

## Who the Heck is Melchizedek Fifth Sunday in Lent – Hebrews 5:5-10

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, March 22, 2015*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

For centuries, on the tenth day of the month of *Tishrei*, *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year, the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest of Israel entered the Temple to begin the day-long ritual that would atone, or pay for the sins of the people of God. Having immersed himself completely in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath of purification, he had dressed in the linen undergarments, long-sleeved tunic, embroidered sash and turban common to all priests. These he overlaid with the “Golden Garments” of his office: the sleeveless blue priestly robe fringed at the bottom with tiny bells and pomegranate shaped tassels; the ephod, a richly embroidered apron held in place at his shoulders by a pair of onyxes on which were engraved the names of the Tribes of Israel; the *Hoshen*, the priestly breastplate with twelve gems, each representing one of the Tribes, and a pouch containing the *Urim* and the *Thummim*, used to divine the will of the Almighty; and finally, on the front of the High Priest’s turban, and on his alone, a golden plate inscribed with the Tetragrammaton, the Name of God, so holy that it was pronounced aloud only on this day.

The High Priest, descendent through his father’s lineage from Moses’ brother Aaron, kept ritually pure from his birth, and consecrated, set apart for *this* purpose, for *this* day in the life of the People of God, would begin the ritual by saying the morning prayers and offering the daily sacrifices usually performed by the other priests. Then, bathing again, he changed into a new set of linen garments, to be used only this once and then destroyed. He laid his hands on a perfect bull and made his confession, on behalf of himself and his household, pronounced the sacred name of God, then slaughtered bull as a sin offering, and received its blood in a bowl. Two goats were then selected from among perfect specimens brought to the Temple for this purpose, one to be sacrificed for the Lord, and one “for Azazel,” the so-called scape-goat. Then the High Priest entered the *Kadosh ha’Kodashim*, the Holy of Holies at the center of the Temple, the only person ever to do so, and only on this one day. With embers from the Altar of sacrifice, the High Priest filled the Holy of Holies with the smoke of holy incense, and sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice eight times before the Ark of the Covenant which led the People through their wanderings in the Wilderness and into the Promised Land.

When he returned, the High Priest laid hands on the goat selected to be offered to the Lord, again declaring the name of the Holy One, confessed the sinfulness of the priests of the Lord, and sacrificed it as a sin offering for them, again entering the Holy of Holies to sprinkle that blood as well before the Ark. Once again on the outside of the *Parochet*, the great curtain that separated even the *priests* of God from the *presence* of God, he sprinkled the blood of both sacrifices on the curtain and smeared in on the corners of the Altar of Incense. He then went out to the *Azarah*, the courtyard, and at the Nikanor Gate, he laid hands on the other goat, the scape-goat, and confessed the sins of the People of God, while those in the congregation confessed privately. This goat was then sent off into the wilderness, never again to return, carrying away the sins of the People.

The High Priest continued from first light to last in the rituals of the Day of Atonement, in all wearing five sets of garments, bathing five times, and washing his hands and feet *ten* times. Two lambs were sacrificed, one bull, two goats, and two rams, with accompanying meal offerings and wine libations, and three times incense was offered as a symbol of the People’s prayers. Though no one entered the rest of the year, on this day, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies three times. And though no one spoke it the rest of the year, on this day, the holy Name of God was pronounced three times by the High Priest, once for each confession. It was through this ritual, through this sacrifice of blood, and through this

intercession of the High Priest, that the People of God were made clean, and dedicated once again as God's People.

But before the Temple and the Altar and the Curtain, before the Tabernacle, before Moses and the Ark and the Priesthood of Aaron, before Abraham became the father of the starry multitude of the People of God, before Abraham was *called* Abraham and before he had anything but God's *promise* of a future, God sent another priest. In the 14th Chapter of the whole story of the People, when Abram was still fighting the battles that would lead him to the land that God had promised, when he had survived a battle with the kings of the land, when he had barely held on to his property and his kindred and his life, God sent Melchizedek to Abram. Melchizedek, the priest and king of Salem brought bread to Abram, and he brought wine, and he brought a blessing: "Blessed be Abram," said the priest of *El Elyon*, "by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed *be* God Most High!" The priest Melchizedek offered no sacrifice, he offered no ritual, he offered no mediation. He offered only the bread and the wine, only *himself* in service.

Melchizedek, whose name *means* the righteous king, gets mentioned only one other time in the whole of the Hebrew Bible, the passage from the 110th Psalm that is quoted by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews in our reading this morning. Melchizedek is mentioned only these three places in all of Scripture, but it is enough. We're still more than a week away from hearing the shouts of "Hosanna!" change to cries of "Crucify him!" We're still more than a week away from our Lord offering *himself* with the bread and with the wine. We're still more than a week away from remembering when the sacrifice of the blood of bulls and goats and rams was washed away by the blameless blood of a single faultless lamb, more than a week from remembering when the curtain that separated the People from their God was torn in two. We're still more than a week from the fulfillment of ritual atonement, and from the nullification of intermediaries and intercessors.

But even now, we know that the whole story was changed forever, in the life and the death and the resurrection of the Christ. We recognize that we are *all* called, to the priesthood of *all* believers, to mediate between God and the world, to become the Body of Christ, to intercede for those do not always see him at work around them, to serve each other and the lost world in the name of the One who has given us the new commandment of love. We know that we have a Great High Priest, not from the Aaronic line of the *Kohen Godol*, but "through what he suffered, and having been made perfect," after the order of Melchizedek, the priest/king who came as a servant. We know that we serve that Great High Priest who, in his great love for you, and for me, and for the *world*, "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."