**Hebrews 4:14-16** March 10, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Lent 1

*Hebrews 4:14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. 16Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

I wish that every sermon could be for every person, but today might be one that isn’t. If you just had the best week of your life, this one might not be for you. If you feel like you are wearing rose-colored glasses only you don’t have any glasses on, this might not be for you. If your future’s so bright—what was that we used to say?—so bright you gotta wear shades, this might not be for you. –At least not today. But even if after this week you feel like life couldn’t be better, maybe you can take these words from Hebrews chapter four, carefully fold them up and put them in your wallet or purse. Tuck them away because the day will come, because anyone who has flesh and blood knows that every winning streak has an end.

But if you are someone who has spent a couple days in the hospital this week (we have had a couple of those), or someone who has lost a near and dear one (we have at least one of those this week too), or if you are day by day looking on while a loved one suffers the ravages of mental or physical disease (we have a few of those), or if you are someone who just got embarressed in front of the whole lunchroom (I don’t know if we have had any of those), and you need God to give you a listening ear, well then God has a word for you today.

The Word of God tells you today,

**Take Courage: You Have One Who Sympathizes!**

This word is written to people who feel their weaknesses, who know that they need what God has to offer. It tells you, me, us, to take courage because, ***“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.”*** Jesus does sympathize. He does sympathize with you, with what you are going through, especially your temptations.

Sympathize literally means “to suffer with someone.” The idea of a truly sympathetic God is something only the Christian faith knows. In other religions, their god is distant, beyond the troubles of this world. Even in the Old Testament it wasn’t quite the same. To be sure Old Testament Israel worshiped the same God we worship. But while they waited for the Messiah, they had not yet seen him. Old Testament Israel’s primary physical encounter with God had been at Mount Sinai. There the glory of the Lord God appeared above the mountain in thick dark clouds with flashes of lightning. The people, they trembled in fear. Now there were places in the Old Testament which mention God’s compassion. For example, Psalm 103:13 which says, *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him…”* But still, God is in heaven and we one earth.

But in Jesus Christ something special happened. God became one of us for a while. Jesus didn’t come like a tourist walking through the place saying to himself, “Interesting. Interesting!” God took on flesh with our weaknesses and limitations. He got tired, hungry, thirsty. He was filled with joy and looked in love on people, and felt sorrow at their passing. He felt pain, and knew that most horrible extremity, as his life-blood drained away into the darkness of death.

Christ Jesus can sympathize with you because he became one of us and lived like us. More than that, as our Gospel reading said, this Son of God felt where the hardness of life naturally leads: temptation.

There he was starving to death in the desert. He had been for weeks. But there was a remedy. He could essentially steal a loaf of bread, lay his hands on that which his heavenly Father had told him “Not yet.” Then his hunger would end.

There he was on a mountaintop tempted by greed. (And before you scoff at it, think of how many have given in to this temptation!) He could have it all if only he would make a deal with the devil. It would be much easier, and more satisfying than having to scrape along.

There he was on top of the temple tempted by pride to leave the humble station of life that he had been put in. With a show of power, he could prove to everyone how great he was, and they would rush around him, laud him.

These temptations which I can recite to you in about a minute were by no means the full length and breadth of temptation that Jesus faced in those 40 days in the desert or, for that matter, those thirty-three years on earth.

Sometimes we are glad to know that other people have troubles. We’re not being mean. We would never wish trouble on them. But people who never seem to have any troubles, they are intimidating. They are unreal. We wonder if have any understanding. After all, what does the billionaire know about the elderly lady planning to sell some of her meds so she can have food at the end of the month. What does the boy genius who started reading at age three and a half know about the embarressment a dyslexic 35 year old feels. What does one blessed with a stable home know about a young woman trying to forget what was learned in an abusive home? How does someone allergic to alcohol know the struggles of one genetically predisposed to alcoholism? How can those who have never been tempted like you have been tempted really understand your struggles?

We want someone who can sympathize. Oh, we are thankful for all the well-meaning people out there. But we want someone who has felt our weakness. And until Jesus came to earth, that was surely one of the foremost questions about God: How can God, up there, really understand? How can he sympathize? He’s not one of us!

