

## **His Name Shall Be Called - The Priest Who Intercedes**

Dr. Tom Pace

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Hebrews 4:14-16

*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Hebrews 4:14-16 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see through your eyes, our brothers and sisters; that we might see the world around us through your perspective. Our ears that we might hear your words in the midst of these words today, and open our hearts that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

I don't know how many of you remember Rev. Justin Coleman. He was on our staff, and he's now the pastor at University United Methodist Church at Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He was the pastor of our Gethsemane campus. But Justin likes to wear a clerical collar, and a number of United Methodist pastors do that as a way of helping others around them know that they're clergy. So one day, Justin and I were having lunch over at Chuy's, and this young woman came walking up to him and kneels before him. I'm thinking, "What's going on?" She says, "Father, will you give me a blessing." Justin doesn't pause at all, and he didn't explain he was a Methodist pastor and not a Catholic priest. He just put his hands on her head, and he gave her a blessing. She said, "Thank you so much," and she went on her way. I just looked at him and said, "What was that?" He said, "Yeah, it happens all the time." I thought to myself, "How interesting that they thought he was a priest."

Sometimes people from other traditions will come to me and say, "Are you the priest at St. Luke's United Methodist Church?" I sometimes will explain the difference in nomenclature, but most of the time I say, "Yes, I'm the pastor there."

But the truth is that I *am* a priest, just as *you* are a priest. In the Protestant church, we believe in the priesthood of all believers, that we all are priests for one another, that we all stand in the gap for one another.

We've been talking about why the birth of Jesus is so important. That the birth of this child – what is it about him that means that history is divided from “Before Christ” or B.C. to After Christ – A.D., which means “The Year of our Lord.” What is it about him that is so significant? So we've been looking at his identities, and we're talking about four key identities. Jesus is our Prophet, Priest, King, and Child. Last week we talked about him as Prophet, that Jesus is the Prophet, and a prophet is one who speaks to the people for God. Someone who brings a word from God to the people. Jesus brings us that word that we can trust; he challenges us to repent, to change our ways. Then he shows us how to live our lives, saying live like this. This is what it means to live a child of God. Think of this downward voice, who stands in the gap to speak God's word to us.

A priest is the opposite of that. Do you remember the last word that we said the Prophet would speak was “I will redeem you”? It's a word of hope. That really leads us to what a priest does. The priest is the one who speaks to God for us, who intercedes with God on behalf of the people.

Our Scripture today talks about Jesus as not just our priest, but our High Priest. What does that mean? The Book of Hebrews – the letters to the Hebrews – is one that speaks mostly about what it means to talk about Jesus as our High Priest. So we're going to be looking, not just at the passage we read today, but at a number of passages from Hebrews. We'll do this so we can understand what this means for us to say that Jesus is our priest.

I want to tell you four things that I believe it means when we say that Jesus is our High Priest. Here's the first one – Jesus gets you. Jesus understands you completely. Here's what the Scripture says, “Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are. (Hebrews 4:14-15). This is a Christ who understands us because he's been here.

Did you have a conversation with someone, and it just feels like they just completely get you? Like they understand completely what you're thinking. And as they repeat the words back to you or they talk back to you, you're thinking, "Yes! That's exactly right!" You just feel so validated and like someone actually understands you.

It makes me sad to realize how many people there are who feel like they don't have anyone who really gets them. Who really understands them. They put up pretenses to try and be acceptable to others, but they're pretending, and they feel like no one really understands them.

I don't know if you've seen the movie "Her," but it's a very interesting film. It's a science fiction movie about the near future in Los Angeles, and at that time, everyone has a little earpiece that they wear that is their virtual assistant. It's kind of like an iPhone in your ear. They talk to it as they're walking along, and they tell it what to do, and it does things for them but what's cool about it – or not cool – is that it's artificial intelligence. So it learns what you want, so it begins to learn what you're thinking and what you're feeling, and it talks back to you. Also, you name this virtual assistant.

Now in the movie, there's a man who is going through a difficult time. He's a loner, and he feels like no one understands him. He ends up falling in love with this virtual, artificial intelligence assistant. Then he begins to believe that she's real. How sad is that! That somehow, we feel like there's no one who understands us, and that this computer can understand us better than anyone.

Here's what I would tell you. We have a High Priest, someone who understands us. I believe that's one of the reasons people go to therapists or come to see their pastor. Partly they want advice, but much of it is they want to be able to be honest with someone who they think will really understand. Here's what I'll tell you – Jesus understands you. Jesus gets you completely. Because there's nothing you go through that Jesus hasn't gone through. He's walked our walk; he's dealt with our struggles.

