

Text: Isaiah 53: 4-12- the Suffering servant; Hebrews 5: 1-10

Title: The Suffering Servant and Melchizedek

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There is a great unspoken- ok maybe not all that unspoken fear, when it comes to reading Scripture aloud – and that's how in the world do you pronounce those unfamiliar names? Ok Zebulum and Issacar aren't so bad- they only have 2 syllables. How about Abilimench or Paddam- Arran or Oholibamah? The old King James tried to help with those pronunciation guides- but I always found them more of a problem- for who can remember what those phonetic symbols mean? The slanting e, or the chevron above the vowel. So most of the time we kind of mumble through, hoping that no one really notices, putting our trust in the fact that Biblical Hebrew or Aramaic are dead languages and no one here really knows how they are supposed to sound anyway.

One of the classics here is Melchizedek. In the who old Testament he only appears twice, Genesis 14: 18-20 and Psalms 110: 4- yet he figures prominently in our understanding of who Jesus is and is even mentioned in our Hebrews passage! What gives? In Genesis we are introduced to Mechizedek as the priest king of Salem- the city that in David's time would be called Jerusalem. Abraham is coming back from a raiding party in modern day Syria. Seems that his nephew Lot was in the wrong place at the wrong time and was take prisoner by raiding parties. So Abraham and his men chased them north of Damascus and upon catching up kill everyone and take their booty as spoils of war. Abram is returning via the road that goes by Salem and the priest Melchizedek meets him- offers him bread and wine (where have we seen that before?) and then blesses Abraham in the name of the God most high. Abraham in turns gives him a tenth of everything that he has as an offering. The God that Melchizedek blesses him is El-Elyon- and Abram is bright enough recognize that they God he serves is the same God that called him to a new life in this land- the point that Genesis is making that while the Jews may be God's chosen people, they do not have the market cornered- God reveals himself to all who seek Him. Ok so far so good – but what about Psalm 110?

Let me share the first 4 verses- *The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." The Lord sends out from Zion your mighty scepter.*

*Rule in the midst of your foes. Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."*

Psalm 110 clearly refers to the Davidic Messiah- the promise that the Anointed One will rule with the power and authority of God. That makes sense- but 's with this priest ont eh order of Melchizedek business- what's an obscure priest got to do with it?

Where we go wrong is that we assume that Melchizedek is simply a name. it is, but in Hebrew names are often sentences. Mekchizedek comes from Meleck (King) + I (possessive particle) + zedek (righteous)= my king is righteous. Melchizedek combined both kingly functions of rule with priestly functions of making sure his people were right with God. So a Melchizedek priest is a both a king and priest.- see where Hebrews is coming from?

But between Genesis and Hebrews there is Isaiah- and the passage we refer to simply as the Suffering Servant. At first glance it is obvious why from day One Christians have jumped on this passage with both feet! During the Babylonian Exile the rabbis were working on the notion that suffering could pay the price for sin. after all, it was because Israel broke the covenant that God allowed Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army to defeat them and to carry them in chains to Babylon. Surely the exile was not mere punishment- it had to serve some purifying purpose. And when Israel was clean- the God would take them home- which is exactly what happened.

But that is not what we see here. A single person is able to fulfill this function for all humanity- to act as a sacrifice to cleanse of from all of our sins once and for all. It is almost as if Isaiah was able to peel away the curtains of 700 years and see the cross for what it really was- the means God uses to redeem all of his people.

Melchizedek- priest and King. Suffering servant- a sin offering for all people. these are the threads that Hebrews strings together. Hebrews starts with the qualifications of the High Priest- any high priest. 1) the High Priest must be one of the people- so that he can make offerings on the behalf of his people and so that he can deal with them gently when everything goes wrong. 2) he must be aware that he is not above the people- he is liable for sin as well. This is the best reality check for ego driven ministers that I know of. 3) the High Priest must be called by God, no one would dare to

step into those shoes unless commanded to. To sum up, one's priesthood must be rooted in one's identification with the people in obedience to God.

Now Hebrews turns to Jesus. It's almost like he starts the list backwards. Hebrews quotes Psalm 110 and puts Jesus in the place of the Davidic Messiah. Jesus isn't so much identified with the people he serves but with God- for he is God's son. Yes he is identified with the people- but Jesus is not a high priest approaching God on behalf of his people. Jesus is the son of God approaching humanity on behalf of the God who they have sinned against. This is what makes Jesus the priest king on the order of Melchizedek- Jesus is King- and he acts as Priest, offering his own suffering so that his people would experience wholeness and purity.

As a general rule, we Presbyterians are big on responding to God's initiative. From creation to covenant; from redemption to sanctification- our story is always our response to God's initiative. And so today we baptize Laker Scott Lee- for what better illustration do we have of our relationship to God not being dependent upon our own wisdom and ability? For us the surprise of the Gospel has always been that God loved us long before we were able to love God. For in Baptism we say "Yes" to, and celebrate God's initiative in claiming Laker as God's very own. Laker is included, as God has always known that he would be in all of the Gospel covenant promises. Bottom line, Baptism proclaims the faith of the church. By this outward seal of the covenant, the water of baptism cleanses us from all sin, renews our lives and is a preview of the reconciliation that is ours in Christ; and relationship with God based on God's promises and not on our too often flawed efforts to live up to those promises.

This is what Hebrews is trying to get us to understand. Melchizedek was a priest/King, Jesus Christ is our High Priest and High King of Heaven. And yet, for all of that, Jesus loves each and every one of us to the point of grieving for our sins and, by his own actions, cleansing us redeeming us from our own sin.

This is God's doing, Let us be thankful and amazed.