

# March 21, Lent 5B (Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33)

**In ancient Israel, priests were the gates through which God poured mercy.**

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue

It's such a poignant request the Greeks make. "Sir," they begin. So polite, even deferential. "We wish to see Jesus." I have heard that these words are emblazoned on the interior of many pulpits, though I've never stepped into one where this is so. They are supposed to remind the preacher that whatever else they do, the call to give the gospel to the people is paramount. Whatever words we speak, they must echo and amplify the Word.

This responsibility is complicated by the reality that Jesus often does not meet expectations. The Greeks come looking for a glimpse of a man worthy of praise and adulation, and he immediately begins ranting about glory turned upside down. Rather than be raised on a pedestal, this Jesus drops an esoteric hint that he will instead be raised on a cross. When I hear those words—*we wish to see Jesus*—I can't help but wonder if the desire falters when we see him for what he is: the Son of Man with a troubled soul and an ardent wish to opt out of his mission.

Meanwhile, the writer of Hebrews exults in Christ the High Priest. I have some mixed associations with the phrase "high priest." I picture a humorless man cloaked in costly vestments, droning on in a language I don't understand. I once began an official discernment process to become an Episcopal priest. The problem was I could not imagine it. If I closed my eyes and tried to see myself as a priest, I saw nothing but the insides of my eyelids. So I jumped ship, seeking out a Christian community where I might be called a minister, a pastor, a preacher—anything but a priest.

But I cannot leave my sense of "high priest" in the realm of caricature. A priest stands in the gap between God and God's people. The priest is a mediator, fully human yet anointed by God to perform sacred rituals. In ancient Israel, the priests

were the ones who made sacrifices on behalf of all the people—including themselves—so that their sins would be forgiven. They were the tendons connecting God to God’s chosen people. They were the portals through which the people funneled their thanksgivings, lamentations, and confessions to God. And likewise, they were the gates through which God poured mercy. That kind of responsibility and authority definitely set them apart from their fellows.

So Christ is the high priest, mediating between God and the people once and for all. But if you know Jesus, you know that he doesn’t necessarily play by all the rules. He flips the script. He tweaks the tradition. He skewers the expectations.

What is the sacrificial offering this high priest makes on behalf of the people? He is not lifting up a turtledove or an unblemished lamb. He is not offering up bread or wine. He is not even offering up the sins of the people for atonement.

He offers himself.

It’s really kind of hard to wrap your mind around the theological acrobatics Jesus accomplishes in the Hebrews text. The high priest, the one who stands between God and humankind, is called to intercede in a way that reconciles creation once and for all. The priest becomes the living, dying sacrifice that has the power to grant eternal salvation and, one would hope, eliminate the need for any further sacrifice. He can do what he does only because he is unique, the beloved Son of man who is fully human yet without sin. And he can do what he does only because he is willing. His reverent if reluctant submission to God’s desire for the cycle of evil and violence and suffering to stop means that he must suffer.

But there is another layer to this picture, a layer that is often left unspoken, unnoticed, unannounced. We tend to hear a lot about how Jesus died for our sins. So you might expect that the high priest would be lifting up the sin of the world, bearing it to God. But as he offers himself to God, what he’s lifting up is not about sin—at least, not in this text. It says, “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears.”

Maybe this isn’t the Jesus we come looking for, but this is how Christ comes. This is how Christ heals. He bears with us, for us, every tragedy, every anxiety, every rough edge and broken promise. He bears the sin, and he bears the pain. We do not need to question where God is in times of suffering: God is right there in the center of it. The true glory of God is God’s willingness to share fully in what it means to be

human. But it is also a symbol of God's willingness to transform what it means to be human.

If this isn't what we want to see, we might want to look away.