

“The Advocate”

(1 John 1:21)

December 5, 2010

Pastor John Bronson

Order of Worship for December 5, 2010, Second Sunday in Advent & Communion

Pre-service Song

Welcome and Announcements

Call to Worship: Lighting of the Advent Candle: Jesus is our High Priest

Songs of Worship:

“Angels We Have Heard on High”

Song # 278

“Good Christian Men, Rejoice”

Song # 273

“Emmanuel”

Song # 243

Offering and Offertory

Celebrating the Lord’s Supper

“A Communion Hymn for Christmas”

Song # 287

[I suggest two changes: replace “eve” with “day” in line one, and have Dorothy change the score for the final measure on the last verse to a climactic major cord. We might also consider having the worship team sing the first verse through alone.]

Invitation and Prayer of Confession and Consecration

Prayer of Dedication and Distribution of the Elements

“Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness”

Song # 293

Message:

“The Advocate” (1 John 2:1)

by Pastor Bronson

Closing Song

“Go, Tell It on the Mountain”

Song # 258

Parting Word of Grace

Sunday Evening Studies:

Hebrews: A Letter for our Time

5:30 – 7:00 pm in the Music Building

“The Prayer Closet”

November 28, 2010

*“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”*

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **National and District EFCA:** that the financial downturn will not result in ministry difficulties for home and foreign missions; that Christ centered harmony will prevail amongst all staff and departments; that love for Christ and for the lost will prevail over all other considerations; that truth will not be compromised
2. **President Obama:** that the Lord will strategically place counselors of godly wisdom around him; that the Spirit will give him discernment of wisdom and folly; that the eyes of his heart will be open to Jesus
3. **The Board of Elders:** for the Spirit give them unity of purpose in knowing God’s will for the ministries of our church; that they will be men of purity, sobriety, compassion and godly love
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: Pvt. Casey Brubaker** (son of John, grandson of Larry and Wanda Brukaer):
5. **College Student of the Week: Caleb Bronson at the University of Michigan** (son of John and Nini Bronson):

We continue today in our reflections on Advent. The general theme, as I hope you recall, is “And the Word became Flesh.” That great truth is the theme for our Advent messages and hopefully for our Advent meditations as well. Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation of the Son of God as the Son of Man. That happened by means of the womb of Mary, a peasant Jewish girl of the family of David. Mary gave birth to a boy, a little boy, a baby, and she named him Jesus just as the angel Gabriel had told her she should do. I have mentioned that each week we want to lift up another aspect of the Savior who has been sent to us.

Last week we spoke of Jesus as the ultimate prophet based on Hebrews [1:1-2] which read this way: *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”* God has spoken to us through Jesus. This week we want to concentrate our thoughts on Jesus as the great High Priest. We look at Hebrews 2:17-18 and this is what you will read: *“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation [that is “payment”] for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted he is able to help those who are being tempted.”* As our high priest, Jesus is also our advocate. Advocate is another way of understanding the work of the priest. This is what we are told in I John 2:2, *“If anyone does sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”*

It is the function of a priest to represent the interests of man to God. At the same time a priest represents the ways of God to man. A priest therefore is to mediate; he is to mediate between the realm of divine perfection and the realm of human need. Describing the work of a priest, Hebrews 2:16-17 reads this way: *“For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”* A priest, as I said, is a mediator between God and men, and of mediators there is exactly one, one mediator and one mediator only. That is what we are told in I Timothy 2:5-6, *“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.”*

There is an observation to make about that. We recognize here agreement with the words of Jesus recorded in John 14:6. What did Jesus say? What he said was this: *“...no man comes to the Father but [through] me.”* [repeated] Those are the words of Jesus. That [assertion] is hotly contested. That is hotly contested even within the church today. You need to understand that the Buddha is not a mediator between God and men. Muhammad is not a mediator between God and man. There are no spiritual guides, no counselors, no teachers, none of the millions of Hindu gods; none can be a mediator between God and man. It is only Jesus Christ, for He is the son of Mary and of the house and lineage of David, born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of the prophet Micah’s words and is the mediator between God and man, and therefore only He can fulfill the role of High Priest.

