

Lutheran Word: Worship

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon text will be the from the Epistle lesson read from Hebrews 4.

We give a lot of different titles to Jesus: Lord, savior, son of God, Messiah, Christ. But what about great High Priest? That's the title that the writer of Hebrews gives to Jesus. His readers were familiar with the role of the high priests, but if you're like me it might be nice for a quick refresher so that we can understand how Jesus is our High Priest, and what that means for our worship today.

In the Old Testament, the High Priests were the religious leaders of Israel. Their main role was to lead the nation in worship on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In this yearly ceremony, the High Priest goes before God in the Holy of Holies, the very inner room of the Temple, he goes there on behalf of the people to make atonement for their sin. The High Priest would sacrifice a goat and sprinkle its blood in the Holy of Holies, then he would place his hand on a live goat and confess the sins of the nation. This live goat, called the scapegoat, was then led out into the wilderness and set free, symbolizing that the sins of the people had been carried away.

Israel's worship was centered on sacrifices. But these sacrifices were not a work the people did to earn favor with God. The sacrifices were a way that God showed Israel grace and mercy. God promised that he would not punish the people for their sins but animals instead. But there was a problem. While God gave the Israelites a way to atone for sin, the Israelites tried to use this sacrificial worship to manipulate God. They looked at the sacrificial system like

a simple transaction: I bring the animal; God doesn't punish me. The Israelites started living however they wanted with their sacrificial get-out-of-jail-free card in their back pocket.

God makes very clear how he felt about the Israelite's worship. In Hosea he says, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice, acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offering." God condemns the Israelites' for their selfish motivations for worship. He didn't institute sacrifices for the sake of sacrifices but as a way for the Israelites to demonstrate faith and love.

I wonder if we find ourselves in a similar place as the Israelites regarding worship. There are a lot of different reasons and motivations you might have for coming to church.

Maybe you're trying to demonstrate your devotion to God, and worship is one way to show it.

Maybe, like the Israelites, you justify the way you live Monday through Saturday with attendance on Sunday.

Maybe, going to church is just what you do, worship is a habit, but it's becoming more and more just a box to checkoff before Sunday kickoff.

Maybe, worship is where you come to learn a little bit about God. It's a cerebral exercise, an itch for our intellectual curiosity, but there's nothing deeper.

Or maybe, worship is an obligation that you feel you owe God. You appreciate that God isn't going to send you to Hell, and so worship is your way to say thank you.

These are not all bad in themselves. Worship should be a consistent habit, we do learn more about God in worship, and it is appropriate to respond in praise for what God has done for us, but none of these is the core or central focus of worship.

It's so easy for our motivation in worship to drift. On one end we follow rote exercises to get the desired results, and on the other end we come seeking an experience, a spiritual high that can get us through the week. It's easy to see in ourselves the same propensity as the Israelites to get worship wrong.

But while the Israelites were getting it wrong in so many different areas; Jesus came to set things right, and this included their misuse of sacrifices, their wrong ideas about worship. Jesus came as the Great High Priest, and as the high priest he was the one who would intercede on behalf of the nation, and he was the one who would lead the nation in the sacrifice of Atonement. In Jesus' own words, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many".

On his day of Atonement, Jesus did not perform a sacrifice with goats that would cover the sins of the people for the year. No, on Good Friday, Jesus offers up himself as the scapegoat on the cross to take away the sins of the people. He is the High Priest and the sacrifice. In this one act, the imperfect high priest and the inadequate sacrifices of the Old Testament find their fullest realization in the crucifixion of Jesus, the perfect High Priest. But that's not the end of the story. Jesus was raised from the dead and sits at the right hand of the Father to fulfill his role as the High Priest. The High Priest of the Old Testament only went before God once a year, and they eventually died and were replaced, but Jesus, the great High Priest is before the Father at every moment interceding for his people.

Jesus is not only the High Priest for the Jews, but he is the High Priest for the entire world. He is your High Priest and he testifies to the Father that despite your sin, he has paid your debt in his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross.

So, how should we worship if Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, is our High Priest? Now that Jesus has paid our debt of sin, is it our turn to start contributing, to bring something to God? No, the author of Hebrews directs us,

“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

The self-giving God, who gave his very life for us, keeps on giving. This is the Lutheran understanding of Christian worship: That even in our worship, we come empty handed to receive the gifts of God. It is all about God. Not just because he’s the focus, but because he’s the one acting, he’s the one providing. And we see it all throughout the worship service.

In the Confession and Absolution, God reaffirms that our sins have been forgiven for the sake of Christ.

In the readings, God reminds us that he has been at work all through history to bring about the redemption of creation.

In the sermon, God has ordained pastors to speak his word of forgiveness, life, and salvation through Jesus Christ.

In the prayers of the church God hears our request. Prayer shows our position in worship wonderfully; acknowledging our need and going to God our provider.

And finally, communion. In communion God gives us a sure sign— the body and blood of his Son, that we are accepted into his family, we are forgiven our sins, and when Jesus returns, we will have a seat at the wedding banquet.

All throughout our worship; God reaffirms, God reminds, God speaks, God hears, and God gives.

As it says in the reading, worship is an opportunity to draw near to God in our time of need. In this life it can feel like we are always in a time of need, and that's because we are. We have doubts about faith, fear of the future, shame and guilt over sins we've done in the past, or sins we can't seem to let go of. These times of need can cause us to stay away from God, thinking that in his holiness or his commitment to justice, we will be rejected. But this is where our High Priest, our advocate, Jesus Christ can give us peace. He has lived the human life, he knows your trials and temptations, and he is there at the Father's side reminding him that your sins and failures are covered by his blood.

There are many different ways that we receive God's word in worship, and we're about to engage in one of them. In communion, God promises forgiveness on account of Jesus, our great High Priest. As you come forward today, draw near with confidence, receive his mercy, and find grace in your time of need.