



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 2ND ADVENT
LUKE 3:1-14 & MALACHI 3:1-7B
DECEMBER 5, 2021

“JESUS OUR PRIEST”

Every year in September or October Jews celebrate Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. It's the holiest day of the Jewish religion and a happy day for them. On it they receive and celebrate God's forgiveness of their sins, and, through personal disciplines and worship, experience spiritual cleansing and transformation.

Some say the first 'day of atonement' was when Moses came down Mount Sinai and in anger flung the tablets of the law at the people who were worshipping a golden calf. Eventually the day of atonement became a solemn, highly ritualized event where the high priest, initially Moses' brother Aaron, would wash himself, enter what was called the '*holy of holies*', the very innermost region in the tabernacle or temple, sacrifice a young bull and sprinkle its blood upon the cover over the ark of God, which was concealed by smoke from incense the priest burned so as not to risk death by accidentally looking at God.

To be a priest of God was pretty serious business in those days. They were to adhere to the highest moral standards and carry out their religious duties meticulously. As the priesthood went, so went Israel. That is why our Old Testament lesson from Malachi says God "*will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver...then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable...as in former years.*"

The role of priest in the Old Testament was to make atonement for sins on the people's behalf to before God. The precise rituals for the Day of Atonement come from Leviticus 16, and the first persons covered by the sacrificed bull's blood was Aaron and his family. Priests needed the forgiveness conveyed by the ritual they performed. For this reason, pastors and priests today are usually the first to receive Holy Communion – we extend grace to you having first received grace ourselves.

Our subject today however is how Jesus is our priest. Jesus never acted the part in his earthly ministry. There is not one instance I know of where Jesus in his ministry takes on the role of the priest. He was eventually put on trial by one – the infamous Caiaphas, but Jesus never suggested to anyone he was one or wanted to be one.

Nevertheless Hebrews 4:14 says, of Jesus, "*therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*" This passage goes on to say in Jesus we have a priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses –perhaps a bit of a jab at high priests of that era who thought themselves above all that weakness, removed from and therefore unfamiliar with the spiritual struggles of "common people." Hebrews 4:15 says "*Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are – BUT without sin.*"

Therefore, Hebrews 4:16 says *“we can approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need.”* We rightfully associate that promise with Jesus the compassionate forgiver, the healer of our every ill, the hope for our tomorrows. It may conjure thoughts of Jesus words in Matthew 11:28, *“come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”*, or John 3:17 which says *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.”* It might make you hearken to the story of Jesus and the so called “woman caught in adultery” from John 8 and incline your ear once again to hear our Lord say *“woman, has no one condemned you. No one sir. Then neither do I condemn you – now go and leave your life of sin.”*

And those would be good places to go when you think of Jesus your forgiver – who fulfills the promise of the prophet Jeremiah of a new covenant God made with his people, in which he would *“forgive their transgressions and remember their sin no more.”* But I’d like you to set your sights even higher today. When in Hebrews 4:16 it says we are allowed to approach the throne of grace with confidence, think on how far you as a child of God have come from the time when a priest could enter the holy of holies - the throne room of God, but once a year and trembling, sprinkle a little bull’s blood while God was still hidden in a smoky cloud of incense.

Jesus your priest will walk you into the holy of holies, the throne of grace, where God your righteous judge dwells, and through his blood present you as an offering that has been purified entirely. You enter that throne room absolutely, entirely and everlastingly sin free. When people came to the Jordan to be baptized by John, they wondered what they should do. And that’s a good question really – what does one do with forgiveness? How is it supposed to altar a person, a relationship, an attitude about and approach to life? How has it affected you? In Luke’s telling of the story of John the Baptist, that very question came up – now what?

OK, John was not exactly easy on them – he apparently baptized not long after calling them all “a brood of vipers” – then sternly charging them to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. To my knowledge I’ve never called anyone that! It’s not a real effective church growth strategy these days. But give John this – he made the folks think about what forgiveness calls for, or better still, what it enables. It would do us all good to think about what we should do with ours.

Leviticus 8 describes the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests. Ordination comes from a Hebrew word that means *“to fill the hands.”* To be a priest meant to have one’s hands full of the things used to make peace between God and sinners – in those days bread, oil, knives for making sacrifices. Luke 24 tells us that after his resurrection Jesus showed his disciples “his hands and his feet.” In his hands were the marks that made for peace between God and sinners. Hands that touched and healed and fed multitudes and then received nails. With the same, Jesus our high priest forgives us, intercedes for us, and one day will raise our bodies, escorting them to God’s throne of grace. You have a great high priest, in whom you can truly place your confidence. AMEN