

Isaiah 53:4-12

Hebrews 5:1-10

“Priest and Offering”

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On April 15 1912 at 12:12pm when the RMS Titanic hit the iceberg, a distress call went out to all the ships in the surrounding area. (It's debated whether this was the first ever use of the newly-agreed upon SOS distress signal by radio.) Many ships began to rush to the location of the distress signal, and the first to arrive was the RMS Carpathia, from the rival Cunard line. Captained by the seasoned Captain Rostron, the Carpathia turned off its course and steamed through the night at great risk in the icy seas. It arrived at 4:00am and starting picking up 705 survivors from the water.

But among the other ships to receive that distress message was the Titanic's sister ship, the RMS Olympic. It was further away, but it also turned immediately around from its course to England and sped through the night. It telegraphed the Carpathia that it was en route, and offered to be of service, offering to ferry the survivors to New York.

After the rescue of survivors, Captain Rostron of the Carpathia conferred with the owner of the Titanic (and survivor) Bruce Ismay. They decided to wave off the Titanic's sister ship Olympic. Bruce Ismay later testified:

“He (Captain Rostron) suggested that it was very undesirable that our passengers on board the Carpathia, who were just settling down, should see

the Olympic, as it would only probably harrow their feelings. The Olympic coming to us could do no good whatever, and I therefore entirely agreed with his suggestion, that it was undesirable the ship should come to us.”

It’s a story that’s been prone to embellishment, because you can just imagine the scene that was averted: the survivors in the wee hours of the morning looking out from their rescuing ship to see the ghost-like mirror-image of the Titanic emerging from the fog and coming alongside, telling them to board.

It’s no wonder that the church is often presented as a lifeboat for the faithful, as a Noah’s ark for survivors from the flood.

Many of us come to faith looking for a blank slate. Though not necessarily evangelical in the strictest sense, our flavor of Christianity has a lot to say about the experience of conversion, of dying to our old sin and awakening to something totally new. Of being able to say, I’m forgiven, I’m not the person I once was.

This is the place we come to when after a week surrounded by all the world’s divisiveness and discord and we think on grander things, nicer things. We come here not to be mired in the past, we come here to be hopeful for the future. This whole thing is supposed to promise us a fresh start.

In our reading from the letter to the Hebrews, we imagine the writer speaking to Christians steeped in Jewish identity. The letter speaks of how some have begun to abandon the Christian community in the face of persecution and imprisonment and disappointment that the kingdom of God has not yet come.

They're also in the wake of the destruction of the Temple. And a return to Jewish religious practice, and unity with the larger Jewish people, is becoming less a possibility.

And so we might expect the writer of the letter to the Hebrews to find new grounds for their identity. To remind them that they can have a fresh start.

But our writer of Hebrews doesn't do that. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews doesn't distract them from what has happened, instead he brings up right alongside them the ghost-like mirror-image of the sinking ship from which they just escaped. And we can imagine this "harrowing their feelings" as Captain Rostron put it, even though it is "undesirable that ship should come to us."

In our passage, the letter to the Hebrews begins with a job description, of the high priests they might have found in the now-destroyed Temple. She describes how first-century Jewish people got right with God, how the priests "offer(ed) gifts and sacrifices for sins" even sacrifices for their own sins as well as for those of the people. How they "did not presume to take this honor, but (took) it only when called by God, just as Aaron was."

We can join those Hebrews in feeling like this is just a ship from a distant past. Except we're even further removed from that history than them.

We're reminded that we're Gentiles, humbly grafted onto the living tree that is the story of ancient Israel by a Jewish Christ, into the living tree of Jewish people. This is something worth remembering with humility. But, just like the Hebrews of the

letter, we might be wondering what this really has to say to us. What a job description of priests doing sacrifices has to do with us.

The letter goes on to put Christ in the role of those priests. “So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed.”

But then the letter describes how Christ goes even further in that role “in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”

What makes Christ as high priest (both the fulfillment) and radically different than the priests of Aaron is that he is not just the priest, but he is also the sacrifice being offered.

Our passage from Isaiah says “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”

We might not have a great basis of understanding of the Temple or its priests making sacrifices. Even more than the Hebrews, it’s something far removed from us.

But we do have sacrifices in our time, sacrifices that are far outside the Temple. We remember the people who are forced to bear the burdens of others in our day, people making sacrifices they were not called to make.

Some groups of people in our world have sacrifices they're just expected to make based on race, economic class, gender, sexual orientation. These are the sacrifices that are not intended to be in the human family.

It's a logic that works out in our criminal justice system: a wrong has been done, and so punishment must be enacted, often with little consideration for repair.

Some of us in her Camp Hill Presbyterian Church are starting to do the hard work of reckoning with racial injustice in the church and in our own communities. And we see etched into our local geography how the prosperity of some comes at the generational sacrifice of others. How the imagined safety of some through policing and zoning policies comes at the expense of the community safety of others. How the educational opportunities of some come at the expense of others.

If we look back, we might see the sacrifices that are not of Christ, not of prayers of thanksgiving and reverent submission to God the Father. We see the sacrifices that are unworthy additions to what should have been Christ's final sacrifice. The prophets of the Old Testament are happy to tell us that there are unworthy sacrifices, sacrifices that are not of reverent submission or a broken and contrite heart.

And Christ tells us where he will be as long as those sacrifices are made: not just as priest, but as one who is sacrificed. Christ tells us that he has chosen to be among those who sacrifice for others and are sacrificed for others.

That might seem like the ghost of a sunken ship coming up alongside us in our comfortable life boat. But, we can take our cue from the writer to the Hebrews. In

describing how Christ is the fulfillment of the priesthood, she describes him going even further back in time.

When Christ was appointed priest, he was appointed by God with the words “you are my Son, today I have begotten you.” This priest was begotten and appointed before all time.

And the writer says that he was “designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek, king of Salem is a bit of a one-off character in Genesis, who meets Abram in the wilderness at his lowest point with hospitality. This is way before the Levitical priesthood was established in the house of Aaron. Melchizedek is described as a priest-king, his name meaning king of righteousness, king of Peace, priest of the Most High God. And Abram gives him a tenth of what he has received.

So, the writer of Hebrews tells us that when our methods of sacrifice can no longer make us right with God, it’s important to go back even further in time. We can go back in time even further than histories of marginalization and oppression and unworthy sacrifice and back to who we were created to be, in moments of gracious hospitality and care.

It’s appropriate that today is the Children’s Sabbath. Often when we hear about how to best care for and teach our children, we’re told to go back to when we were a child: when we were naive and hopeful and imaginative. But going back to when we were a child is also about coming to peace with our former selves, coming to care for ourselves as children despite all the decisions we’ve made, mistakes we’ve made, and options foreclosed.

We can live into the possibility and freedom that comes from letting Christ be Lord over our lives, of being offered a blank slate through life in him. The question is: are we also comfortable letting Christ be Lord of our past hurts, our past mistakes, our past failures? What would it look like to make Christ the priest and lord of our sunken ships?

Sacrifice is about God caring about the integrity of what God has made, in all of its fallenness and brokenness. After the flood and the ark in God's covenant with Noah, we're promised that God doesn't just scrap what doesn't work. God transforms our past, present, and future in Christ, who is our high priest and final sacrifice, who is the source of eternal salvation for all.

Because Christ has fulfilled and exceeded the demands of the past, but he also proceeds them before all time and he goes ahead of us to prepare the way. He is both our final priest and our final sacrifice, our continual offering by the power of the Holy Spirit.