If you know the Old Testament, you realize there were two great liabilities, two weaknesses, two inadequacies for the Old Testament priesthood. The first was that they died. That is what we are told in Hebrews 7:23. This is what we are told, *“the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office...”* By contrast, Jesus does not die. Hebrews 7:24-25 read in this way, *“...he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them”* This is an extraordinary statement. What is extraordinary, however, may easily slip our attention. What is extraordinary is not so much the endless life of the resurrected Jesus – that is of course extraordinary, but it is not different than what all of us will experience who are in Christ. After all, we expect Jesus to live forever in some way. But what is really extraordinary is the emphasis upon the fact that Jesus knows us personally forever. Clearly the implication of verse 25, which we just read, which is that Jesus’ life is continuous, in combination with what I read earlier in Hebrews 2:17-18 – I am going to read it

again; *“...he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”* The implication of that is that Jesus knows you personally and that there is a qualitative advantage to this when He enters the holy place to come into the presence of the Father as we are told in Hebrews 9:24. This is what it says, *“For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”* Jesus does not pray for people in general; he prays for people by name. That is the point of this. When he comes before the Father, he prays for John Howard Bronson – and what is your name? Jesus did not die for people in general. He died for people by name. He is the infinite God; he does not need general categories.

There is a further critically important aspect of Jesus as our High Priest. Again this is spelled out for us at Hebrews 2:14-18. Hear them again:

*“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*

Whom does he help? [He helps] those who are being tempted. How can he do that? Because he knows us.

There are some important things that we learn in those few verses. First, we recognize that at the heart of Jesus’ work on the cross was setting us free from the fear of death. That is how we are set free from the power of the devil. The devil works on us through our fear of death. By implication, reflecting upon the triumph of Jesus Christ over against Satan and death, we realize that the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the triumph of life over death. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the triumph of forgiveness over condemnation. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the triumph of hope over despair. It is equally the triumph of grace over judgment, of hope over despair and of faith over fear. How do you like that list? What I put at the bottom of that list is “Merry Christmas”! That is the best Christmas present you will ever get!

But to rightly appreciate that list of triumphs, we need to have some clarity regarding the way the fear of death works to enslave us. This is not, you see, simply the fear of going to hell, that is, of eternal condemnation, although that is a fact. The emphasis instead falls on what the fear of death does to people now, in this life. Death, of course, is the absence or the negation of life. In its truest sense death is separation from God, Who is the source of all life. But the person enslaved by fear of death is not so much held captive by a sense of separation from God – although this is true. Rather, fear of death is the fear of emptiness. The person who is gripped by the fear of death is held captive by a sense of impoverishment, a sense that somehow they are going to miss what life has to offer. This is the powerful allurement of sin. The looming reality of death, which is almost always ignored but never forgotten, drains us of hope and joy. When we are joyless and when we are hopeless, and when we live in the fear of missing out, that somehow life is going to pass me by, and I will be left holding a big bag of nothing if I don’t act now, so under the fear of death we begin to “make deals.” Under the fear of death we begin to curry favors. Under the fear of death we seek to buy at least temporary security and fleeting happiness, we seek to pile up worldly treasures. At the same time we are careful to keep our distance from God, because Satan whispers into our hearts and minds, “You know, it is God who is going to kill you!” Life is hard, an inevitable reality in a fallen world, and life is therefore seen as brief, because there is no hope against death. So slaves of the fear of death live by calculation. This is the calculation that they make: the cost of doing the right thing must never be greater than the potential for immediate rewards. Under these conditions all of life is lived by compromise. This is the overwhelming condition

of humanity without the life-promise of the resurrection and eternal life to cancel our fears. It is from all of this that the cross is designed to set us free.

