

“Unexpected Graces”
a sermon by Jacob Brenton
concerning Hebrews 5:5-10
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on March 18, 2018

A reading from an ancient sermon, preserved for us as the book of Hebrews. Hear these ancient words:

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the One who said to Him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” ⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

This is one of our sacred stories

Thanks be to God

Grace and Peace to you in the name of Jesus the Christ, as the lent we await His crucifixion and celebrate the coming Easter resurrection.

Today’s reading is a short snippet of Scripture containing no less than three full length sermons. Rest assured, I don’t plan to preach three sermons here, but I wanted to begin by acknowledging that there are many different directions with which one could take this Text. First, this is the part of the book where the unknown author of Hebrews begins to name Jesus as High Priest to the presumably Jewish audience. We could spend a lot of time here, proclaiming Jesus as the High Priestly source of our own priesthood of the believer, providing intercession between us and God. There is also an interesting message in this passage about Christ’s humility and the way He grew in wisdom and in stature to become the Savior we recognize in the Gospels. This would be a provocative academic discussion, with debates over what Jesus knew when, and how much God in the flesh can grow and mature.

Yes, those would make interesting and enlightening sermons, but today I want to focus on the author’s invocation of Christ as a Priest in the Order of Melchizedek. What in the world does this mean? Who is Melchizedek? What did he do? Now, if you’re like me, sometimes at a university church in a university town, you can feel like you know almost nothing in the presence of esteemed biblical scholars. Yes, our church has many people with MDivs, PhDs, impressive titles, and decades of study in the Holy Scriptures. For this I am thankful. Rest assured though, child of God, even the best biblical scholars know little to nothing about Melchizedek. We simply don’t know a lot about this ancient character. He appears once in

Genesis, is mentioned once more in Psalms, and then again in Hebrews. He's an obscure character, in an obscure passage that captured the imagination of the preacher in Hebrews. He's worth our time to study this morning. Let me read you his small passage in Genesis 14:17-20:

*¹⁷After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).
¹⁸And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. ¹⁹He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; ²⁰and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.*

That's the whole passage. But let's set the stage a bit more vividly.

Abram and Sarai were exhausted. God had called them out of their home, their community, and their place in society with little more than a promise and a prayer. The couple traveled as a group with their livestock, a few possessions, their young nephew, and, let's be honest in our naming, a group of slaves. Wilderness living had been tough on their aging bodies and in the middle of their wandering, their tenacious nephew Lot had been abducted. Abram gathered together a small militia and had to wage a bloody war to get his nephew back safe and sound. The battle was won, but at great cost, losing some of the people they loved. They were still years away from being able to settle in the Promised Land, and God had yet to even give Abram the covenant or change his name. Abram and Sarai may have been convinced that they were the only people in this whole wild world faithfully following YHWH. This may have been the lowest point in their lives.

Out of nowhere, Abram and the king of Sodom encounter a visit from a mysterious character. The man is named Melchizedek, and is described as the King of Salem, and a Priest of God Most High. This is an odd pairing of titles, because to this point in Genesis, we hadn't seen a good example of a king, and God hadn't instituted any kind of priesthood among the Hebrews. There was no law, no Temple, no Tabernacle, no religious ceremony... as far as ancient Jews would have been concerned, there would have been nothing for a priest to do! But this character comes to Abram from a different land, following God as a priest and a king. We don't know how Melchizedek came into relationship with Yahweh, but it should prove to our sometimes closed minds, that God is working in, through, and around all things, communicating with all sorts of people we would never expect. Melchizedek gives Abram a blessing and shares bread and wine with him before praying to God and disappearing back into the obscurity from which he came.

Out of nowhere, when Abram felt he was following God in the wilderness all by himself, he received the unexpected grace of communion with a priest he had never known. The priest spoke a blessing over him; in a way that is more meaningful than we can understand today. Yes, we say "bless you" when someone sneezes, and end our worship services in a pastoral benediction or blessing, but to this audience, a blessing from a priest had creative and formative power. What a king and priest spoke over you would happen. Words became flesh in those days, and Melchizedek is no exception, speaking a blessing over Abram. Melchizedek also came with bread and wine; a sort of Old Testament communion for the journey. An action that would leave Abram physically and spiritually filled. Melchizedek came from no where in Abram's time of

greatest need to offer him unexpected strength and grace for the journey; reassurance that he had heard the voice of God, and that the same voice would be with him for life. We have no idea where Melchizedek came from, what his relationship with God looked like, what religion he would claim, or where he went after this story, but he stands as proof that Jesus calls sheep from all sorts of pastures we know nothing of.

