

People mostly understand the role of a *mediator*. We see mediators at work in labor disputes, in border conflicts, in congressional gridlock, in international affairs, in marital breakdowns. Lawyers, diplomats, counselors, economists, all function as mediators who try to bring two warring sides together. Mediators are a standard part of life in this sharply divided world.

High priests? Not so much. But high priests are a particular kind of mediator, the only kind that can bring about reconciliation between sinful humans and a holy God. The Jewish religion knew this very well, as did many other ancient religions. Today the great majority of people are unfamiliar with such an idea. And many of those who know the concept don’t see the necessity of a high priest in their lives. I’ve known many Christians who say something like this: “I don’t like to think about myself as a sinner, and I don’t think of God as holy.” Even though they may have been raised with such biblical concepts, they have drifted away from them. If “a child of the covenant” has these reservations, it’s no wonder people raised outside the Christian faith find the whole idea of a high priest old fashioned, if not incomprehensible.

So, we have our work cut out for us when we try to make sense of the highly controversial claim at the heart of our reading for today. “*We have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God*” (v. 14). Hebrews argues that Jesus is the kind of “*great high priest*” that makes all other high priests unnecessary. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews spends the next 3 chapters showing that Jesus is the all-sufficient and completely essential high priest. Jesus is the only mediator who can make peace between humanity and God, so don’t even think about drifting back to an old religion with its high priests.

All students of the Bible know that the word “*Therefore*” at the beginning of verse 14 is a bridge word, connecting the preceding argument to the argument ahead. The preceding argument is essentially a history lesson about Israel losing the “rest” God had promised to them. God delivered them from bondage in Egypt and was leading them safely through the wilderness to the Promised

Land where they would enjoy God's shalom "rest." But when 10 spies gave a frightening report about the giants and the walled cities blocking the conquest of that land, the Israelites were filled with terror. In fearful unbelief they rebelled against God and made plans to return to the slavery of Egypt. They let go of the promise of "rest," and "*they were not able to enter because of their unbelief,*" so says Hebrews 3:19. So how are they to find their Sabbath rest?

The writer of Hebrews uses this well-known history lesson to urge his readers to *hold on to their faith* and enjoy a rest even better than what was promised to the ancient Hebrews. "*Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it*" (4:1) After explaining how the rest promised to these Christian believers is better than the rest promised to ancient Hebrews, the author again calls them to *hold on to their faith* in the verse that early in our reading for today, "*Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience*" (v. 11).

What follows in verses 12 and 13 seems, at first glance, to be a slight digression. I mean, why riff on the Word of God, when he has been talking about losing their rest by letting go of their faith? Well, the writer wants to make sure readers don't dismiss the story of Israel as a mere history lesson, an example. Remember, he says, that this story came from the Word of God.

We can't evade the Word of God. It is not just a dead old story; it is living and active. It doesn't just make a point—it is sharper than any double-edged sword. It doesn't just tickle our imagination—it penetrates to the depths of our being. It isn't something we can hear and forget—it uncovers the secrets of our hearts. It isn't something you can make judgments about—it judges you!

Throughout my entire ministry, I've discovered that when people are thinking of walking away from the faith, they often hide their thoughts, even from themselves. Occasionally someone openly shares the inner struggles of their faith, although most will not admit where their thoughts have taken them. The writer of Hebrews is telling us today that we can't hide our thoughts from

God. The Word of God cuts through the curtain separating heaven and earth, piercing into the depths of humanity, exposing the secret intentions of our hearts. The Greek word here draws a somewhat gruesome picture of a person with his head yanked back so that his jugular vein is fully exposed, and the executioner's sword is poised to slice it open. Yikes! Perhaps the Word of God is nothing we should trifle with?

All of that precedes the “*Therefore*” of verse 14 followed by strong words of warning, dark and threatening words: “*let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*” Don't you dare drift away from your profession of faith in Jesus! That ominous backdrop makes what follows this “*Therefore*” truly surprising. Verse 14 calls us to hold firmly to our faith, not because of the awful thing that will happen if we let go, but because we have such a wonderful high priest. In just a few words the writer explains why Jesus is so tremendous. Unlike a Jewish high priest who went through the veil into the Holy of Holies once a year to make atonement for the people, Jesus (as we saw last week) has gone through the heavens into the very presence of God, where he is today, having finished his atoning work. Unlike Jewish high priests who are merely human descendants of Aaron, Jesus is the very Son of God. So, why would you possibly let go of your faith in such an awesome Mediator?