Periodically people will ask me what books matter the most to me, and I've shared a number of them. Frederick Buechner is one author I like, and Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. But one of them is called *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* and it's by Henri Nouwen and in there he talks about how we're able to help others when we're willing to be vulnerable about our own brokenness and our own pain and our own wounds. In the book, he tells a story out of the Talmud, which is a Jewish book of writings and reflections – there are

actually a number of Talmuds. Here's the story he tells, "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai's cave. And he asked Elijah, 'When will the Messiah come?' and Elijah replied, 'Go and ask him yourself.' 'Where is he?' 'He's sitting at the gates of the city.' 'Well, how shall I know him?' 'He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others untie all the wounds at the same time and then bind them up again.'"

(They would untie their wounds to let air get to them to help heal.)

It goes on: "But he unbinds one at a time and then binds it up again, saying to himself, 'Perhaps I shall be needed and if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.'"

The idea that the Messiah is the one who is wounded but is more worried about our wounds and his ability to help us than his own wounds. Jesus is the one who has suffered and struggled far more than us, and yet he cares about us more than anything. Jesus understands us. Jesus gets you.

Here's the second thing I think it means to say in that he's a High Priest. It's that Jesus is on your side. We need someone on our side, and Jesus is on your side. All of Romans 8 is beautiful, but one of the phrases I like says, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). If God is for us, who could be against us? What could be stronger than a God who is for us?

In 1 John 2 puts it says it a little differently: "My dear children, I will write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ the Righteous One." What does that mean – an advocate? It means someone on our side. Let me give you a couple of examples that are parallels or metaphors, maybe.

About 14 years ago, I went to Turkey with a group of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. When we got to the airport in Istanbul, the security people there took about seven or eight of us aside into a room and began to ask us questions. I wouldn't go so far as to say they interrogated us, but they asked us questions. They separated us all and asked each one, "Who are you going to see? Where have you been before? Where are you going? When are you coming back?" It was a whole series of questions. Then they would switch us and ask different people the same questions to see if our answers all matched.

We were there maybe thirty minutes or so, and I was really starting to get nervous. Then a man walked in. He'd actually come to get us at the airport, and he was from the organization that was sponsoring us. Ironically it was an organization that is now banned in Turkey. But he came

in, and it was so interesting. He talked to one of the security guards there and just sort of whispered in his ear. The guy said, “Oh, okay – you guys go on.” I thought, “That’s great! That’s what it means to have someone who is on your side – who is an advocate for you.” A fixer, if you will. I thought to myself, “What would it have been like if I hadn’t had that? If I’d been there by myself or with others and I didn’t have anyone who knew what they were doing and who could speak on our behalf.” Jesus is that advocate for us.

Here’s another example. I don’t know if you’ve ever been arrested. I’ve never been arrested, but I’ve been questioned about things. But I’ll tell you one thing you think about is how you wish you had an attorney. We all love to make attorney jokes. St. Luke’s has lots of attorneys, so I hear lots of attorney jokes – from those attorneys. One I heard was, “What’s the difference between a jellyfish and an attorney?” The answer is, “One is a spineless, poisonous blob, and the other lives in the sea.” I know. I know! I love attorneys, and those of you who are attorneys, we’re glad you’re here! Send me your attorney jokes!

It’s great for us to make attorney jokes, but here’s the thing – you can talk bad about them all you want until you need one. Because when you need one, it matters so much to have someone who understands the system and can negotiate your way through it on your behalf. Because without an attorney, you just feel powerless.

Jesus is in a sense that advocate for us – that one who’s on our side, and who sits right next to God – right next to God to advocate for us.

You probably know the story of Job. In the story, Satan and God got in this little bet, and God allows Satan to bring all this calamity on Job. And Job is a righteous guy, and that’s what he says. “I’m a righteous guy, and I don’t deserve this! Why is this happening?” Then he begins to try and make his case before God, but he gets no satisfaction. Then in Job 23 is an interesting verse. We sing it in a hymn at Easter. Job says, “I know that my redeemer lives, and I’ll see him someday. And my heart longs for that day.” The word redeemer there sometimes is translated as vindicator or advocate. He’s saying, “I know that there’s someone who can plead my case before God because God’s got all the cards, and I need someone who will plead it for me, and I know that one day I’ll have that advocate.” Jesus Christ is that advocate for us – the one on our side.

Here’s the third thing. To say Jesus is our High Priest is to say that Jesus is praying for us. Periodically people will come to me and say, “Will you pray for me? You’re a pastor, and I know since you’re closer to God than I am so God will hear your prayers.” Well, no... God

doesn't hear my prayers any more than he hears your prayers. But there's that feeling that this would be the case. Well, what if you knew not that your pastor was praying for you but that Jesus was praying for you.

In the Gospel of John in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter, Jesus is on his way to the cross. This is part of the last discourse, and he prays for his disciples. He says: "I ask not only on behalf of these (the disciples) but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word..." (John 17:20). That refers to you and me. Jesus prays for you and for me.

