

A God's Eye View: Of You! Pt. 9
Priests of the LORD
Exodus 19: 3-6; Isaiah 61: 5; 10-11

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**July 12, AD 2020
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Today we're picking back up on our series *A God's Eye View: Of You*. We've been delving into the book of Isaiah, and noticing the new names of identity that the LORD promised his people. They were living in the chaos of exile, but God promised them something more was coming. Throughout our study, we've seen that the LORD named his ruined people, *Sought Out* and *My Delight*. He reminded them that they would become great *Oaks of Righteousness* and *Restorers of Streets*. His seemingly forsaken people would become part of God's great redeeming plan for the world. So the next pair of names in Isaiah 61 addresses this role: "but you shall be called *priests of the LORD*; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God."

That's not a way we usually think of ourselves: as priests. Sounds kind of ritualistic for a bunch of Presbyterians, doesn't it? Let's think of it in more basic terms. A priest is a go-between. A priest offers the things of God to the people. And then offers the gifts and prayers of the people back to God. It is assumed that a priest knows the God he represents. He has this role because he knows something about the LORD. The people say, "So, you have studied the Scriptures more deeply than we have; tell me what our God is like. Tell me what he wants and who he is." And it is assumed that the priest knows people well enough to express their hearts and desires in prayers. "Look, you can put this in words better than I can, so would you pray to the LORD about how much life hurts right now? Would you tell him how sorry we are for our sins? Would you ask him to take care of our deepest needs?" A priest with integrity would intimately know both God and his people.

A person acting in a priestly way connects deeply to the people. I once heard a pastor begin a sermon on depression this way, "Now, I've never been depressed myself. And I'm not really sure why people get depressed anyway. Or why they can't get over it. But I gather it's hard for some people. So I'm going to talk to them today." You can imagine how the rest of the sermon went. No connection. No help at all. By contrast, the priest comes alongside people and speaks in terms of "we."

I recently met with Lauren Darden the new principle at Gardere Christian School. Lauren, by the way is fabulous, and she's going to have a bright future. But

she's following Nancy Zito, the visionary and founder of the school. She's daunted by the task. I understand. I said, "In my career, two times I have followed legends. Guys who were at the church before me for 20 years of great ministry. At age 32, I stood in the churchyard of my first pastorate, looked at the Steeple and said aloud, 'God I can't do this job.' And he showed me that I couldn't but he could."

Last week George Gillam preached a great message to us. He can make a priestly connection on difficult streets where I wouldn't get a hearing. "I was in the car when a murder was committed. I spent decades in Angola. I know what the streets are like. I know what you're feeling. I know what happens when you get put away. The loneliness. The hopelessness. The fear. I want to talk to you about living a different way." And they listen.

If I should experience the suicide of a loved one, I need to talk to some heart-shattered people who have walked that dark valley. I don't want platitudes. I need to hear how even though the sting never leaves, but keeps coming around and around again, even though the sadness and guilt are constant companions, an unexpected peace can rise up from the depths, over time, and make life bearable.

When Susie Tucker was with us, she was a great comfort to people beginning the journey of a battle with cancer. Should I get the shock of that diagnosis and it seems that the C word is unravelling everything, I want to hear from a gladiator who fought 8 years, and never lost faith, never stopped loving, never stopped savoring life even as she lost hers.

The ragged road of exile is Ivy League graduate school for God's kingdom of priests. When we go down the broken paths in Jesus, we become priests of the Triune God for those who struggle. Alcohol, anxiety, emptiness, divorce, the bafflement of parenting adolescents, the crush of debt, the radioactive fallout of moral lapses, the sickening embarrassment of stupid decisions and ordinary, everyday failures in a world that only loves winners. Oh, we've got it all in this congregation. And if we are processing these stages of exile through the grace of Jesus and the company of fellow believers, we become reliable priests for those who feel lost in a faraway country with no way home.

Now of course Jesus is the one true priest. He is the perfect go-between. He is the Son of God who became the Son of Man. God and humanity meet together in the person of Jesus. He knows his Father intimately. He knows intimately as well life as a human in a broken suffering world.

And it's more than empathy. Jesus actually *did* something about the gap between us and our Father. One of the essential tasks of ancient Israel's priests was to offer the sacrifice for sin in the most holy place. Once a year, the high priest would put on a breastplate that engraved upon it the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Symbolically, he was putting on the names of all the people. He was bearing on his heart every single person. This high priest would then take the blood of the sacrifice that had been offered into the holy of holies, to the mercy seat, and pour it out as an offering for the sins of the people. Then he would return to give the blessing, to declare that the LORD had accepted the offering and God and his people were reconciled again. This ritual happened year by year for centuries.

From the beginning, the first Christians realized that Jesus is our High Priest who has offered a sacrifice for sin that does not have to be repeated. He has brought God and man together once and for all. Let's look at a few verses from the book of Hebrews that discuss this:

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 tempted (Hebrews 2: 17-18).