Do you hear how strongly he makes his appeal? But this is not where the message ends in our reading today. Hebrews 4 wants potential drifters to focus not only on the *majesty* of Jesus, but in the end on the *empathy* of Jesus. Hold fast to your faith, “*for we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin*” (v. 14). If you ever contemplate leaving Jesus, you need to know that he gets it. He gets you. He even empathizes with you.

What's that? You don't think Jesus was ever tempted to leave the God he loved? Think back to his wilderness temptations of hunger, safety, and power, temptations that sum up every temptation any one of us has ever faced. Each one of them tempted Jesus to turn away from total reliance on God. Or think back to that moment in the garden of Gethsemane when he was tempted to turn

his back on the whole salvation enterprise. He didn't do it, of course. "*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done,*" he prayed (Luke 22:42). He was always without sin. But he was tempted in every way, just as we are. And that includes our temptation to leave the faith.

I wish some people choosing belief or non-belief could have understood that. They might have been able to talk more openly to Jesus about their honest questions and doubts. Some may talk to me because I'm supposed to be compassionate since I'm a pastor. But how much more is that true of Jesus? Though I have applied all my education and ministry experience to people's lives, the task of rescuing them is ultimately the work of God's Son our Savior. If any of us can see Jesus as Hebrews 4 presents him, we will receive greater help than I could ever provide—*a high priest who is able to empathize with our weaknesses*. Mercy and grace are not mine, but his to give.

Verse 16 puts it this way: "*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.*" To get a sense of the pure wonder of those words, picture Isaiah getting a glimpse of the Lord sitting on the throne in Isaiah 6 and crying, "*Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.*" That was the typical Jewish response to the majesty of God on his throne. But here we are told that we can approach his majestic throne confidently—even boldly—because it has become "*the throne of grace*" for us through the high priestly work of Jesus. Even in our time of greatest need, a time when we may be thinking of deserting Jesus, we can approach God's throne through our *empathetic* high priest and receive mercy and find grace.

The whole idea of Jesus as a genuinely *empathetic* high priest has troubled many theologians, because it challenges long held ideas about the immotive character of God. The old doctrine held that God is a simple being, that is, a being without movement or divisions or change. Doesn't James say that God "*does not change like shifting shadows?*" Well, our emotions change. One moment I don't feel sad; the next moment I do. I change within myself, usually

because of changes outside myself, like when my dog Archie died. I am subject to change. God is subject to nothing. God is what he is. Therefore, God cannot feel emotions. God must be apathetic. He cannot be genuinely sympathetic. All that language in Scripture about God experiencing emotions like anger or sorrow or changing his mind is just *anthropomorphic*—a way of describing God that we humans can relate to. God might appear to change, but he can't, or he would not be God.

So, the Scripture's claim about the "*empathy*" of God in Jesus remains something of a puzzle. That's why John Calvin said, "I don't want to argue too much about this word. The question of whether Christ is now subject to our sorrows is too frivolous not less than inquisitive." But it is a real question for hurting, tempted people. Does Jesus really feel our sorrow, our fear? If he was really God, doesn't that mean God changes inside? One moment, he is not feeling my sorrow; then in the next moment he is. What kind of God is that?

Well, says the book of Hebrews, *this is the God we have in Jesus Christ*. Whatever theologians might make of God in himself—God as he exists from eternity—this is how Hebrews says we must think of *God in Jesus Christ*, God as he existed in time and space. He felt and he feels with us. He suffered and he suffers with us, whether it's the misery of sorrow, or the prick of fear, or the nausea of sickness, or the agony of temptation. That's the miracle of the Incarnation, the miracle of a great high priest who is Jesus the Son of God.

Our Scripture today is mostly about Jesus' qualifications to be our Mediator. To do the work of atonement, he must be a great and merciful high priest, both Son of God and "*tempted in every way, just as we are,*" so that he can stand in our sinful place and empathetically walk with us in our weakness. Just any random person could not save us from certain death. Only a uniquely qualified person who volunteers to do the hard bloody work necessary to save us from the powers that threaten to ruin our lives—forever.

God's Word tells us that person is God's Son. Praise be to God! Amen.