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Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

Congregation: **First United Reformed Church**
Oak Lawn, Illinois
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How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds

Teach Me, O Lord, Thy Way of Truth

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Title: **We Have a Great High Priest!**

I Will Sing of My Redeemer

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“We Have a Great High Priest!”

Hebrews 4:12-16

In one of those terrifying dreams that make no sense at all, yet seems so real that you wake up in a cold sweat, imagine that you hear a knock on your door late at night. “Who is there?” you call out into the darkness. A loud voice over a megaphone responds, “This is the police. Open up. We have a warrant for your arrest!”

It may seem like a strange and frightening dream, but the verses before us remind us that we are all lawbreakers and that we are all accountable to God. Apart from Christ there is more than a warrant for our arrest; there is eternal condemnation for those who are not in Christ through true saving faith in him alone.

Verse 12 tells us that the word of God is double edged. The sword of God’s word has two sides. It can bring great comfort. It is filled with the great and precious promises from God. It gives assurance of salvation and promises strength and grace for each new day. It promises that the God who has cleansed us from our sin will also hold us in his hand with a powerful yet tender grip so that no one can snatch us out of the hand of our faithful God. (John 10:28-29)

But because the word of God is a double-edged sword, it also brings deep conviction to the true Christian. The word of God, as it is applied by the Holy Spirit, has a way of convicting us in the deepest recess of our being. That is what verse 12 refers to when it describes how the word *“penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.”* The verse is describing how the

word of God dissects us, much the way a surgeon with his scalpel dissects the patient on the operating table.

God's word goes underneath "our Sunday best." It goes underneath all the pretenses that we put on. "*It judges,*" verse 12 says, "*the thoughts and attitudes of our heart.*" In other words, it confronts us directly with our sinful condition. The word of God convicts us of all the evil thoughts we have harbored and all the sinful deeds we have done; it cuts us deeply, showing us the enormity of our iniquity and transgression against God.

God's word brings comfort, yes – but first it convicts us and shows us our true condition as sinners. In a sense it is as though the word rubs salt in our sinful wounds so that we painfully feel how serious our sin is. And then the word brings the salve of salvation, the healing balm of Christ's redeeming work.

Verse 13 countersinks the nail driven home in verse 12. Verse 13 declares: "*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*" When verse 13 says, "*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight,*" it truly means nothing. And when it says in verse 13, "*Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account,*" it truly means everything.

Achan found that out. You remember what happened when the Israelites surrounded Jericho. The walls of the city came tumbling down by God's power, but the Israelites were commanded not to take any of the possessions of Jericho for themselves. Those items were to be devoted to the Lord; and the silver and the gold were to be put in the treasury of the Lord. Yet Achan came across a beautiful robe from Babylon along with a wedge of pure gold and two hundred shekels of silver.

Wouldn't it be a shame to leave that beautiful robe in a city that was going to be destroyed? Would it really matter if he took that robe for himself? And what about the wedge of gold, and the two hundred shekels of silver that were near the robe? Would it be so wrong to take those items too? Wasn't there enough gold and silver in the treasury of the Lord? Besides, who would ever know if he took those items?

Most of you know how that story ends. It ends in the tragic seventh chapter of the book of Joshua. Achan's sin was revealed. Achan was guilty, and Achan was stoned to death. He found out that God knows our secrets, and there is no way to hide anything from God.

Or, if you think that not everything is hidden from God's sight and if you doubt that truly everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account, consider Ananias and Sapphira.

They knew that Barnabas had sold some property and had given the proceeds to the church. He was not obligated to do so. There was no law saying that he or anyone else had to sell property and give the proceeds to the church, but Ananias and Sapphira apparently wanted some recognition. They sold some property and kept some of the money for themselves, which they had every right to do. But they also gave some money to the church with the implication that they were giving all the proceeds of the sale of the property to the church, just as Barnabas had done.