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. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself (Heb. 7:25-27).

The priesthood of Jesus was enacted once for all in the giving of himself on the cross. That death, mysteriously, made a way of peace for all time between humanity and God. But Jesus' priestly work, like his humanity, continues in the present. So he constantly intercedes for us. Moreover, he is continually relating to his Father, not only as the eternal Son of God, but as the Son of Man. He offers praise and love to his Father out of a humanity that was ever obedient and faithful. He does that even now. But not only for himself. He loves his Father in our name and on our behalf, so that we might be included in the eternal love relationship of the Triune God. In as much as we are in Christ, we participate in his relationship of joy and intimacy with the Father.

Jesus' work as a priest who offered the sacrifice of himself established the grounds for how sinners like ourselves can be forgiven and get joined to Jesus. Now his continuing work as a priest in intercession for us is what keeps me connected to God even now. He continues to send the Spirit into our hearts to shape and transform our lives. He keeps on praying our behalf even now. He prays for our ongoing experience of God's great love and salvation.

Now, how does that work with our being called priests of the LORD? There's a stunning passage from Peter that explains,

you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Pet. 2: 4-5, 9).

The reason we are given such a privileged title is so that we may proclaim God's mighty acts of mercy toward us to the world. We have been called in order to be sent. We are the ones who get to make the connection between the Triune God and the world of lost humanity. Let's round our way towards home by looking at three ways we fulfill this priestly task.

1) Worship. Our drawing apart to worship is itself a service to the world. We hold forth to the world a different model of reality. The worshipping church declares that life is not, at the deepest level, simply about our immediate wants and needs. Rather, we exist to glorify and serve the God who has made us. Though it may seem that everyone is going down a path of self-centered destruction, the church in its worship stands against that tide. We acknowledge the one true God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ. In that way, the church is a beacon to the world, drawing people to come out of the darkness to behold the light of Christ.

This is why it's so important that we begin regathering as a congregation, even though it is awkward and inconvenient. By our presence and participation in worship we bear witness to the world of our acknowledgement of the LORD I AM's reality. Though our focus is on God, we actually minister to the world because we declare hope amidst despair, the primacy of love over the forces of evil, and the gift of everlasting life in the face of so much death.

Vigorous worship takes work. Though we no longer have to offer animal sacrifices, we do make the sacrifice of time, energy, and attention. Our worshipping

work as the Priests of the LORD is encapsulated by the verse from Hebrews, "Through him then let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Heb. 13: 15). Confessing the name of Christ in public worship leads to fruit in the watching world.

2) Intercession. Since we are named *Priests of the LORD*, we are to go continually before God on behalf of a world in ruins. Looking upon the present wreckage of the world, we envision the world in which God's redemption has come to fruition. And we pray that it will come to be. Rather than be undone by a world which seems so far from Isaiah's hope, we cry out to God for his promised salvation to be accomplished against all odds. We priests are those who stand in prayer defiantly, almost insanely, against the present appearance of life in the world. We remember that things are supposed to be different, and we remind God that we have such a memory because of his own word. This kind of intercession attempts to pull into the present the future that has been promised by God. We dare to pray so boldly because of what has already been accomplished by the Anointed Redeemer in the past.

In the middle of Isaiah 62, we are called to prayers of watching and prayers of asking.

On your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have set watchmen;
all the day and all the night
they shall never be silent.
You who put the LORD in remembrance,
take no rest, and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it a praise in the earth. (Is. 62: 6-7)

These watchers on the walls were to take taking no rest in their intercessions, and give the LORD no rest until what he promised came to pass. They were to continually remind God of the new names offered to the people of Jerusalem. Our intercessions matters. They are a priestly service to the world.

3) The Ministry of Reconciliation. We tell the story of a God's Eye View of Us. How Christ has led us to see our lives in a new way. So we offer to others this lens of looking through God's eyes. We bear witness to how we have changed from seeing as God sees, and suggest they might find relief, new life, and change as well.

Paul explained this ministry clearly in his second letter to the Corinthian church:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5: 17-20).

We are named as God's own. We have received his marvelous love toward us in Jesus Christ. This news, however was not meant to stop with us. We are each sent to bring the story of this great love to the world. We are ministers. Not just those of us with seminary training and ordination certificates. But all of us who are in Christ share in the administration of the good news—we minister this glorious truth to others.

Our message is to those who have labored so long under the names of defeat. We go to the foreigners and aliens, all the people who have felt excluded and unworthy for so long. We invite them to come in to the full welcome of our loving God. We take the word to all who have experienced life as dried up and without hope for the future. To these who have thought that God has forgotten them, we offer flowing, everlasting life in Jesus Christ. We invite them into the heart of our worship and prayer. That's the world-changing work of Christ's priests.