

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
December 21, 2014**

The Surpassing Christ

- 1. The priests were great**
- 2. But Christ is greater**

Hymns: *"Where the Promise Shines"* –
27 – Distribution: 26, 19 – Closing: 6

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

How deep is your Christmas celebration?

That may seem to be a strange question, but it's an important one. How deep will yours be? Christmas celebrations, after all, can have different depths:

- 1) An "entry level" depth would mean that a person's Christmas celebration would simply include traditions and customs, mostly secular, which have grown over the years. It means doing things of Christmases past, with certain places being visited and certain movies or shows watched, which pop up again and again each December. However, the songs and meaning of Christmas won't go any deeper than Frosty, Rudolph, or chestnuts roasting by an open fire.
- 2) A Christmas celebration with shallow depth would remember that there is a baby whose birth we commemorate this time of year. This person would remember that it is CHRIST-mas. Therefore, since Christ was born, this person would accept the fact that those religious songs about "Joy to the World" and "What Child is This?" should be sung without offense at this time of year.
- 3) Moving into deeper waters, the next person would acknowledge that Christ the Lord was born as our example, the

one to imitate. Just as he loved the loveless and befriended the outcast, we should do so also. Just as he performed acts of charity and kindness, we should do so also in our lives in this world.

- 4) But those are not the deepest forms of a Christmas celebration. And they are not where we would ever want our own Christmas celebration to end. **For the deepest, most meaningful Christmas celebration, we must realize that our High Priest is born.**

Our Sunday Advent sermon series, called *"The Surpassing Christ,"* concludes today with a comparison between the coming Christ and the Old Testament priests who served the Lord. As we examine this today, may God lead us to the deepest, most meaningful Christmas celebration possible this year.

1. The priests were great

This morning we need to look at two places in the Scriptures. The first one is Exodus 28. Beginning at verse 1, we read, ***"Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests. Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honor. Tell all the skilled men to whom I have given wisdom in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron, for his consecration, so he may serve me as priest."* (vv. 1-3)**

As we read these opening verses, we see that those whom the Lord chose to serve as priests had a special calling. They would be special representatives of the people before the Lord. They would command special respect and honor. Old Testament priests would not only come from the tribe of Levi, they would also be in the narrower line specifically through Moses' brother Aaron in the tribe of Levi.

Let's read a little farther, and see how these priests were to dress themselves as they performed their duties. Perhaps it would be helpful for you to look on the back page of the bulletin where the Sermon Notes have a couple pictures. ***"Make the ephod of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely***

twisted linen--the work of a skilled craftsman. It is to have two shoulder pieces attached to two of its corners, so it can be fastened. Its skillfully woven waistband is to be like it - of one piece with the ephod and made with gold, and with blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and with finely twisted linen. Take two onyx stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel in the order of their birth--six names on one stone and the remaining six on the other. Engrave the names of the sons of Israel on the two stones the way a gem cutter engraves a seal. Then mount the stones in gold filigree settings and fasten them on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones for the sons of Israel." (vv. 6-12)

If you look at the picture, you see the Old Testament priest wearing what might appear to be an "apron" over his robe. This was the ephod. It was ornately designed by God and fashioned by an expert. Ornate stones were mounted on the shoulders, carved with the names of Jacob's sons.

Let's read on: ***"Fashion a breastpiece for making decisions - the work of a skilled craftsman. Make it like the ephod: of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen. It is to be square - a span long and a span wide - and folded double. Then mount four rows of precious stones on it... There are to be twelve stones, one for each of the names of the sons of Israel, each engraved like a seal with the name of one of the twelve tribes. For the breastpiece make braided chains of pure gold, like a rope."*** (vv. 15-17, 21-22) An ornate breastpiece was fashioned to be attached to the priest, with 12 stones, along with the Urim and the Thummim.

Reading on: ***"Make the robe of the ephod entirely of blue cloth, with an opening for the head in its center. There shall be a woven edge like a collar around this opening, so that it will not tear."*** (vv. 31-32) As you look at the picture, you see the blue robe that would be under the apron (ephod).

Reading on: ***"Make pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet yarn around the hem of the robe, with gold bells between them. The gold***

bells and the pomegranates are to alternate around the hem of the robe. Aaron must wear it when he ministers. The sound of the bells will be heard when he enters the Holy Place before the LORD and when he comes out, so that he will not die." (vv. 33-35) Most interesting!

Reading on: ***"Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: holy to the LORD. Fasten a blue cord to it to attach it to the turban; it is to be on the front of the turban. It will be on Aaron's forehead."*** (vv. 36-38) A special golden plate was to be tied to the forehead of the high priest.

Reading on: ***"Weave the tunic of fine linen and make the turban of fine linen. The sash is to be the work of an embroiderer. Make tunics, sashes and headbands for Aaron's sons, to give them dignity and honor."*** (vv. 39-40) The "tunic" was the gown that the priest would wear under the blue robe. So, there were three layers of outer clothing that the priests wore.

Finally, as if this weren't enough, ***"Make linen undergarments as a covering for the body, reaching from the waist to the thigh. Aaron and his sons must wear them whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting or approach the altar to minister in the Holy Place, so that they will not incur guilt and die."*** (vv. 42-43)

What special garments the priest was supposed to wear! And as you can see, he was to serve barefooted, for he would be treading on holy ground. Can you imagine the feelings of the people as their priest, decked out in these special clothes, would perform his ministry? **What awe and wonder must have filled them as they saw him dressed in this regalia!**

After Moses had all the experts make these things, v. 41 says, ***"After you put these clothes on your brother Aaron and his sons, anoint and ordain them. Consecrate them so they may serve me as priests."*** The next chapter, which we will not read together, describes their ordination day. A sacrifice of a bull and two rams was to occur every day for seven days. (Have you ever been to a pastoral ordination that took seven days?!) Also involved were offerings of bread, cakes, and wafers. In addition, they were anointed with oil. **Can you**

imagine the people's awe and wonder as these things were taking place?