That is the first implication of the cross. The second is that we are told Jesus helps the off-spring of Abraham. Now this is critically important for us to understand. In the context of its presentation [in Hebrews], the author is distinguishing between angels and men. The whole of the first chapter [of Hebrews] is devoted to distinguishing between angels and Jesus, the emphasis falls on the fact that Jesus has come to help, not angels but men. But in the context of the New Testament at large, notice that Jesus does not say that he comes to help the sons of Adam. Look again. Adam is too broad a category.

Who are the offspring of Abraham? Well at first thought we might want to say it is the Jews, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But a bit of sober reflection and we know that there are two ways that this thought is also wrong. On the one hand if we say that he has only come for the physical descendants of Abraham, it leaves out all the believing Gentiles. How many of us are believing Gentiles? Thank-you very much! It cannot possibly mean that! It would also mean that he would include all the unbelieving Jews. To straighten this out, we need to go to Romans 9:6-13. I will not expound on this passage; I will simply read it and let you be aware of what it says.

*“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all – an important statement – who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as the offspring. For this is what the promise said: ‘About this time next year I will return and Sarah shall have a son.’ And not only so, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’”*

So, the children, the offspring of Abraham are those who believe. They are those who believe in the promise. These are the ones who are given the hope of eternal life. Neither the unbelieving Jew nor the unbelieving Gentile has this hope. They have not received the gift. My question is, do you have hope for eternal life? That is the question. Have you received the promise? Do you believe?

Third, and lastly from this little passage, we are told here something of the specific qualities of Jesus as a high priest. These are the result of him being made flesh and blood, subjected to temptations just as we. What we are told is that he is merciful. We are also told that he is faithful. We are also told that he knows all about our temptations. Lastly we are told that out of this we can have every assurance he is well able to help us whenever temptation arises. It is here in the context of Jesus’ response to our need that we discover the second critical liability – remember earlier I said there was a liability, a weakness, a deficiency – in the Old Testament priesthood: they died. In reflection upon what it means to say “death” we realize that those men burdened by their own sins were quite incapable of keeping straight all of those whom they tried to serve. They were sinners. But we are told Jesus was not a sinner. “. . . we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

Think for a moment: How many of you sin? (Don’t answer these questions. Just assume that I am the Holy Spirit talking to you. You talk back in your heart [alone].) How many of us find it difficult to go to a brother or a sister and confess our sin? Why? Why do we hesitate? Not only will the saints hesitate to go to one another, but you won’t even come to me. Why not? [It is because] you are afraid. Of what are you afraid? [You are afraid], of the fact that we are all sinners. Let me ask, how many ever did that, how many ever went to someone and laid out your heart and confessed your failings and appealed for forgiveness, and then got a boot in your face? We fear the response, even the best of friends and those who love us most are still sinners. I had to confess to my wife this morning. I had misjudged her and responded with irritated accusation and wounded her spirit. I did not want to

come to the [communion] table [without clearing the matter up]. Now you would think that going to anybody like my wife would be easy. She is kind, gentle, patient and forgiving. Ah, but if I approach her in the grip of my own sin, I project my heart's condition onto her, and then I fear. I had to have a little session with the Lord this morning, which is highly advisable and can be exceedingly uncomfortable. Sin distorts our thinking. Sin makes it very hard to hear what the other person is saying. Sinners are always bringing their issues into the middle of what you're trying to say. Though sinners ought to be able to sympathize with us in our struggles almost always they are having troubles of their own and will be playing games in their own heads and are likely to play games with you as well. The fact of the matter is that dealing with sinners is risky, even saved sinners.

But beloved, Jesus is not a sinner. Jesus has full sympathy [with us] because he has full knowledge [of us], full experiential knowledge of what it means to be tempted. He knows what it means to live in a body of flesh and blood. He knows the reality of the things with which we struggle; he is not a sinner. He does not play games.

