

Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas, January 1, 2023
Hebrew 2:10-18

A Three-Point Sermon on Jesus

On this “First Sunday after Christmas,” which also happens to be New Year’s Day, it is fitting that we spend some time thinking about the child whose birth we just celebrated, and who that child would go on to become. This morning’s text can help us with that.

I learned in seminary that the so-called “Letter to the Hebrews” reads more like a sermon than a letter. The same could be said for this morning’s passage taken from the Letter to the Hebrews. As Aleen reads it, listen for the three main points you think the “preacher” is trying to make about Jesus. [Aleen reads the passage.]

So what stood out for you? Here are the three points that stood out for me. First, our preacher says in verse 10 that Jesus is our “pioneer.” [*“It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.”*] Interesting word to find in the Bible, right? What is a pioneer? Well, when we think about other pioneers throughout history, like Lewis and Clark in the pacific northwest, a pioneer is someone who goes before us. Who explores uncharted territory. Who marks the trail. Who paves the way. Who gives us someone to follow.

Think about that. There is nowhere we can go that Jesus hasn’t already been. No struggle we can experience that Jesus hasn’t already faced. As the preacher put it in verse 14, “*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise share the same things.*”

Which tells us something even more important. Jesus was and is one of us. He was fully human, just like us. He experienced suffering, just as we do. Jesus knows what it is like to suffer.

Not only is he one of us. Not only is he a fellow human being. We are part of his family, and he is part of ours. As the preacher points out, not only do we have the same “Father” [*For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.*” v. 11], Jesus considers us his brothers and sisters [*For this reason, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,’*” v. 11-12]. And further on the preacher adds, “*Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect*” [v. 17]. So, point one is that Jesus is our pioneer. He is one of us. We are part of the same family, brothers and sisters, having the same Father. There is nowhere we can go that he has not already been. He knows what it is like to suffer. He has paved our way.

Second, the preacher says that Jesus is our Victor. Granted, the preacher doesn’t use that word, but you’ll see in a bit why I’m using it. The preacher says that Jesus has defeated, thereby rescuing us from, our enemy. And who is our enemy? (Did anybody catch that?) Death. Otherwise known as, who? The devil. Let’s look again at verses 14 and 15: “*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise share the same things . . . (we’ve already covered that; he is one of us; he shares not only our physical humanity but our human experiences) . . . so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.*”

Today, as I've already said, is the First Sunday after Christmas, and already now the preacher is reminding us that Jesus the precious Christ Child ("no crying he makes," says one familiar Christmas carol) will go on to suffer a horrible death, that he is going to be crucified.

But why? Why did "the little Lord Jesus" have to die? Theologians have been asking that question for centuries. Make that millennia. And one of the earliest theories was that Jesus had to die in order to rescue us from death, otherwise known as the devil. For a time theologians referred to this as the "Ransom Theory" of the atonement, but in the last century it has come to be known as the "*Christus Victor*" theory. Maybe you've heard of it. (Or maybe not. ☺) The thing is, The Apostle Paul said essentially the same thing, in his glorious letter to the Corinthians. This should sound familiar: "*Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ,*" [1 Cor 15:54-55.] In other words, Jesus is our Victor.

And third, Jesus is our "*High Priest.*" That one is in our text, as we'll see. But first, what is a high priest? (I should really say, what was?, because we don't have them today.) In Old Testament times, and on into the New, the high priest worked in the temple in Jerusalem, and his job was to receive the various sacrifices that people would make to atone for their sins. We could say that he was an intermediary between the people and God. He helped the people make their relationship with God right again, after sin got in the way. Here is how our preacher puts it: "*Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.*"

This, we could say, is another reason why Jesus had to die. His death, theologians have said, was like a "once-for-all sacrifice" that atoned for all of our sins in the past, the present, and the future. The fancy, theological name for this theory is "*the satisfaction theory of the atonement.*" Jesus, as heavenly High Priest, became the intermediary between us and God. His death makes our relationship with God right again, anytime sin gets in our way.

And make no mistake, sin will continue to get in our way. We will continue to be tempted, and tested. Here is how our preacher puts it. "*Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*" Not "were" tested. "Are being" tested. Helps us to know we're not alone in our temptations and testing, right?

Our preacher is unique among New Testament writers in referring to Jesus as a High Priest. And he spends the rest of his letter—sorry, his sermon—talking about it. So if you want to know more about Jesus the High Priest, I would recommend you read the Letter to the Hebrews. If you want to know more about Jesus in general, I would recommend you read the Letter to the Hebrews.

For now, let's review the three points of my sermon on Jesus.

First, Jesus is our Pioneer. He is one of us. We are his brothers and sisters and family. Thoroughly human, having flesh and blood, he was born a child, grew to be a man, and faced everything in his life that we face. He went before us, marked the trail, paved the way.

Second, Jesus is our Victor. He defeated the power of Death. Aka the devil. Because of which, we no longer need to fear death. Even though we die, and we will die, we know that we will live.

Third, Jesus is our High Priest. His death was a “once-for-all sacrifice” that covers all of our sins. Every single one of them. For every single one of us. Because of which we are free to focus simply on following Jesus, and living as God’s children. We are forever right with God.

Think of those three as the best Christmas gifts ever!

[Hillary and Tom perform “O Holy Night.”]