



March 17, 2024, Lent 5

Hebrews 5:5-10

Detail from Mosaic San Vitale, in Ravenna, Italy date: 521-547

Abel and Melchizedek Sacrificing

A Covenant of Blessing

*Prayer: We pray for grace enough to see your unfolding blessing all around us; we also pray your generous blessing on those we know who do not share our faith. In our common life, may we bless one another – in our life and work -- thus giving glory and honor to you, our God...*

“What’s past is prologue” is a quote from Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, Antonio says it in the opening scene. It means that there are some things that have happened that have led to this. And what is important, for us now, is given everything that just happened, now we focus on what is coming next.

When I looked it up it appears that everyone uses this quote for their own purposes, it is often used on TV shows, and popular culture. You might have heard people say that “if you don’t know your history you are doomed to repeat it.”

I want to encourage you in this season in between settled Pastoral leaders to reflect on what has brought you to this moment, and how we bring that to bear on what is to come. The interim season is an opportunity for a congregation to identify its own directions in ministry without a settled Pastor to give it their own shape and ideas. It is an opportunity to reflect on the kind of pastoral leadership which would be a good match for the congregation’s intended ministries in its next chapter. What’s past is prologue, meaning that everything that has come before, will go with you, but in a new form – now is the time to give that shape. What has happened up to now has prepared you.

The book of Hebrews engages the people in the same kind of moment: it is written to encourage them – given their past and their immediate future. It encourages us to consider what is the deepest core of our faith? What has led up to this moment in our lives? What will build up our faith as we move forward? And what tears it down? What are the things that turn our heads, and play on our fears, or threaten the convictions that keep our faith alive?

When are you most vulnerable to a loss of faith, or just letting it just drift away?

In particular, the book of Hebrews worries about the effect that injustice is having on a community of people. Much like living with chronic pain, living proximate to injustice wears at our souls. There are at least two sides to any injustice: on the one hand, if you commit a sin that is an act of injustice for someone, on the other hand, other people’s sins and mistakes are affecting you all the time.

The teacher asked the student in the class to give an example of injustice. The student responded: “when my father makes mistakes in my homework, the teacher blames me!” ... Injustice happens on many levels, sometimes all at once.

For Black History month, many of us read *The Other Side of Prospect* by Nicholas Dawidoff. One of the things that begins to be explained in the book is how a whole community of people would come to distrust law enforcement to the extent that no one would cooperate when a young man confesses to a murder he did not commit. There were witnesses to the murder, none of them would talk about it. Enormous injustice brings a community to a moment like that.

The person you know whose faith may be the most vulnerable is the one struggling with injustice. Injustice comes in many forms; the poorest among us often live with institutionalized injustice in ways the rest of us do not have to. But injustice festers under many roofs – in homes and businesses, in families, and workplaces, among nations, and even where you think it should not: it can have a life in churches and among people of faith – despite everybody’s best intentions. Hebrews’ main point, and my main point today, is that faith can resolve injustice (beginning in our hearts, extending to the world) – the deep blessing and wholeness that comes by putting our faith in Jesus Christ – Hebrews calls him our High Priest. A surprisingly effective tool when you consider the injustice loose in the world.

But before we get to the main event, there is some soul work we need to do to address ourselves to our sins. This should not be news to you: when we commit sin, the scriptures teach us how to handle it – 4 steps. 1. Admit the sin. 2. Ask forgiveness from the person you have sinned against. (Not always possible, if they are dead...e.g.) 3. Ask forgiveness from God. 4. Accept that you are forgiven, and change. The meaning of the word we get as “repent” from the Greek really just means to turn around. It is directional, not judgmental. (You would not judge someone bad or good by going north or south on a highway.) All parts of this process are important when we handle sin. This simple and Biblical process alone will put right a great deal of the injustice in our lives.

But what about the people who are sinned against, and no one comes to ask their forgiveness? What if you have done nothing wrong at all, and still are persecuted? What if you are the one compromised in a miscarriage of justice? What if you will not be made whole, and never will be in this lifetime? The four-step process does not help you if you are not the one who commits the sin to begin with. Many people live with enormous injustice which is not of their own making. Hebrews tells us: take Christ as your example. That is the key.

The scriptures promise, that through Christ our high priest, we have access to power too. We can change things. In the sphere of our influence, we have resources, spiritual and physical, we have a new family, the communion of saints, the church which connects us which continues to influence history and we have Jesus Christ himself, our redeemer, savior and advocate – our high priest, according to the ancient order of...this ancient High Priest, Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is a little mysterious. His name means My King of Righteousness – he was King of Salem, what later became Jerusalem. He brought out bread and wine to Abram after he won a battle to retrieve his nephew Lot and all of his people. Melchizedek blessed Abram, and Abram gave Melchizedek one tenth of everything he had as the people would learn to do much later for Priests in the Temple. Melchizedek was the priest of a Canaanite cult, he did not worship the God we worship at all, and yet he comes out and blesses Abram, after the injustices of war. And here is Melchizedek blessing him in the name of “God Most High, maker of heaven and earth...” Sometimes even the wrong guy, a stranger in this case, can do the right thing. It is the only human blessing Abraham receives before God makes a covenant with him, to make of him

and his barren wife, a great people. Melchizedek, who has no connections to the people who will become the children of Israel, appears out of the mists to do a good and beautiful thing, and we do not know anything else about him. But it gives us hope. A blessing to take with us, into the future.

It is the kind of blessing that is available to us in Jesus Christ. None of us deserve Jesus, none of us are related to Jesus by birth. He is not in our family tree, he has not been legally appointed to look after us, we cannot earn his attention or approval, but he does arrive, out of the mists of 2 millennia, and blesses us – with bread and wine, even – and takes the injustice we struggle with upon himself.

Our scriptures promise that through Christ our high priest, we have access to power also. We have resources, spiritual and physical; we have a new family, the communion of saints, the people gathered here. We have Jesus himself, our redeemer, savior, and advocate – our high priest according to the ancient and highly unpredictable order of Melchizedek.

It may even be that God will use the wrong people to propel you, and bless you, in the right direction.

The injustice which we experience in our lives is resolved in faith. We have access to power to change the course of human history which God Almighty holds in his hands. We have every good reason to be hopeful and encouraged today, and for our future.

At its founding, this church was set aside to worship God, to bring that power to bear upon and bless the lives of those living here. What is past is prologue, it is taking shape even now. Let us welcome God's future with gladness and joy. Into this covenant of Blessing.

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Children's moment:

Top o' the morning to ya, wiuns!

Happy Sain Patrick's Day!

Didja have potatoes for breakfast, this fine mornin'?

didja find any four-leaf clovers on your way to church?

Ye find Any Leprechauns?

Obviously, I'm not from Ireland! (but I have been watching an Irish series on Netflix). Neither was St Patrick, did you know that? He was British but he was captured by Irish pirates and taken to work as prisoner in Ireland. His job was to be a shepherd. After he got home to England again, and he went to Divinity school, he began to feel like God was calling him back to Ireland to serve the people there and tell them about Jesus.

So he left and went back to Ireland. He wanted to tell the Celtic people that God loves them just as much as God loves anyone.

When we tell someone about God's love, we use whatever there is around us to tell them about it. St Patrick used the Irish shamrocks to explain to the Irish people about the trinity. Three leaves on one stem.

Dear God, father, son, and Holy Spirit,

You are Creator, Christ, and wisdom,

Thank you that you go with us wherever we go,

And are part of our lives, no matter our circumstance.

Amen