Most of you know how that tragic story ends in the fifth chapter of the book of Acts. Both Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because, in the words of Peter, they had agreed to test the Spirit of the Lord. They, too, found out that "*nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*"

Millions of people today think that somehow they have hidden their sins from God and that he will not find out about them. But their day of judgment will also come. The day will come when they will

find out firsthand that there is nothing hidden from God's sight, that everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.

But it's not just Achan, Ananias, Sapphira, and millions of others who have done things that they thought were hidden from God. You and I have done the same. There is not a law of God that we have kept perfectly; we have broken every commandment, more times than we even realize. And often, unfortunately, we have transgressed God's law willfully, with full knowledge of our rebellious sin. And our text, written by a Christian to Christians says, "*We must give account.*" The knock is at the door. We have broken the law. Who will represent us? Who can help us in this frightening dream turned reality?

Before the Bar of God's Justice

While verse 12 and 13 remind us of the stark reality of our sins, verse 14 to 16 reassure us that we have One who perfectly represents us before the throne of God's justice.

Verse 14 describes Jesus as our great high priest. A high priest in biblical times represented a group of people before their judge – before God – much like we would have a lawyer today to represent us in a court of law.

In the Old Testament there were many high priests, but none of them were truly "great." The high priests of the Old Testament era could enter the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle or temple only once per year. They had to make a sacrifice for their sins as well as the sins of the people. They were sinners here on earth; they were not in heaven at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, as Jesus our great high priest is.

But verse 14 assures us that Jesus is in heaven and that he represents us before his Father's throne; he represents us and speaks on our behalf. However, looking back at verse 12 and 13 and seeing that we are lawbreakers against God, what will Jesus, as he represents us, say?

Do you remember what the earthly high priest, Aaron, said when Moses came down from Mount Sinai and saw that the people were worshiping a golden calf? Aaron had told the people to bring him their gold earrings and Aaron fashioned their jewelry into a golden calf. Then the people said, "*These are your gods who brought you up out of Egypt.*" (Exo. 32:4)

But when Moses asked him what was going on, Aaron the high priest – the representative of the people, the one who was to represent them before God – said in, Exodus 32:22-24: "*You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!*"

You and I can be certain that Jesus does not represent us before the Father by placing blame upon us. As Jesus represents us, he does so with a great understanding of our weakness, of our sinful condition. We see that in verse 15: "*For 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.*"

You may think that there are temptations in your life that are unique to you. But Scripture assures us, in 1 Corinthians 10:13, that no temptation has seized you or me except what is common to all humanity.

Jesus is truly human and has experienced every temptation that you and I have faced: greed, lust, pride, revenge, slothfulness, coveting. All the sins that you and I have committed are sins that

Jesus was tempted by. He knows how powerful the temptation was that made you fall. Jesus understands because he has faced that temptation himself and yet he never fell; he never sinned.

And Jesus faced much greater temptation than you or me. Consider how tempted he was when the devil came to him in the desert, using his weakness after fasting for forty days and forty nights. The devil appealed to his hunger in an effort to make him fall, to turn him from the call that his heavenly Father had given him.

So, too, in Gethsemane the temptation was great. Jesus was tempted to forsake the agonizing work of redemption set before him on the cross. The temptation was not to drink the cup of the Father's righteous and proper wrath against your sin and mine. In a similar way, imagine the power of the temptation for revenge, when on the cross the people below mockingly shouted, *"If you are the son of God come down from there, save yourself and save us too!"*

But even though Jesus was tempted in *"every way as we are"* – and much more severely than we are tempted, he never sinned. But because of his temptations, he fully understands the power of the temptation that comes into your life and mine. He understands the tempter's power even more completely than we do. And he remembers what it is like to be a human being in a fallen sinful world filled with temptations of every type imaginable.