Have you ever had a Melchizedek in the desert? Someone from nowhere, letting you know God was present. I have. I remember it like yesterday. My heart was beating fast, a bead of anxious sweat began to form on my palms as I arranged two chairs and two microphones on a portable stage in the ballroom of the local community college. You see, three years ago I was the campus missionary associate for the Baptist Student Ministry of a large college in a small Texas panhandle town. The events our students had requested featuring an interfaith conversation between a Muslim Imam and a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Pastor in the area who were friends was intended to be a forum for students to learn about Islam without fear. Instead, the room was only half full of students and beginning to fill with all the powerful figures of a town like that: the chair of deacons of the First Baptist Church, a City Council member, someone from the Chamber of Commerce Office, and the manager of the local Ace Hardware had all found their seats, and more people with influence and, I'll be honest, checkbooks that usually gave to our ministry, began to pour in. Despite my fears of an angry community, the event turned out to be a beautiful time of building common ground. At the end of it all, the Imam closed the event in prayer, choosing to refer to God as "the God of many names" and "the God of Abraham." This story sparked in my mind at that moment. God had sent a priest from another pasture to bring a word of peace to an anxious room. Melchizedek came out of the desert and into the student center of South Plains College that night, anxious to bless us and commune with us. What an honor.

Personal and Old Testament narratives aside, the question still remains: what motivated the author of Hebrews to title Jesus "a priest in the order of Melchizedek? The answer would have been obvious to the original audience: Jesus wasn't in the right family to be a priest. The first requirement for any priest in ancient Judaism was to be in the line of Levi or Aaron. This is how priests got their authority, this was their family business. They knew how to talk to God and quite frankly, tried to make others believe they couldn't talk to Yahweh. The problem here is that though we have two genealogies of Christ listed in the Bible, neither make Him out to be in a priestly tribe. Don't get me wrong, they gave Jesus a great bloodline: tracing all the way back to Abraham and Adam by means of King David, and Ruth, and even Rahab. But God in the flesh was somehow not in the right bloodline to be a priest. Therefore, the author of Hebrews demonstrated how Jesus was a better priest. Jesus was a priest that was also a king. Jesus was a priest that didn't have to be from the right family or have human imposed structures define Him. Jesus was a priest that didn't need religious approval. Jesus was a priest that looks nothing like the figure we thought He would be.

Yes, Jesus isn't in the order of Aaron, or of the right people, the famous people, the well educated people who have all the answers. Jesus is in the order of Melchizedek. And if we are to be in this order as well, I have a warning for you. It's not easy. It's not always fun. You will be told you don't have the right credentials. You may be challenged because you're not from the right family, or didn't go to the right response. But if you look long enough, you just might find

your Abram in the woods; tired and breathing hard from a long battle. The person you find may smell bad and look disheveled as they've wandered the wilderness, but God has sent you, God has commissioned you to be their Melchizedek. To find the broken and the weary and offer them the hope of a blessing and communion. Perhaps your ministry will leave the walls of this old church building and extend to the middle of Waco, or the end of the earth. Perhaps you will have a religious person question your qualifications. If that happens, smile and remind yourself, that you, like Christ, are in the order of Melchizedek. Child of God, keep being the priest in the wilderness.

I think for many in this room however, thinking about having enough energy to reach into a broken world seems impossible. This Lent we've journeyed with Christ toward crucifixion. For some of us, it has been a dark time: realizing our sin, both personal and the systems of sin in our society, school, church, and work to which we have been contributing. Maybe in this story we are in need of our own Melchizedek. Our own West Texas Imam to calm our hearts by invoking the name of the God of Abraham. Perhaps sometimes we've felt like this as a church family, as we've followed the voice of God the best we know how, and get rewarded by being sent into a wilderness of denominational abandonment. But Lake Shore, children of God, I'm here today to tell you that Good News that Jesus is a Priest in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus finds us when we are the most exhausted, the most tired, the most out of place we've ever felt, and He brings with Him a blessing and a communion. A real, tangible blessing that we are on the right path, in the arms of the God who made us. We didn't hear God wrong, no, God just led us to the wilderness before the promised land. Jesus carries with that blessing the bread and wine of His body and blood, to nourish us on this journey. He comes from unexpected places, to a tired people as a priest, even when the Temple has rejected Him. He comes for you. He comes for me. Jesus comes as the priest of the order of Melchizedek, with unexpected graces for all who will hear. Are you listening? Amen.