



Jesus Came to be Our High Priest
Text: Hebrews 2:17-18; Selected Scriptures
Series: *Why Did Jesus Come?* [#6]
Pastor Lyle L. Wahl
Christmas Day, Sunday, December 25, 2016

Introduction

Christmas often comes with surprises—the *garden-variety* surprises of unexpected presents and guests, and then some very unusual surprises. How many of you have had some surprises this season? Not many. How about another question? How many of you have opened your Christmas presents? Not everyone. No for all of you who didn't raise your hand on the first question, are you telling me you knew what every present you received for Christmas was before you opened it?

Christmas comes with many kinds of surprises. There are some very unusual surprises. In recent years many people have been surprised in shopping malls when one, then two, and three, and finally a whole chorus starts a surprise singing of the *Hallelujah Chorus* from Handel's *Messiah*. One of the largest of those events was a number of years ago when the Opera Company of Philadelphia brought together over 650 singers from 28 groups. Even the venue was on a grand scale—Macy's City Center in Philadelphia where they were accompanied by the Wanamaker Organ, the world's largest fully functioning pipe organ housed in a seven-story-high court of the center.¹

In a totally different vein, our subject this morning may surprise you, *Jesus came to be our High Priest*.

When was the last time you heard a sermon on Jesus Christ as our High Priest? Or, perhaps I should ask, "Do you recall ever hearing a sermon on Jesus Christ as our High Priest?" Even if you have you may wonder, "But at Christmas? On Christmas Day?" You see, even a basic understanding of Christmas only starts with Christ being born in Bethlehem, being laid in a feeding trough, being welcomed by angels and worshiped by shepherds. Remember, you cannot understand Christmas without Good Friday and Easter. You cannot separate Christ's birth from His death on the cross and resurrection. Explore this wonderful, beautiful Christmas gift with me that Jesus came to be our High Priest.

The Old Testament High Priest.

To understand this, we need to take at least a brief look at the Old Testament High Priest, who pictured what Christ is and does as our High Priest. The High Priest in Israel was appointed to the position according to God's instruction. God directed Moses, "bring near to yourself Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the sons of Israel, to minister as priest to Me."² They were charged to minister as priests to God on behalf of the people. God also told Moses, "they shall have the priesthood by a perpetual statute. So you shall ordain Aaron and his sons."³

As Aaron's life drew to a close, Moses anointed, ordained Aaron's son Eleazar to succeed him, and so the priesthood would remain in the family line.⁴ This was not because Moses liked his brother who had been his right hand man for so many years, nor was it the result of a competition or back room deal. It was God's direction to Moses and the nation.

By the time Jesus was born the office of High Priest, sadly, had become a political appointment. The Romans took charge and often made it a one-year prize appointment rather than service for life. So we read in the gospels of a group called the "chief priests"—former High Priests, still alive, and wielding a fair bit of religious and political influence.⁵

God appointed the High Priest and the rest of the priests for a specific purpose: to minister to Him on behalf of the people. One of the main tasks of all the priests was to offer sacrifices. As the writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 10, they stood "daily ... offering time after time the same sacrifices" (verse 11). The High Priest was not exempt from this, but on a day to day basis directed the priests and Levites as well as the Tabernacle, and later the Temple.

The High Priest was to be holy and represent holiness to the people. He had a special turban with a gold plate engraved with "Holy to the LORD."⁶ The High Priest led the priests in instructing the people.⁷ He had a very special role in ministering to God for the people, representing them before God. He wore a breastplate of gold, blue, purple and scarlet linen with four rows of different stones, each representing one of the twelve tribes and engraved with its name.⁸ This was a visual reminder of this role. He also was to be consulted and discover God's will for the people.⁹ And it was the High Priest, and only the High Priest, who entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement each year to offer a sacrifice which would cleanse the holy place, because it was set among sinful people, and cleanse the

people from their sins.¹⁰ It is this annual, year after year sacrifice which pictured Christ's full and final cleansing work developed here in the book of Hebrews.

Jesus Christ Our High Priest.

Now let's turn to Jesus Christ our High Priest. This is developed extensively in the book of Hebrews. Our base text for this season of chapter 2 tells us in verses 17-18,

“Therefore, He [Christ] had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”

Jesus came into our world at Bethlehem to be our High Priest.

Jesus was appointed as our High Priest by God's word. In chapter 5 at verse 5 we read, “Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You’; just as He says also in another passage, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’” (5-6). The writer is citing Psalm 2:7 which reads, “I will surely tell of the *decree* of the LORD: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” This spoke initially of a king and then prophetically of Christ. It was God's decree, His order, His appointment.

When we turn ahead to chapter 7 in Hebrews we find Melchizedek and his priesthood pictured as a type of Christ's priesthood. Verse 21 tells us Christ's priesthood was put in place by an oath of God. His priesthood set aside the priesthood of Aaron, “bringing in a better hope, through which we draw near to God” (19). Here we see one sparkling aspect of the value and beauty of the Christmas gift of Jesus coming to be our High Priest.

There is much we can explore here but not fully comprehend. I have tried to picture this eternal decree to appoint Christ as High Priest, but the problem is I, like you, am a creature of time, of linear progression from start to finish, from point A to point B, from birth to death. I can understand it being worked out in time, but the eternal decree is another matter.