Consequently, as he represents us before his Father's throne, he says in effect, "I know what it's like to face their temptation, I know what the human experience is all about. I know that they did not always resist temptation, that they fell innumerable times into sin, breaking the law over and over. But I shed my blood for them. I bore the curse of their sin. I sacrificed myself as their great high priest."

No wonder Romans 8:1 assures us that, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* He has paid the penalty, not in part but the whole. Sins of the past, sins of the present, and sins of the future are all covered by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. He has turned the throne of God's justice into the throne of grace. That is why verse 16 tells to *"approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

Holding Firm to Our Faith with Confidence

How else are we to respond to such a great high priest? How do we respond to the one who faithfully represents us before the throne of God's justice? How do we respond to the one who shed his blood to cover all our sins?

One way is to hold firmly to the faith we profess. We see that in verse 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."*

The Hebrews to whom this letter was originally written seemed to be especially tempted to give up on their faith. In Hebrews 3:6 the author of the letter encourages his readers to *"hold onto their courage and the hope of which (they) boast."* In Hebrews 3:14 he writes, *"We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first."* He also frequently brings up the apostasy of the Israelites in the Old Testament and warns us against that apostasy; he warns us not to deconstruct our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He warns us with the realization that Christians of every era are tempted to give up on their faith. One reason is that Satan, whose name means among other things, "Accuser" and "Adversary," always stands ready to bring accusations against God's people.

He knows the Scripture far better than you or I do, and he loves to quote Scripture. But he only quotes the Scriptures that cut like a knife. He loves to quote verse 12 and 13, without any mention of verses 14 to 16. He loves to quote Romans 6:23, *“The wages of sin is death,”* but he is loath to quote the last part of that verse, *“but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* He loves to focus on the law and how each one of us is a lawbreaker deserving eternal damnation, but he will say nothing about the gospel, the good news of salvation for sinners through saving faith in Christ alone.

But instead of letting his bluster blow the candle of your faith out, hold firmly onto your faith with the full assurance that you have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. He knows everything about you and everything about me, and yet he loves you and me so much that he bore the curse of our sin upon himself as he shed his precious blood to cover our sins.

Secondly, as we hold onto our faith, we are to draw near to God with confidence. We read of that in verse 16 which says, *“Let 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.”*

We approach – or in the words of the ESV, *“draw near”* – to God through the means he has given. The primary means that God has given to us in order that we may draw near to him are his word, the proper use of the sacraments, and prayer. Theologians refer to those three items as “The ordinary means of grace”.

It is in his word, the Holy Bible, that the Lord reveals himself. And if we are to draw near to him, then his word must be an open book in our lives. The Holy Spirit draws us ever nearer to our triune God as we spend time in the word which he inspired. When we systematically spend time in the Word, not only on Sunday but each day throughout the week, the Holy Spirit draws us ever nearer to our triune God.

Prayer is also a means of grace through which we are drawn nearer to the Lord. And prayer goes hand in hand with reading the Bible. One of the most effective ways to pray is not to make a long list of petitions to bring to the Lord, but to pray with an open Bible. It is effective because the Bible shows us both our sin and our Savior. The Bible cuts us to the core as it *“penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, (as) it judges the thoughts and attitudes of our heart.”*

But it also reveals our Savior, who came to redeem sinners from their sin. It reveals Jesus who said, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”*

When you pray, pray with an open Bible. Take both the warnings and the promises of God and pray them back to the Lord, thanking him for the reconciling work of his Son, your great high priest.

A third means to draw us closer to our triune God is through the proper use of the sacraments. In the sacraments, the cleansing of sin is portrayed to our senses, enabling us to more deeply appreciate the truths of the Word of God and the sacrifice of his Son for sinners. In the words of Lord’s Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism, *“the Holy Spirit produces (saving faith) in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through the use of the holy sacraments.”*

God has given us these means so that we may *“approach the throne of grace with confidence, ... (and) receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”* Our confidence comes not from ourselves but from Christ. We have confidence because through Jesus, our great high priest, we come to God’s throne of grace. Grace is unmerited favor. We do not deserve to be represented by the great high priest, and yet by unmerited favor – by grace – we have full assurance that we are represented by our sinless Savior before the Father’s throne.

