

Text: Hebrews 5:1-10
Title: Me and Melchizedek
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I have no memory of my recent bike/car crash or the first week in the hospital. Between getting my eggs scrambled, the pain medication, and the first few operations I was not particularly cognizant or coherent. Friends report of seeing me in the hospital and I have no memory of seeing them. I can't remember being in the ICU or meeting with doctors. Lately I've begun asking Sandi about details from that first week and I'm completely buffaloed by her answers.

For example, it turns out that in the middle of the night I took to texting incoherent ramblings. When Sandi would leave the hospital, she'd show me where my phone was, and then tell me not to text anyone. In the morning she'd check the night's texts and then send out apologies. For example, I texted gibberish and heart emojis to Fern Kuipers at 2:00 in the morning....

What stands out during those first weeks is that I was battered, confused, and unable to process information or make clear decisions. I couldn't advocate for myself. I couldn't get my mind around what was happening. I couldn't speak with any clarity or authority.

Sandi stood in the gap and was my advocate.

She dealt with the doctors and surgeons while worrying about saving my life, saving my leg, and saving my spirit. She had the love and support of family and friend – some of you were lights in the dark for her, but she was a kind of priest for me. She interceded on my behalf to the doctors and to God....

Her priestly function wasn't about sin, but it was about intercession, identification and love.

A priest, by the definition in Hebrews, is one selected from the people to represent them before God. It required both human qualification and divine appointment. A priest would make sacrifice for their own sin, and understanding our frailty, they would then be able to intercede on our behalf.

Our text assumes an insurmountable chasm between humanity and God. The gap is too wide, the fault line is too deep, and access is beyond our grasp, so we need a priest to make intercession for us.

We're weak, alone, and battered.

We can't do it ourselves.

We need a go-between.

We need someone who has the ear of God.

This arrangement, this need for priests, was deeply embedded in the life of the Israelites. For some it was the family business. For some the buying and selling of sacrifices was an income stream. For most it was the only way to imagine connecting, or appeasing, or satisfying God. There was a system in place that required a priest to make sacrifices on their behalf in order to “pay” for their sins.

To our modern sensibilities that system seems antiquated and questionable.

Why would God require a blood sacrifice? How does the death of an animal (or a son) satisfy the wrath of God for sin? How does that transfer work? What kind of God requires death to balance the scales of righteousness?

Listen to how Tom Long frames these sorts of questions:

The idea of a God who always seeks compensation, a God who always wants a pound of flesh, is not simply a tactical problem in a chess game among professional theologians; it provokes a crisis of trust among the ordinary faithful too. We may say in sermon and liturgy that the death of Jesus squared the debt once and for all, but we are still left with the troubling picture of a God who balanced the checkbook by inflicting pain. Who would love or wish to draw nigh to such a God? We suspect that a God who requires compensation just might encrypt a cancer cell into our tissue in order to teach us an ethical lesson or send a surging tsunami to pummel a coastline for the sake of some cosmic moral equation.

Those are powerful and important questions that we won't adequately answer this morning. Quite frankly there are multiple ways in which the death of Christ on the cross is understood; the priestly-sacrificial way is just one. But it is the framework of our text this morning...

Jesus is characterized as an eternal high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Makes you wonder who Melchizedek was...

He sounds like the evil half-brother of Gandalf...

But, actually, he surfaces only very briefly in Genesis....

During early battles with Sodom and Gomorrah, Abram took 318 men to rescue his nephew Lot and recover his possessions and people. With that accomplished the king of Sodom came out to meet Abram and he was followed by Melchizedek, who brought out gifts of bread and wine, and as a “high priest of God” he blessed Abram saying:

Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.

In response Abram gave him one tenth of what they recovered....

And that's it! Outside of a brief reference in Psalm 110, that's it! That's the story of Melchizedek to whom Jesus is likened unto. Melchizedek is the first priest identified with God in the Old Testament. So, in some ways he was a sort of prototype. Heidi Haverkamp writes about this hint of Jesus....

(we)read Christ backward into this enigmatic person. "Melchizedek" means "king of righteousness." Salem, an otherwise unknown place, has the same spelling in Hebrew as shalom. Clearly, a king of righteousness and peace who appears in the wilderness, hosts a meal of bread and wine, and is deserving of tithes is an irresistible candidate for Jesus peekaboo. And who else could be both a priest and a king but the Messiah?

The writer of Hebrews also describes Jesus having empathy for our weakness and knowing every way in which we're tempted. While Jesus walked the hills of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem, he offered prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears. The Greek has it that he prayed with *clamor* and *strong tears*; and he learned obedience in what he suffered.

Therefore, we can put it this way: Human life is brutish and short ~ tears, temptation, and weakness are our common lot. And the central claim of the gospels is that God in Christ was one of us – knowing our losses, struggles, loneliness, questions, pain, and longings.

If you remember last week's sermon this is familiar ground. When Jesus has God's ear, he knows your heart. Or to put it another way: Jesus knows our frailty and stands before the doctor pleading our case.

But! But, what if the whole construction doesn't make sense to you? Maybe you don't think you need an advocate.

In a culture that has shed any notion of decorum or distance, in a culture where presidents, priests, and preachers are seen as dolts, in a culture where individual freedom is the highest good, in a culture where you can say anything to anybody, in a culture where spirituality is a private function, in a culture that assumes a certain chumminess with God....

In that culture, the notion that we need a go-between seems stilted and ridiculous. Shouldn't we just be able to approach God and belt-out whatever it is that we think, feel, want and need? God speaks to us, so shouldn't we speak for ourselves?

The economy of God as detailed in Hebrews assumes such a rupture between us and God that we're like a man whose body is battered and whose mind is broken, lying in a hospital bed, able to only text gibberish.

Neil Plantinga says it this way:

...one way or another it's not just particular acts or thoughts that are now corrupt. It's our whole nature. We're born sinners, the way Michael Jordan is a

born athlete... And it is not just some of us. It is the whole race.... All of us are now bent toward sin. In the world we have not just sins, but sin; not just wrong acts, but also wrong motives, tendencies, practices, and patterns that break down the integrity of persons, families, and whole cultures. This drum roll of disaster has never been fixed by human hands. Who in heaven's name can save us?

The language of sin may sound clunky to our culture's refined ears, but ignorance or insufficient effort seem such cheap explanations. Because of sin we simply have no access to God and we need a priest....

The Belgic Confession makes a case that Jesus is the only one equipped to be our priest, and then with a series of rhetorical questions, it offers this great proclamation:

Suppose we had to find another intercessor. Who would love us more than he who gave his life for us, even though "we were his enemies"? And suppose we had to find one who has prestige and power. Who has as much of these as he who is seated "at the right hand of the Father," and who has all power "in heaven and on earth"? And who will be heard more readily than God's own dearly beloved Son?

Why should we seek another intercessor? Since it has pleased God to give us his Son as our Intercessor, let us not leave him for another-- or rather seek, without ever finding. For when God gave him to us he knew well that we were sinners...

Dear friends, can you imagine a word more tender and hopeful? The mystery of the incarnation of Jesus makes possible the intercession of Jesus.

So, this morning,
if you're lonely,
if you've sinned or screwed up,
if you've been betrayed or battered,
if you're adrift or overwhelmed or confused,
if you're scared,
if you're down to your last prayer or you haven't breathed your first,
if you're slouching toward death,
if you're human....
you have a high priest who knows what it means to be human and who knows what it means to be God.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.