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The First Sunday in Lent

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Against the Rock of Obedience, Temptation Is Crushed

Jesus came into the world to crush the head of Satan and destroy his power to capture and condemn us. During the Season of Lent we watch Jesus in action. In the Gospel for the First Sunday in Lent, Satan tempts Jesus to abandon his march to the cross and his plan to save. Jesus did not give in but obeyed God instead. Jesus is our Rock, and against the rock of his perfect obedience, Satan's temptation is crushed. As we battle with Satan, Jesus is our champion.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Jesus Overcomes Your Temptations.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

There is a psychological phenomenon that most of us have experienced, even if we don't remember it anymore. When we were teenagers and "fell in love" for the first time, there is a strong possibility that most of us felt that we were the first people to ever experience such a combination of emotions. The feeling that we are the only ones to experience the positive emotions associated with love fades quickly with experience as we realize that we are not at all alone in our feelings. But it does uncover something very interesting about how we think: we like to be unique when it comes to positive emotions and experiences. On the opposite side, we hate to be alone in our sadness and loneliness and yet those are the points in which we often feel the most alone. We can easily accept that people have experienced great joys like we have, but it is hard to know if others really can understand the unique pains and struggles that we go through. However, many people do understand similar pains and struggles, and this may be one of the reasons that group therapy has arisen as a helpful tool for those who suffer. But there is often one person that we don't think of as having been in the depths with us, and that is Jesus. Yet, as the writer to the Hebrews says, Jesus is one of us in a very real way.

The reading starts by calling Jesus a "great high priest," and I want to take a moment to unpack what a high priest was so that we can understand what the writer is telling us about Jesus. The first high priest of the Israelites was Aaron, the brother of Moses. There were many priests with a number of different roles to maintain the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, but the high priest had one duty that went beyond what any other priest was permitted to do.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would go through a purification ritual, wear special linen garments, and make a public sacrifice for his own sins to show the people that he, too, was sinful. Then, just on this one day, the high priest was to enter the Most Holy Place. This is where the ark of the covenant was placed, and no one other than the high priest was allowed to enter. He would take incense and fill the Most Holy Place with smoke from the incense so that it would obscure his view, then he would sprinkle the atonement cover with blood, then the entire tabernacle. The atonement cover was the cover on top of the ark, sometimes called the mercy seat, and the Lord said that it was the place where he was present in a miraculous way. In this way, the high priest would make atonement for the sins of the whole nation. If the high priest were to fail to carry out these instructions, or try to enter on another day, he would die.

This is probably the most powerful image that would come to mind for a Jewish believer upon hearing the name, “high priest.” And Jesus was a high priest in a powerful way: he offered himself to go to the place where everyone else could not so that he could make atonement for the sins of the world. As a priest, he was one of the people. But there is something more since he is called a great high priest. He was great because he filled a role that no other high priest could fill, and he completed the role of high priest by making the sacrifice that was enough so that no animal ever had to be sacrificed again: himself.

Jesus is able to “empathize with our weaknesses,” the writer goes on to say. Jesus was as human as you and me, which means that he experienced every sort of pain and suffering that you and I ever experienced or will experience. He had flesh and bones which could burn under the sun and ache with exhaustion. He felt pain when the thorns pierced his scalp. He felt hunger when he had not eaten. He felt tired when he didn’t get to rest. We read in the Gospel for today that he was tempted by Satan in a very real way. Satan waited until Jesus was weak and tired in his fasting to try to bring him to sin.

And this is when Satan strikes us, too. Satan knows when we are weak, he knows that in weakness, we seek cheap and quick relief from our suffering. What is it that you go to for that quick release from your trouble? Is it alcohol or some other drug that interferes with how you see the world? Is it by putting someone else down so that you can feel just a little bit better about yourself? Is it closing yourself off from the world and your responsibilities by hiding behind a screen and viewing something that you know is ungodly? How easy it is, to fall for those silly temptations of the devil that we know we will regret, that we know we struggle against and yet we go back to them over and over again. Doesn’t it just make you feel so alone, and so empty? You knew the consequences of that sin, and yet you chose to do it anyway. How could a God of justice ever let that stand? You feel cut off from your God, from your Christian brothers and sisters, hoping they never find out that you are a fraud because of your sin.

This is all part of Satan’s wicked plan. He wants you to sin, and then immediately, knowing that you feel guilty, will make you feel alone and burdened. He wants you to think that. He wants you to despair of your sins. He wants you to believe that you are alone and that no one will help you.

But we have a high priest who was tempted in every way, just like you and me and yet was without sin. Jesus withstood the very real temptations that you and I so regularly fall into. And he didn’t do it so that he could show us the way to “say no to sin.” He did it so that when he offered himself up on Calvary, he would be the sinless lamb of God who could take on himself our failures and our shortcomings. He withstood the pain and scorn of the cross so that we would never have to feel alone or cut off, so that we would be cleansed of our sins and holy before our heavenly Father. This is why Jesus is called a great high priest. He made intercession on our behalf, being truly human and truly God, and God accepted his sacrifice once for all. There is no more condemnation that exists because the condemnation was exacted already on the cross. Through faith, you have become a recipient of the perfect gift that God has given to you, of the forgiveness of all of your sins. Your high priest knows your struggles, and he has thoroughly conquered every temptation for you.

The Day of Atonement had to be repeated year after year, but that all changed when Jesus gave his life on the cross. There was no longer a need to symbolize the sacrifice that would be made because Jesus made the sacrifice. In his ultimate high priestly sacrifice, Jesus opened up the Most Holy Place. At the moment of Jesus death, the curtain in the temple which separated the Most Holy Place was torn in two. No more would there be a need for separation because the atonement had been made. This is how the writer can confidently tell us, **Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.** We can go right to the throne of grace. You, yes you, have the right to approach God where he is because of what Christ has done for you. You can walk right up to his throne and be confident that you will receive mercy and find grace there, just when you need.

What do you need mercy for? Does the feeling of guilt still haunt you? Do you feel the burdens of your sin and the punishment that you know must follow? God has mercy for you. From his throne, he looks on you and does not see

one who needs punished, but one who needs his endless mercy. He sees the seal of your forgiveness in baptism, he sends his gifts of the Word and the Lord's Supper to you so that you can taste, see, and hear the forgiveness.

What do you need grace for? Grace is God's undeserved love, and who of us couldn't use that. During this season of lent, we reflect on our sinfulness and the more of your sin that you see, the more grace God has to offer to you. God's grace sustains and helps us to resist the devil's temptation. Grace gives us peace in knowing that Jesus has already resisted every one of our sins and is there to help you resist every temptation as well. Go to that throne, where you will find all the grace you could ever ask for and so much more. Access to that throne was bought and paid for by your great high priest, who invites you to come to the throne.

We have a great high priest, do we not? We are set free from all our burdens, from all of our guilt and shame. We are set free from the temptations of the devil. This all from his perfect life, lived in perfect obedience, sacrificed with joy so that we would be purified from all unrighteousness, so that we could have direct access to God's grace and mercy, which flow abundantly to you. Let us hold firmly to this faith. Let us approach God's throne of grace with confidence, where we know that we have mercy and grace in fullness through Christ. Amen.