And we also have the full assurance that the punishment and the penalty for our sin has already been paid by Jesus Christ. Just as the Old Testament high priest would offer a bloody sacrifice in accordance with Old Testament law, so too, Jesus offered himself as the ultimate bloody sacrifice so that all of our sins are covered, separated from us as far as the east is from the west, cast into the depth of the sea, and remembered for judgment no more.

Grace for Our Time of Need

Not only do we find mercy and forgiveness for all of our sins, but through faith in Jesus we also are given grace to sustain us in what verse 16 calls “*our time of need.*” Do you have times of need in your life? Times of weakness? Times when you need that extra measure of God's grace? I'm sure you do; and I know that I do. And verse 16 assures us that not only does Jesus forgive our sins, he also grants us his grace in the time of need.

We sang, “What a friend we have in Jesus – all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.” The author of that hymn, Joseph Scriven, knew about times of need; he knew about grief, disappointment, hardship, and heartache. He wrote the hymn to encourage his mother as she lay on her deathbed. Yet death was something he was already well acquainted with. The night before he was pledged to be married, his fiancée, whom he loved so very much, drowned.

Joseph Scriven then immigrated from Europe to Ontario, Canada, where he made a living as a woodsman. He sold countless cords of firewood, but he also gave countless cords away; he had an eye for widows and others in need. He provided the wood they needed for warmth at no charge.

He had found mercy through faith in Jesus as his sins were forgiven. And he found grace to sustain him in his time of need. He found out firsthand that there is no greater friend than our Savior and Lord, our great high priest who perfectly represents us before the throne of God the Father.

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We have all had strange and haunting dreams at times, but dreaming that we are lawbreakers, guilty apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ, is not just a dream. It is a reality for all humanity. Every knee will bow before Jesus Christ. Every tongue will confess his deity when he returns to judge the living and the dead. Yet all who confess their sin and have saving faith in Christ alone, will find there is no longer any condemnation for their sins.

Instead, there is the great high priest who perfectly represents us. There is Jesus at the Father's right hand, sympathizing with us and pointing to his finished work on the cross. On the cross he covered our sins, propitiating them by appeasing our triune God's righteous and proper wrath against sin.

And then, having covered our sin, he imputes his perfect record of righteous obedience to us, so that we stand before God's throne, not in our sinful selves, but in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. In the words of Lord's Day 23:

Even though my conscience accuses me
of having grievously sinned against all God's commandments,
and of never having kept any of them,
and even though I am still inclined toward all evil,
nevertheless,
without my deserving it at all,
out of sheer grace,

God grants and credits to me
the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ,
as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner,
and as if I had been as perfectly obedient
as Christ was obedient for me.

All I need to do
is to accept this gift of God with a believing heart. (Q&A 60, Heidelberg Catechism)

By God's grace and Spirit's power, have you accepted his gift with a believing heart? If your faith is truly placed in Jesus Christ alone this morning, then you can be sure that you are perfectly represented before God's throne of justice by him who laid down his life for you.

May that be a reality in your life and mine, this day and always. For we truly have a great high priest! Amen.

sermon outline:

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. - Hebrews 4:15

“We Have a Great High Priest!”

Hebrews 4:12-16

- I. We need someone to perfectly represent us before God, for all of us are guilty sinners (12-13)

- II. Jesus is our great High Priest, perfectly qualified by his life of obedience, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection, to represent us:
 - 1) He is in heaven, at the right hand of the Father (14)

 - 2) He is able to sympathize with our weakness, for He was tempted in all ways as we are (15)

- III. Our response:
 - 1) We are to hold firmly to our faith (14)

2) We are to draw near to God with confidence, finding mercy and grace in times of need (16)

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