God, of course, does not have that limit. The important point here is that just as God appointed Aaron to be High Priest, so Jesus Christ was appointed by God's word to set Aaron's priesthood aside when He came to earth and died, offering Himself as the sacrifice for our sin.

Then too, Jesus was appointed High Priest to minister to God for us. This is where the wrappings come off and we can see the beauty of this precious gift. First, unlike Aaron, Jesus Christ, chapter 7 verse 26 tells us, is "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners." What Aaron was to become and be by God's grace, Christ was and is perfectly by His nature. Christ did not have to offer sacrifices for Himself as Aaron did.¹¹

Jesus is both the High Priest offering the sacrifice for our sins and at the same time the sacrifice—He offered up Himself for our sin.¹² Unlike the priests who day after day, year after year offered the same sacrifices that, chapter 10 verse 11 tells us, "can never take away sins," Christ's one sacrifice of Himself for all time is the full, final sacrifice and propitiation for our sin.¹³ Turn ahead to chapter 9. Verses 11-13 draw a contrast between Christ's sacrifice and those of the Temple. Now look at verse 14. "how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

Isn't this wonderful? Not only is the price paid, the sacrifice sufficient to forgive our sins, but it also cleanses us, releases us from that nagging and condemning pursuit of trying to be right with God through being good and doing good works. Knowing this, experiencing this we can know, serve and glorify God with joy and peace, bringing glory to Him.

There is so much more here, but let's look at just one dimension of those beautiful things. Because Jesus is our High Priest He understands us and aids us. The basic framework of Hebrews 2:5-18, our home base for this season, is that Jesus became one of us to be our substitute, to redeem and sanctify us, to break Satan's power and set us free. Look at 2:18 again. "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to *come to the aid* of those who are tempted." Now turn ahead to chapter 4. Let's pick it up at verse 14.

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet

without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (14-16).

Because Jesus is truly God and truly man He is the perfect High Priest, the *Great High Priest* who has accomplished what no merely human High Priest could. Because this is true we can draw near to God, and do this with confidence because of what Jesus has done and is doing for us.

Now, based on Christ’s High Priestly work, we are made complete and holy, as we read in chapter 10.¹⁴ Now based on His new covenant God puts His truth, His laws on our hearts and minds, as chapter 10 also tells us.¹⁵ Now too Jesus knows your questions and temptations not only because He objectively knows everything, but also because He became one of us and faced every kind of temptation you face.¹⁶

Now He knows and He acts on our behalf. Chapter 7 verse 25, “He always lives to make intercession for [us].” The apostle Paul strikes the same chord in Romans chapter 8 verse 34 where he tells us Christ Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us. Christ’s shed blood is the answer to any and all accusations against us. Jesus’ love and care for us is the impetus for the Holy Spirit’s work of enlightening and empowering us.

All of this and so much more because Jesus came into our world at that first Christmas, appointed High Priest to minister to God for us.

Conclusion.

Just before one Christmas a man wrote,

Slogging my way across West County this week, I pointed out the endless blanket of festive red blinking lights to my son.

“What Christmas lights?” he wondered.

“Not Christmas lights, exactly,” I said, “Brake lights.”

My fitful stops and starts down Manchester Road seemed to echo the Christmas journey. To borrow a line from the Gospel of Luke, the drive toward Christmas Eve feels as though the entire world is about to be

enrolled. It's a busy time. The days are an awkward mix of rushing around followed by impatient waiting. We're pushing ourselves to the holiday finish line, searching for gifts, fighting for parking spaces, dragging ourselves through these days.

It's exhausting.

No wonder that when Christmas Eve rolls around, it can be tempting to kick off the shoes, nibble on cheese dip and rest. Let the stockings go hang, and call me in the morning.¹⁷

Perhaps you have felt, are feeling a bit like that. Today, on this Christmas Day, do kick off the shoes and rest. But also remember and refocus. Christmas is about Jesus. He came for you: He was born for you, died and was raised for you; He ministers as your High Priest. Take the next few quiet moments to thank God for this.

¹ "2010 - OPERA COMPANY of PHILADELPHIA, "HALLELUJAH!" Random Act of Culture." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp_RHnQ-jgU>. 14 December 2015. Accessed 14 December 2016.

² Exodus 28:1.

³ Exodus 29:9.

⁴ cf. Numbers 20:23-29; 25:10-13.

⁵ The title "chief priests" occurs 54 times in the gospels, e.g. Matthew 2:4; 16:21; Mark 10:31; Luke 20:19; John 11:47, etc.

⁶ Exodus 28:36.

⁷ The priests' role in instruction, e.g., Hosea 4:1-10; Malachi 2:1-9.

⁸ Exodus 28:15-21.

⁹ e.g., 1 Samuel 23:6-12.

¹⁰ Leviticus 16:16, 30; context: verses 1-34.

¹¹ Hebrews 7:27.

¹² Hebrews 7:27; 9:14, 28; 10:10, 12.

¹³ Hebrews 10:11-12; 2:17.

¹⁴ Hebrews 10:14.

¹⁵ Hebrews 10:16.

¹⁶ Hebrews 4:15.

¹⁷ Christopher Keating. "Letting Christmas Eve worship dispel holiday fatigue." *stltoday.com*

<http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/civil-religion/christopher-keating/letting-christmas-eve-worship-dispel-holiday-fatigue/article_2c808c56-2b8a-11e1-9397-0019bb30f31a.html>. 20 December 2011. Accessed 14 December 2016.

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