenly priest. While not a Levite by birth, as is normally required of the priesthood; and not a direct descendant of Aaron, as is normally required of the Chief priest; he is a priest of the

order of an obscure character from the Book of Genesis who actually pre-dated the Levites and Aaron by generations. This was a king declared a righteous priest by God himself. His name? Melchizedek, a name that means “my King is Righteous.” (And here you thought he only mentioned Melchizedek to mess with the heads of lecturers). Like Mechizedek, the preacher of Hebrews says Jesus was appointed by God as a priest forever.

But that’s not the whole picture. A priest must not only be of God but also of the people. He must become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, tested through suffering in order to help those being tested. Only then can the priest deal compassionately and empathetically with the ignorant and the wayward. The ministries of a true priest must always be performed in full sympathy with the people.

So the preacher goes on to paint the most human picture of Jesus in the entire New Testament. Sure his is still God’s Son, but the Jesus of Hebrews is also fully a human being.

One who knows our shortcomings and failures first-hand. It’s a Jesus who can relate to human suffering, because he himself suffered, and in fact even today suffers right along with us when we do. This is a Jesus whose concerns are our concerns.

Who delights when we celebrate, and mourns when we mourn. Who worries when we worry and hurts when we hurt. A Righteous Priest who was indeed lifted up as promised in John, and now draws all people to himself, including Americans, Israelis, Jews, Apaches, and Argentineans.

The Son of God who invites all of the “thems” of THIS world into his eternal kingdom of “us” in the next. The Jesus of Hebrews whose footsteps WE can indeed dare to walk in. Knowing that he has walked in ours.

Amen.