

Jesus is Our Great High Priest!

We host blood drives here at St. Matthew. I'm glad we can use our building to help the community in some way. Many people need a blood transfusion because they lost blood during a surgery or because of some ailment. Without blood we die. Without the blood of Jesus, we die eternally in hell. This morning we're going to talk about blood and how that fits in with our salvation. And we will rejoice to hear that Jesus is our great high priest.

Let's start at the beginning. God created a perfect world with perfect humans – Adam & Eve. You know what happened. Adam & Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. They disobeyed. They sinned. Instantly, everything in the world changed. Instantly, Adam & Eve had shameful thoughts and tried to excuse their sin. From that moment on, Adam & Eve were doomed to death, separation from God. In profound, unexpected, and undeserved love, God promised to send a Savior who would destroy the devil's work, someone who would suffer the death, the separation from God, that we all deserved; someone who would be our substitute and die for us. We know that Savior as Jesus. Adam & Eve found comfort and joy in that promise. They trusted God. They were reunited with God. They were saved.

It would take a few thousand years, however, before the time was right for Jesus to come into our world. Until that time, God set up a system for the Old Testament Israelites to stay focused on the need for the Savior and the promise that he was coming. God told the Old Testament Israelites to place their hands on an animal, symbolically transferring their guilt to the animal. Then God told them to kill the animal. Blood represents life. By shedding its blood and killing the animal, God was teaching them that sin is deadly serious. There was blood everywhere at the temple. The priest looked like a butcher coming out of the back room with his white apron covered with blood. I have seen an animal being sacrificed. The blood gushes. The animal twitches and becomes still. It's very sad. It was all a vivid reminder of the seriousness of sin and the need for a Savior.

The blood of bulls and goats and lambs did not take away human sins. If a human has sinned against God, then a human has to die. A sinless life has to be sacrificed for a sinful life. The blood of an animal can not take away human sin, but every Old Testament blood sacrifice was a reminder that

God was going to send someone innocent would die to take away their sins. The sinner did not have to die – be separated from God in hell – because someone was going to die for him. As the Israelites saw the animal killed and remembered the promise of a Savior who was coming, their faith was strengthened. They rejoiced in the forgiveness they had through the promised Messiah. That's what Jesus did on the cross. The Apostle Paul explained (Eph 1:7), “**In Christ, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.**” Jesus was forsaken by God as he experienced the reality of hell for us.

The symbolism of an animal being killed for the sake of our sins was especially seen in the festival of the Day of Atonement, often called Yom Kippur. The high priest would first slaughter a bull. I wonder how many priests it took to hold the bull still, or maybe get it to lie down. As the high priest slit its throat, he caught some of the blood in a bowl. Then he would enter the Most Holy Place in the temple. The Most Holy Place was where the Ark of the Covenant was. It represented God's presence on this earth among his people. The priest would put his hand into the bowl of warm blood and then sprinkle the blood seven times on top of the Ark of the Covenant, then seven times in front of the Ark. Then he would leave the temple and sacrifice a goat and do the same with the blood of the goat. There was more blood involved with the ceremonies. The details are in Leviticus 16. Twenty-eight times, the lifeblood of an animal was offered to the Lord. That's what the Israelites, or Jews, did in the Old Testament times.

After Jesus lived, died, rose and ascended, the 12 apostles spread the message of salvation. A good number of Jews were brought to faith in Jesus. They recognized him as the promised Messiah, their Savior. Alleluia! In those days, however, Christianity was considered a cult while Judaism was recognized as a legal religion within the Roman Empire. Christians were persecuted by family, friends and the government. Some Christians had their houses and bank accounts taken away. How would you react if you lost your house simply because you were a Christian? Others ended up in prison. Some of those Jews who became Christians started wondering, “Is it really worth being a Christian? Jesus has not helped me much. Life would be easier if I walked away from Jesus and went back to the traditional Jewish religion again.”

