

“Eager to Trust the Priest”

The expectation is mounting. Christmas is drawing closer and closer. Kids all over are starting to get anxious to open their presents. They wonder what’s inside, and if parents aren’t careful, they might find out early.

It hopefully comes as no surprise to you that at Christmas, we celebrate God’s gift to us and to the world in his Son, Jesus. But it hopefully also comes as no surprise to you that this gift from God was not a secret like those wrapped inside fancy paper waiting to be uncovered. No, instead, God had made a promise. He had promised long beforehand, that he would send the greatest gift of all.

Our midweek Advent sermons give us the opportunity to think back on the promises of God to send Jesus into the world. They invite us to put ourselves in the place of the Old Testament people who first heard these prophecies, and to consider how eagerly they waited for the fulfilment to arrive. As we think about their eager expectation, we might realize even more the great blessings that are ours as we eagerly await our Christmas celebrations.

Last week, we considered a passage from Deuteronomy that told us how Jesus would come as a prophet, like Moses. Next week we’ll hear how Jesus would be a king like David. Today our focus is on our eager expectation of Jesus the priest. Listen to the words of our sermon text from **Isaiah 53:11–12:**

¹¹ After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

You likely have noticed already that our sermon text does not explicitly refer to the promised Savior as a priest. However, this passage does tell us that the promised one would serve priestly functions. We are at a bit of a disadvantage as far as understanding the role of the priest in Old Testament times, since we don’t have direct experience with their work, or even work that closely parallels what they did.

There were two major tasks that the priests, including and maybe especially the High Priest, performed. First, they were responsible for sacrifices. On a daily basis and on special occasions, people would bring animals to the priests. Following careful instructions that they had received from God, the priests would oversee the slaughter of the animals and would present them at the altar. Parts, or in some cases all of the animal would be consumed by the flames on the altar. There were different sorts of offerings that would be presented, and different occasions on which they would be presented. But in all there was an aspect of the sins of the people being transferred to the victim animal.

The second aspect of the priests’ work was to represent the people before God. In a sense, the priests did this as they made offerings on behalf of the people. But their work went further to include offering intercession on behalf of the people. Especially the High Priest had this responsibility. You heard in our Scripture lesson this description of the work of the High Priest: **“Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins”** (Hebrews 5:1). On the Day of Atonement specifically, the High Priest would stand in the place of all of the Israelites in order to approach God on their behalf.

The promised priest in Isaiah 53 would carry out these same responsibilities. Our passage speaks with prophetic perspective and mentions these works, which would be carried out in the future, as if they had already been accomplished. It says, **“For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”** God promised the people a priest, a perfect priest, to carry out the responsibility of offering sacrifices on their behalf and offering intercession for them before God.

But to appreciate even more fully what promises like these meant for the Israelites who first heard them, it is helpful to consider the context of this passage within the book of Isaiah. The prophet spoke to the people and warned them about an impending attack from Babylon. The people of Jerusalem and all of Judea would be carried off into captivity by this foreign nation. But his was far from a hopeless message. Isaiah promised also that God would bring the people back. He would rescue them from captivity, and he would see to it that they were restored to their land, their home.

And Isaiah had even more good news for the people. Though they would be carried off to Babylon because of their sin, because of their rejection of God, they would be restored because of God's grace, his undeserved love. This truth as it regarded the Babylonian captivity also taught the people a greater truth. Their sin had separated them from God, but God would send his Servant to restore them and to bring them into a new and repaired relationship with him. In other words, the promise that God would rescue the people from captivity foreshadowed the greater promise that God would bring his people to heaven.

And the way that God would accomplish this greater promise was through the sending of a special Servant. The Old Testament Scriptures are clear regarding God's promise that he would send a Savior. This central figure was generally referred to by the people as the Messiah, God's chosen and anointed one. Throughout the Old Testament, God revealed more and more details about this Messiah and his work. Here in Isaiah 53, the Messiah is called God's Servant, and it is revealed that he would face suffering and ridicule, and that he would be despised and rejected.

The reason for his suffering and rejection was his work as the great High Priest. He came to offer the ultimate sacrifice for people. His sacrifice would actually remove their sins and give them the gift of complete forgiveness. This sacrifice would not be a lamb or other animal. Jesus himself would be the sacrifice. As our text describes, **"he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."** No wonder the people waited with such eager expectation for God to fulfill his promises. His promise was life and salvation for them.

And that is the same reason that we wait with eager expectation to celebrate Christmas. That baby in Bethlehem's manger is our Priest, the one who came to represent us before God, the one who came to offer the sacrifice that was needed to take away our sins, the one who came to offer himself for us.

And we need our Priest now just as surely as the Old Testament people of Judah needed him then. Even at such a special time, when we prepare to celebrate his birth, we too often stray away from him. We too often focus on the material instead of the spiritual. We are tempted to celebrate a sort of romanticized Christmas, with its cute and cuddly baby and happy message of peace on earth. What we ought to be celebrating is so much greater and so much more profound.

No earthly wealth or material blessings could offer us the eternal peace that our Priest came to bring. That cute and cuddly baby is born into our dark world to be our light and our life. He is born to die for us. We can trust this great Priest.

And because we have such a great High Priest, we live in eager expectation now of the time when he will come again. We look forward to a time when we will experience exactly what it means that our sins have been removed from us forever. We long for the time when we don't need an intercessor on our behalf, but when we can live with God and be with God in the fullest way. We eagerly await that day when our Priest will bring us to his heavenly temple, where we will live forever in his endless praise and glory.

Let us pray. Dearest Lord Jesus, you came as a prophet to bring us the Word of God, let us listen to you. You came as a Priest to intercede for us and to offer yourself as the sacrifice for our sins and for the sins of the whole world. Let us trust you. As we eagerly await the celebration of your birth, prepare us also to live in eager expectation of your return to bring us to live with you forever. Amen.