On St. Luke's website, we have a Prayer Wall, and I regularly go there and see what the prayer requests are. I pray for those people that are there. Let me share something with you. I looked this morning at the Prayer Wall, and I saw one from a lady named Betty. She prays, "Please pray for my anxiety and that I receive peace of the Lord. Please pray for God to spread his protection over and in everything and all things in our lives dwelling situations and financial circumstances so that I will be able to pay off my debts and get caught up on bills and help others and make desperately needed home repairs. I'm so stressed about my financial situation. I keep trying, but nothing seems to help. Things are getting worse and so scary. I'm so afraid things will never get better."

I want Betty to know that Jesus is praying that prayer for her. Jesus is the one who intercedes for her.

I told you that we would look at other scriptures from Hebrews, and in chapter seven, it says, "He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 7:25) Jesus is praying for us.

We have a prayer tree out in the foyer, and before they go on, I like to look at the Prayer Leaves and to pray the prayers that are there. There's a prayer for Alex to thrive in a new job. Or "Please pray for Charlene." Or another one, "Please pray for me, I'm scared."

Jesus is praying those prayers for you, and I want you to know that. Imagine that when you pray, Jesus is right there with his arm around you praying with you. I think that's powerful.

We've said that to say Jesus is our High Priest is to say that Jesus understands and gets us, that Jesus is on our side, that Jesus prays for us. And finally, and most significantly, to say that Jesus is our High Priest is to say that Jesus interceded by giving his whole life for us. He gave his life willingly and lovingly on our behalf.

Here's the way this High Priest stuff worked. It's so foreign to us. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the highest holy day in the Jewish year, the High Priest would take a bull and two goats into the Holy of Holies. It started in Leviticus when they were just in a tent of the meeting, and then once the first temple was built – Solomon's temple – it continued there. When the second temple was built by Ezra and Nehemiah, then it continued there. They would first slaughter the bull, and that was to make atonement for the sins of the High Priest himself and his family. Then once he was purified by that, he would make a sacrifice of one of the goats for the sins of all of Israel. He would go into Holy of Holies – the only day of the year that he could do that. Then the other goat he'd put his hands on the head, and sort of imparting the sins of Israel into that goat, then release it into the wilderness. That was often called the scapegoat; *Azeziel* is the actual word in Hebrew.

The picture is of these sacrifices that humans try to do in order to bridge the gap between a holy God and sinful people. So you have this gap, this separation, between God and the people, and the priest would make these sacrifices in order to bridge that gap. So what the Scripture teaches is that this doesn't work. When I struggle to understand Scripture, I'll often turn to the words of Eugene Peterson and his translation of the Scripture called *The Message*. Here's how he translates Hebrews 10: "Every priest goes to work at the altar each day, offers the same old sacrifices year in, year out, and never makes a dent in the sin problem. As a priest, Christ made a single sacrifice for sins, and that was it! Then he sat down right beside God and waited for his enemies to cave in. It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people. By that single offering, he did everything that needed to be done for everyone who takes part in the purifying process." (Heb. 10:11-18 *The Message*)

The idea is that the sacrifices we make could never really bridge the gap. But the sacrifice that God made for us in the High Priest of Jesus would indeed bridge that gap.

Dr. Harold Warlick tells the story this way, and I'll close with this. "The great High Priest takes a seat as all rise. Papers in hand, we approach the bench in fear and trembling. The great High Priest glances down. 'Don't need your offerings, though they helped your spirit,' he calmly states. 'Don't need your cantatas, though I enjoyed listening to them, and they expanded your spirituality,' he continues. 'Don't need your scraps of Scripture, though I'm glad you memorized them,' he adds. 'Don't need your list of good deeds though my beloved church and human need demanded them,' he concludes. But the plaintiff questioned shivers its ways to the forefront.

‘I’m not going to get out of this, am I?’ Comes the response which reverberates its way across the corridors of time and the wreckage of human frailty, ‘Of course you are. I took all I had, even my life, and I sacrificed it for you. So you are holy and always will be.’”

Jesus is our High Priest, and he’s made that final intercession on our behalf. I think of that young woman who came and approached Justin in Chuy’s restaurant. I hope she knows that it’s wonderful for Justin to give her a blessing, but she has a real priest – a High Priest – who understands her completely, who’s on her side, and is praying for her. And who gave his life for her out of his love for her.

Let’s listen to the last verse of our passage for today. “Let us, therefore, approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

We have a High Priest, so we can do that.

Let’s pray. *Gracious God, you are holy, and yet you have bridged that gap by sending that High Priest to intercede for us. One who is on our side, who understands us completely. We thank you that he prays for us, and we thank you that he gave his life out of love for us. God, give us the grace to know that we can come before your throne through Christ with boldness and that you will give us grace and mercy for every time of need. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*