

Sermon: *What We Offer Up*

Year B, Lent 5

[Jeremiah 31:31-34](#); [Psalm 119:9-16](#); [Hebrews 5:5-10](#); [John 12:20-33](#)

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I know this is Lent, when we focus on the realities of suffering in this world. And I know that to really get the reference to Melchizedek in today's reading from Hebrews, it helps to understand the Levitical code and the role of the high priests in the mid sixth century BCE. But inflicting that on you in a sermon is more than my commitment to mercy can handle. It's probably enough that one of us has had to suffer through it. If you do want more details, read Deuteronomy until you nod off. In my experience, the part you're looking for is two pages further on.

You should know, however, that the high priest had a very particular role. In addition to everything else he did, and it was always a "he", he offered the sacrifice in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. First he would offer a sacrifice to atone for his own personal sins. Then he would offer the sacrifice on behalf of his community. He would go into this incredibly sacred space where God entered the world to contact God's people. The high priest would go by himself and provide the offering, pretty sure it was not enough.

Think of that for a minute. The high priest was a regular human being, as sinful and imperfect as the rest of us. Fully aware of his own sin, fully aware that no matter what he sacrifices it can't begin to atone for his transgressions, he brings the offering into the presence of the Almighty, the God who never forgot the people of Israel, the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom in their own land.

Think of all the hard realities we have to face in this world: having babies, caring for the sick or disabled, raising children, administering justice, overcoming addiction, dying, burying our dead. In all those incredibly hard things, we try really hard to keep people from doing them all alone. We don't always succeed. But we try. And it's not just our own society or culture. As a species, we seem to be wired to want to make sure that when there is really hard work to be done, no one does it alone.

As parents, we drive our kids all over the face of Creation to get to practices and basketball games. We provide them with equipment and courts to play on, coaches to teach them the fundamentals. We raise money for travel or uniforms or whatever. We do all that so they learn all the skills and discipline and teamwork and ball handling. They have to learn to read a defense, and understand how to make their growing bodies get the ball to where it's supposed to go. They have to learn how to take defeat in stride, how to have a good game personally when the rest of the team was off, how to win and not be completely obnoxious. We can't do that for them. In that sense, that work is the work of a single individual. But when they are standing at that free throw line looking so alone that we just want to swoop down from bleachers, they are just doing another part of the hard work that the whole basketball community has had a role in. And we are doing the hard work of being parents to leave them there, learning what they have to learn.

And yet, coming face to face with God and saying that we have failed to keep our part of the covenant, that hard work we left to one individual. We left the high priest to go in terror, all alone, to offer something tiny in the face of all the human sin accumulated over the year. We sent him in there when he had to know full well that when he said, essentially, "we confess our

sin and we want to atone for it,” that he could probably name twenty people he had seen in the last hour who were proud of their behavior and had no intention of changing it.

When I hear the story of Holy Week, I hate the brutality of the violence. But somehow, I don't know, maybe because of the violence on TV or in the news, that part of the story doesn't touch me as personally as realizing that Jesus was alone in Gethsemane, even though he asked his most trusted disciples to be with him when he had to do the hard work of prayer when he was so frightened. In a story that is heart breaking in so many ways, it buffets me every time that Jesus is abandoned by his disciples when he is crucified. When there was hard work to be done, we left Jesus alone to do it. Or, with the most generous interpretation, to do it with strangers and people who hated him.

There's probably a part of everyone who agrees with me. But there has to be a part of everyone who says, “We weren't there. It was 2,000 years ago for Jesus and 2,500 years ago for Jeremiah.” Of course, I get that no one here is a couple of thousand years old, although we've all had mornings when it felt like that. I'm just not convinced that we've changed all that much. While we may hate leaving people to do the really hard work alone, there are so many children abused because we left them alone with their parents. There are so many elderly and disabled people neglected because we left them alone without people capable of looking out for them. There are so many veterans left alone with the demons acquired when they fought our battles. There are so many college seniors committing suicide because we left them alone with expectations they can never meet.