But Jesus came and was tempted. And I think he was tempted even more than us. Think of it this way: One runner is an accomplished marathon runner. Another person makes a New Year’s resolution to exercise more and fail out before Groundhog Day. Who has endured more? Who has battled more? “The fact that Jesus was without sin means that he knew depths of temptation which we never can know.” We fall before Satan’s temptations long before he gives us his best shot. But not Christ Jesus. Every defeat of temptation meant that Satan would only hit him harder, tempt him more.[[1]](#footnote-1) Christ endured the full power of Satan’s temptations, and bested him at every turn. ***“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”*** He can sympathize. He *does* sympathize.

But what does it mean that he is ***“Our great high priest.”***

A priest’s job – and here I am speaking of the Old Testament priests – a priest’s job is to be the go-between. First, the Old Testament priest offered sacrifices on behalf of sinful people to make them acceptable to God. Secondly, the priest interceded, taking people’s requests to God because we are unworthy on our own.

In the Old Testament times, before Jesus the Messiah, human priests were selected by God to make these sacrifices and to symbolically carry the prayers of the people to God. When Jesus came, he was kind of what robots are to the modern workforce. When Jesus came he made all the priests obsolete, he put them out of their jobs. Jesus, in a once-for-all sacrifice for sin, did what all the priests could never really do. Now Christ has told us that in his name, we can go directly to God, without any other sacrifice or sacrificer.

Which, incidentally, is why Lutherans and other Protestant denominations do not have priests. Now once in a while someone calls me a priest by people, and that is ok. It doesn’t bother me. I know that people say that out of respect. It’s not the word that is bad. But we don’t have “priests” because the function of Old Testament priests is done, finished, forever, by Jesus. And so Lutherans and others stopped calling spiritual leaders priests. To say that we still need someone between us and God is to say that Jesus isn’t who he said he is. But some churches still have this concept that a priest is an intermediary. No. Jesus is our priest.

He said as much when he told his followers, *“No one comes to the Father except through me… and then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name”* (John 14:6; 15:16). In our prayers, we need Jesus to usher us into God’s throneroom. Jesus is our priest, and no other human.

Anyway, because Jesus is our sympathetic and all-sufficient high priest, we can ***“approach the throne of grace*** [we can pray] ***with confidence.”*** Christians don’t pray, “Hey, God. I hope you time for me.” Christians don’t get done praying and think, “I wonder if God heard that.” We have confidence. We know he hears. And so we pray as verse 16 invites us ***“Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”***

Whenever we go to God in prayer we are confident that God will treat us with mercy and grace, for Jesus’ sake.

There is a talk radio host who is a Christian. When people get on air and ask him, “Hi, Dave, how are you doing?”, just about always he answers, “Better than I deserve!” After the first dozen or so times you hear him say it, it starts to grate on your nerves. And then after you have heard it about a hundred times or so, you start to realize, “What a powerful Christian witness!” You see, he never says it with a feel-bad-about-yourself Eeyore---remember Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh—never with an Eeyore sort of voice, “Better than I deserve.” He never says it thinking, “Wow, I just hope my luck holds out a little longer!” He always says the same thing in joyful voice that you just know he would use even if his house burned down and all his investments zeroed out.

Every time he is outlining the Christian message. He is saying, “Everything I have is from God. And if it weren’t for God’s grace and mercy in Christ Jesus, I wouldn’t have any of it. But I do! And will!”

What a thought to take with us to God every time we pray. “Because Jesus is my sympathetic high priest, I know that God is going to treat me better than I deserve, way better!” And every time you walk away from prayer, you have the confidence to know that God will answer your prayers even better than you deserve.

***“Then let us approach the throne of grace with confidence.”*** In our time of need we pray, knowing even before we ask that God is going to answer us even better than we deserve. He will because we are approaching the throne of what? The throne of grace. Undeserved love.

So take courage! Jesus not only saved you, he understands you. He not only understands you, but he sympathizes with you. Therefore, “Take Courage! Approach the throne of grace with confidence.” Amen.

1. Barclay, *Hebrews*, 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)