Did you ever notice what the first thing was that Satan did when he decided to destroy humanity's relationship with God? Put your mind all the way back to Genesis 3. Do you see what he tried to do? In his little conversation with Eve, the first thing Satan set out to do was to present God as if he was a sinner. “Did God really say. . .?” “Do you think God dealt straight with you?” “Aren't you aware of the fact that God was hiding something from you, that He knew if you ate of that tree you'd become gods. . . Did you ever think about that Eve?” “You've been assuming that God is your best friend, that He was devoted to your best interests, that you could trust Him explicitly in all things, that there was nothing to fear from God at all, but I am letting you know that is not the whole story.” But Jesus is not a sinner. If Jesus has an agenda, it is the agenda that we see being acted out in the gospels in which He will do anything for our good. So let me ask you a question: How recently have you been fooled into staying clear from God because you were afraid of what He might have to say if you got close? Are you sometimes fooled into feeling and seeing that God is not to be trusted?

Here is a summary: the first thing we learned is that Jesus is our High Priest. He intercedes for us, knowing fully who we are and what we have done. He intercedes for us at the very throne of the Father in the heavenly temple. No form of death, no shadow or interposition of sin, nothing distracts Jesus from His loving labor of intercession, a work in which I would take it from Romans 8:26 that the Holy Spirit joins Him. *“Likewise,”* Paul says, *“the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”* That is the first of the great comforts that we receive from this passage. The second is this, and we find it again in Hebrews 2:18; Jesus helps us when we are being tempted. Do you notice the tense there? Jesus helps us when we are being tempted. So here's the question: when we confront temptation, do we instantly look for Jesus? When we are tempted, do we instantly cry out, “Lord God, I am in need!” When we face the temptation, it begins to rise up as a competing desire to draw our hearts away from a love for God that we would instead love something else, do we say, “Jesus, help me; I feel myself being torn away from You. I don't want to go there. I want you to grasp me, hold me, keep me that I might abide in You.”

The Puritans and all the preachers at the time of the First Great Awakening that preceded the American Revolution by about thirty years would often ask their listeners, “Have you flown to Jesus?” Certainly as much as any other the truth set before us, regarding Jesus as our High Priest explains why we should do that. Once more Hebrews 4:14-16,

*“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses – O God, I fell again! God, I went where I wasn't supposed to go! O God I said what I didn't want to say! And God says, “I know.” – but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

Is this a time of need, personally, in your family, your friends, this church or our community? How about our nation? Is this a time of need? Do we face trials and temptations? Will we fly to Jesus?

Pray with me: Father, it is one thing to know the doctrines; it is another to live by them. Help us to live by the truth that we know. Jesus has told us the truth. He has also come as our mediator. He is the high priest of our confession. He is the one who speaks our name before you and the throne of mercy. He is the one who says, “I am here to help you when you are tempted, when you are weak. Grant, Father, that we will not be fooled by Satan, but rather be persuaded by the Holy Spirit and come to You. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you often (ever) think of Jesus as a priest? According to the message, what is it that a priest does? (See Hebrews 2:17-18 and 4:14-16)
2. How many priests in the whole of human history can actually bring a sinner to God?
3. What were the two liabilities or weakness of the Old Testament priesthood? (See Hebrews 7:23-25, 4:15 and 10:1-4)
4. According to Hebrews 2:14-18, what does Jesus accomplish for us on the cross? What are some ways of understanding the enslaving power of the fear of death?
5. According to Hebrews 2:14-18, who is it that Jesus helps and therefore who is it that He does not help? (See also Romans 9:6-13) Why is this significant or important?
6. According to Hebrews 2:14-18, what are the special qualities which Jesus brings to us as our High Priest? (See also Hebrews 4:15) Why are these important qualities for a priest?
7. Where does Jesus carry out His service on our behalf today? Who helps Him in this task? (See Romans 8:26)
8. When most specifically – and perhaps surprisingly – is Jesus available to help us? (See Hebrews 2:18 and 4:16) Has this been your experience?