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote to them and practically screamed, “No! No! Do NOT walk away from Jesus! He is far greater than the symbolic sacrifices of the Old Testament.” The author pointed

out that the Old Testament sacrifices, including the Day of Atonement, had to be performed again and again and again and again because they did not really take away sin. Jesus, however, was the ultimate priest and sacrifice. He explained (:24), **“Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands [the temple] ... he entered heaven itself.”** Verse 25, **“Nor did Jesus enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is no his own.”** Jesus offered his own blood. Verse 28, **“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many [of all people].”** The Old Testament way of worship was all symbolic pointing to Jesus. Jesus was the real deal. He was the great High Priest. The author pleaded with those Christians not to let go of Jesus.

There was once a young girl who had leukemia and needed a blood transfusion. The doctor asked her little brother if he would be willing to give his blood for his sister. The boy thought for a moment and agreed. When the doctor inserted the needle and was taking the blood, the boy meekly looked up and asked, “when am I going to die?” The precious boy thought that they were going to take all of his blood to help his sister. The doctor quickly assured him that he would not die. But what love that boy had that he was willing to die for his sister. Jesus was willing to give his lifeblood to save you. He let himself be sacrificed on the altar of crossed timbers in order to pay the price of death that we owed for our sins. Because all humans are infected with sin, our blood is not pure. Our blood cannot pay for anyone’s sin. But as true God, Jesus was perfect. His blood was pure and could save us. As Luther explained in his explanation to the Second Article, “Jesus redeemed me [paid for my salvation] ... not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.” And just in case the devil tempts you to doubt, Jesus even gives you his very body and blood in the Lord’s Supper so that you can know for sure that Jesus shed his blood for you. You are forgiven.

We have an altar here in the front of our church. We do not need this big piece of furniture to worship. We could fit all the Communion vessels on a TV tray. Still, we have an altar which preaches a sermon to us. In the Old Testament, the altar was covered with blood. You’ll notice that there is no blood on our altar. Every time you come into church and see this altar without any blood on it, you are reminded that no more blood needs to be shed. Jesus’ sacrifice was sufficient to take away the sin of all people of all time, including yours. Through Jesus, you are already forgiven. Alleluia!

This Sunday we are focusing on the Last Day, Judgment Day, when Jesus will visibly return to earth. The first time he came was as a baby born in Bethlehem to be our Savior. The second time, he will come as a glorious and triumphant king and judge. Maybe the idea of standing in front of God as our judge makes us feel a bit uneasy. After all, he knows everything we have done wrong, even our impure thoughts. The devil constantly nags at our conscience, “You’re a scummy sinner. You can’t expect Jesus to love you and let you into heaven.” The author of Hebrews reminds us (:28), **“Christ will appear a second time, not to bear sin [which he did the first time he came into the world], but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him [believers].”** Jesus saved us when he died and rose, but he will bring you the full enjoyment of salvation as he takes you home to heaven where everything will be perfect forever.

A pastor friend of mine told me that he had to help a member who had a bad case of the “yeabuts.” The man met with the pastor and confessed a sin that was troubling his conscience. The pastor calmly listened and let him get it all out. Then he said, **“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 8:10). The man replied, “Yea, but ... a sincere Christian should not do what I did.” The pastor said, **“The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, purifies us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7). The man replied, “Yea but ... what I did was so shameful and embarrassing.” The pastor said, **“Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven”** (Matthew 9:2). “Yea, but ... I feel so dirty and unworthy.” The pastor explained, **“Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool”** (Isaiah 1:18). Slowly, the man got the message that he was truly forgiven. If you are ever afflicted with a case of the “yeabuts,” if your conscience nags at you, if the thought of standing before God on Judgment Day makes you uncomfortable, look to Jesus, your great high priest, who already saved you.

As our great high priest, Jesus was able to pay for all sins, with his blood, for all time for all people, including yours and mine. As our great high priest, Jesus is coming again to take you home to heaven where you will be relieved of all the sorry and sadness of this world forever. You can look forward to the Last Day and rejoice and give thanks. Because Jesus is your great high priest, you are saved. Amen.