



CANCER AWARENESS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 12, 2008

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Lection – Hebrews 4:14-5:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. (v. 15) For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. (v. 16) Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

5:1 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Cancer awareness means that one has or is obtaining knowledge about cancer and cancer related issues, including, but not limited to, possible causes, treatment, and its effect on the body and spirit. Awareness is more than a cerebral activity, it can also involve:

- Advocating environmental justice so that hazardous waste sites are not built in neighborhoods;
- Calling for more prevention and screening programs in order to lower the cancer incidence rate for minorities and reduce the number of delayed diagnoses; and,
- Demanding a quality of patient care that results in improved survival rates for racial minorities.

As we confront the challenges of this disease, we recognize that we dare not forget that it inflicts fear and the feeling of helplessness on the sufferer, the family, caregivers and the community. However, affirming Jesus as our “high priest” can be a source of courage. Scripture doesn’t prescribe a “pie in the sky” mentality, or suggest that we should not take cancer seriously. Rather, we are called to live in a hope that frees us from being spiritually overcome by any physical condition.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Hebrews 4:14-5:1

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Recently, our congregation conducted the funeral of an extraordinary man. He was extraordinary, not because he was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer that produced inoperable tumors or because he outlived his prognosis of six months, but because of how he affirmed his faith in the midst of crisis. I saw his strength in dealing with several family crises and traumas over the years, but even I was surprised. He refused to be crushed by his plight or sit down and wait to die. He researched treatment options and became intentional about planning quality time, travel and activities with his family. For two years a new form of treatment did have positive effects, but the cancer had advanced far enough to cause other painful physical problems. I saw him in those final days, as he wrote the closing chapter of his life with a pen of celebration, offering words of thanksgiving to his family, affirming his belief in the resurrection and living out the words I used at his funeral, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7). In this liturgical moment, I remember him.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Book of Hebrews is a call to persevere, and it is encouragement to not let go of the faith. The message directed to those persecuted Christian converts was that Christ is superior to anything that could be found in their past or present religious lives. This lection reading focuses on priests, those who were the intercessors between God and the children of Israel. They proclaimed and interpreted the law, affirmed that the promised Messiah was Israel’s hope, and sought to appease God with the prayers and sacrifices they offered. Priests were important, but they had human limitations.

The high priest had a closer relation to God (5:1). Only he could officiate at certain festivals, discern the will of the Almighty, and enter the inner sanctum of the temple to make a sin-offering for himself and the people. But he still had human limitations.

The term “great high priest” (v. 14) lays the foundation for a later comparison to Jesus and the first high priest, Melchizedek (5:6). Melchizedek (King of Righteousness) was both the priest and King of Salem (Jerusalem). The connection between Jesus and Melchizedek can be attributed to David, who, in describing the Messiah, said, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Psalms 110:4). In other words, the Messiah would be righteousness itself and, like the high priest, he would intercede and atone for the sins of his people. However, this High Priest, unlike those to whom he was compared, would have the ability to intercede like no one before him. This high priest could take away the sins of the world.

The reading contains important key words:

“Sympathy” (v. 15)

Jesus pleads our salvation before God because he sympathizes and empathizes with human suffering. Jesus knew anguish and suffering. At the tomb of Lazarus, “Jesus wept.” On the cross, he bled, suffered, and cried in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Thus, our intercessor knows in great detail what it means to suffer. He is acquainted with groaning and with grief. He is familiar with what it means to have a body that has been wounded -- His by foolish men, and ours by sickness and disease.

Furthermore, and quite importantly, he pleads God’s mercy for us in our daily existence. This priest, intercessor, and advocate of ours, is connected to our everyday struggles. Therefore, we know that we are not alone in our season of illness. The great high priest and, as the old folks used to say, “our doctor in a sick room,” is nearby.

“Boldness” (v. 16)

Since Christ is with us, we can go to God with confidence, courage and boldness, relying on the promise that God will hear our prayers. The spirit of boldness also defines how we can view the challenges of life. We approach them, not in a foolhardy way, but with the determination of one who knows the greatest physician and the ultimate deliverer. The spirit of boldness and confidence empowers us to fight to live though ravished by disease and even by radiation. Since we have this high priest firmly on our side, we can do no less than show up ready for duty to face even that which can harm our bodies.

“Mercy and Grace” (v.16)

The most powerful words in the passage are mercy and grace (v.16): “*we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” This sounds like a promise. Mercy and grace! These two traveling companions are some of the greatest gifts given by the one who watches over us. Mercy is being spared a deserved condemnation, and grace occurs when we are given a reward that we have not earned.

The implication is that we are not only in the heart of Jesus and have the ear of God, but we are looked upon with a favoring eye and even given an advantage. But is that not the behavior of a loving God and a caring Savior? By favor (mercy and grace), we can meet even physical challenges, like cancer, with a faith that overcomes fear. This same faith energized our fore-parents in the face

of slavery, segregation, poverty and discrimination. So we have a legacy of knowing how to fight attacking forces and a God who favors his children.

Through the sympathy shown to us by Christ and his mercy and grace, we draw both consolation and inspiration. We can fight on, live on; we have courage because we live in assurance that, “whatever life’s challenges, we can meet them in partnership with the Divine.” It is this partnership that lets us know that cancer can invade the body, but it need not possess our soul.

Celebration

Hebrews 4:14 - 5:1 is a “good news” passage. It affirms that the relationship we have with God, through Christ, is a living reality. It is a renewing and empowering relationship that we depend on in good times and in bad. We know that we can draw from God’s deep waters of mercy and grace. “O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.” (Psalms 34:8)

Descriptive Details

Although not all of these details are actually indicated in the passage, the imagined imagery allows us to posit the following:

Sights: A throne upon which a high priest sits; goats and lambs as offerings of sacrifice before Jesus became the great lamb slain for the sins of the world; approaching the throne of grace with boldness; the face of those who receive grace and mercy in times of illness; and

Sounds: Groaning in pain during medical treatment; shouting in celebration for relief.