But these were not the most remarkable things about the Old Testament priest. The most remarkable things were the duties they were supposed to perform:

1. They were allowed to go into the tabernacle (later, the Temple) and offer prayers with burning incense as they approached the Lord for the people.
2. They were to offer slaughtered animals as sacrifices every day for the sins of the people. They alone were authorized and approved by God to offer these sacrifices.

As they went about their duties, entering the Temple and making these sacrifices, can you imagine the respect and awe that the people would show to these specially-appointed men?

Let's pause here a moment and see some lessons that God was teaching his Old Testament people. First, you can't read these verses without realizing that there is a principle of SEPARATION between people and God. Common people were not allowed to approach God to do these things, and the priests themselves had to fulfill certain rituals to be able to carry out their duties as well. **Sin caused that separation between God and mankind.**

It's sad to be separated. If we think about Christmastime, many people try to get together with their family at this time of year. If someone is not able to do that, it's a sad situation. How many people have shed a tear or two hearing the Christmas song, "I'll be home for Christmas... but only in my dreams." However, even more depressing is the fact that we are separated from our Creator and heavenly Father because of our sin. It began when our parents were banished from the Garden of Eden, and is true of us by nature because of our sinful nature and our sins. If you think you can simply approach him on your own merits, death will be the result. We see how true this is when we look ahead to Exodus 32 and see what the children of Israel are doing while Moses is up on the Mt. Sinai getting these commands. They

are making and worshiping the Golden Calf! How sadly ironic!

A second lesson we must know is that the ministry of these priests were not the permanent fix to this separation. In Isaiah 1 God lamented, "*Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 'The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?' says the LORD. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats... Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.'*" Worship in the Old Testament had become a shell, a formalism. Their hypocritical hearts were far from God, and the outward keeping of those ceremonial laws could not give them forgiveness for their sins.

Therefore, we need to look at someone greater this morning, someone who will have an effect on the depth of our Christmas celebration. Let's turn to Hebrews 7 to see how Christ surpasses the ministry of the Old Testament priests.

2. Christ is greater

As we look at these verses, we can look at the second picture on the Sermon Notes, as Christ our High Priest performs his ministry.

Hebrews 7:11-14 – "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come - one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests."

Christ is greater! He has been made a priest by special appointment! There are times in

earthly circumstances that a special appointment needs to be made. Perhaps a government position is vacated by resignation. Or a teacher might not be able to finish out the year. A special individual needs to be picked because of their unique abilities to fill the position. Christ's priesthood was by special appointment. After all, as the writer says, he did not belong to the normal tribe that produced priests. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. Therefore, his God-ordained service as priest was special, yes, even greater.

Hebrews 7:16,26-28 – “...One who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life... Such a high priest meets our need - one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens...”

Christ is greater! He has served as a holy priest! What happened to the men who served as Old Testament priests? They died! They were mortal sinners whom God called to serve in a special way, but they were not without sin. But Christ was greater. He was holy and sinless. Even when he was put on trial before the high priest and Pontius Pilate, false witnesses and ridiculous charges had to be brought forward because there was no evidence to condemn him to death!

Hebrews 9:11,24 – “When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation... Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.”

Christ is greater! He served by entering “heaven itself!” This is a most mysterious concept. Moses made all those parts of the tabernacle, and we hear that these are copies of heaven itself where God resides! The most sacred day on the Old Testament worship calendar was the Day of Atonement, the only day of the year when the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place where the Ark of the Covenant lay. When Christ made his sacrifice

before God the Father, he did not enter the tent but rather the real Most Holy Place in heaven itself. We could compare all those Old Testament sacrifices to the wedding rehearsal that a couple might have before the big day. But Christ's sacrifice was the real event in God's real sanctuary!

Hebrews 9:12 – “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”

Christ is greater! He sacrificed with his own blood! How shocking that would have been for an Old Testament priest to put aside the animals for the day's sacrifices and declare, “Today I'm going to climb on the altar and be the sacrifice!” Unthinkable! Yet this is what Christ did when he sacrificed himself for your sins. That sacrifice was made with his own blood. That was the costly price required in order to pay for the sin of the world.

Hebrews 9:25-27 – “Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

Christ is greater! He sacrificed once for all! When something has to be re-done, it often means that it was not done right the first time. Perhaps you've had times you've taken your car in for a repair, and you had to take it back a few days later because they did not get it right! Maybe the drift in the alignment was still taking place. Or the brakes still squealed.

In the Old Testament, the priests that performed those sacrifices had to do them over and over. They were not the real, perfect sacrifice that would pay for the sins of the world. But when Christ was sacrificed, it occurred once. It was a perfect sacrifice in every way, and has resulted in your forgiveness. You have the assurance that you will live in heaven with God forever!

What light this sheds on the depth that our Christmas celebration has. How deep is our Christmas? The deepest celebration comes to the Christian who realizes that his High Priest has come, one that is desperately needed and who surpasses the position and ministry of the Old Testament priests.

Therefore, may God grant you a deep and most meaningful Christmas, one that makes you sing:

**Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King!"
Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled... Amen.**