So yes, most of the time women having babies get people to help them. Most of the time, people get rides to chemo. Most of the time we don't let those who are dying slip away unnoticed. Most of the time.

Most of the time we keep the commandments written in stone on Mt. Sinai. Most of the time we can manage to not covet or take God's name in vain. However, as Jeremiah points out in today's reading, God wasn't asking for compliance most of the time. God was looking for us to be in right relationship with God, God's Creation and each other all the time. “Most of the time” was only going to lead to trouble.

Jeremiah describes a moment when God shows compassion. It's as if God said, “Well, I thought the problem was that you didn't know what I wanted. So I got that Moses fella to write them down on stone tablets. I was as clear as I could be. I gave you guys a number of generations to work it out. You guys still didn't get it.” In effect God went on to say, “You are still my people. We'll leave the Commandments thing in place, because that definitely helped. But we're going to stop relying on a human's ability to become perfect. I'm going to do the writing directly this time, and it's going to be on each individual's heart.” The capacity for keeping the covenant shifts from being outside us and dependent on our ability to be perfect all the time to being inside us and, more incredibly, to be given to us by divine grace. We still have to do our part, we still have to obey the commandments. But the covenant is now a part of us and has been so since Jeremiah's time.

So, yaay, because being perfect is just not something any of us can be. But we still keep sending people in do the hardest work alone, at least some of the time. In today's reading from Hebrews, Jesus prays with “loud cries and tears.” Just exactly the way we pray when we are frightened and hurting. But he takes on the role of high priest. In another incredible moment of God's compassion, God steps in, doing some of the hardest work for us. No human can possibly come

before the divine and sincerely ask for forgiveness on behalf of the community. We are all too flawed, too broken. If the community asked us to do it, if we were honest, we'd probably say, "OK, I'll go meet God face to face, but I'm not representing What's-His-Face because he never shovels his sidewalk. And I'm not there for So-And-So because she'd run up hill in the summer to spread some mean gossip she made up from three bits of nonsense." We'd agree to go before God only as long as we could be the judge of who we were apologizing for.

Jesus says he'll go before God for us. More importantly, he'll go before us in this most public way and show what a fully human being does to show love and compassion to the whole community, regardless of who they are. Jesus will do the hard work alone so that we may be less frightened of it.

Having a high priest is fabulous, because there's someone to interact with the divine for us. They get to take the brunt of God's displeasure. Given who we are, God's always going to be disappointed. But having a high priest is just an added layer of complication, because they're in the way, standing between us and the infinite compassion of the divine. So Jesus steps into that role, protecting us from what we fear until we grow enough, until we shoot enough baskets from the free throw line to know how it's done. Jesus is also fully divine, so even while he is in that role for us, we are in the presence of the divine. As New Beginnings will sing during the offering, "How great the love lavished on us all, That we can be the children of God". It may not look like basketball practice, it may look like a nursing home or a divorce court or a prison cell, but Jesus is there with us. He knows how frightened we are because he is fully human. He knows that the covenant is written on our hearts because he is fully divine.

The thing is, just like the whole cloud of people surrounding that kid at the free throw line, God has surrounded us with people who help us do the hard things. If you want God to write on your heart, ask your sister-in-law if you can call her after visiting your cousin at the county lock up. If seeing your mom in the nursing home is too devastating, ask her best friend to tell you some more stories of your mom on the field hockey team and let her write them on your heart. Yes, Jesus is there with you always. But if you need some more tangible writing, there are a whole crowd of folks here. Jesus came into this world to remind us what God could do. Jesus also came into this world to remind us what we can do. So sometimes what we need to offer in the Holy of Holies when we feel the most afraid and the most alone is more space in our hearts and the willingness to let other imperfect people write on them. In those moments when we are doing the hard work all alone, we can offer up a little more room in our hearts for God to write on.