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March 18, 2018 – 5th Sunday in Lent

Text: Hebrews 5:1-10 (NIV)

⁵ Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵ In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.”^[a]

⁶ And he says in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”^[b]

⁷ During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Footnotes:

- a. Hebrews 5:5 Psalm 2:7
- b. Hebrews 5:6 Psalm 110:4

It’s really interesting to go back and watch old war footage, like stuff from WWII. There are the old newsreels and propaganda footage that you can catch here and there, often in more modern movies about WWII or in documentaries. A lot of footage that was shown over here during the war was used for recruiting. The draft was going on, but there was the need for people to simply enlist on their own. You had little clips of strapping, young men in their new Army or Navy uniforms, fresh out of boot camp and ready to take on the Axis powers. You’d see some clips of him driving a tank or climbing into a fighter plane, or any of the other exciting jobs an eager young soldier might take on. A soldier is a courageous warrior against evil. A soldier is a noble defender of the downtrodden. A soldier is a patriot who protects his homeland against loathsome invaders.

The footage wasn't all smiles and excitement though. Interspersed would be some combat footage as well. A recruiter needed a prospective soldier to see a little of what he was up against, not too much, but enough to know America was up against powerful enemies and his contribution would help his country wipe out a terrible evil. As a soldier, he would be valuable. He would be noble and courageous. He would stand up for those who couldn't defend themselves. He would protect the innocents back home from the encroaching evil, from all of the might warriors the other side would no doubt be sending. Each soldier who enlisted had dreams of being a veritable Captain America, standing as a bulwark against the dark tides of Germany, Japan, and Italy.

The footage from after the war continues that story. The victory parades and celebrations. The major streets of every big city were covered with confetti. They were heroes. Whether they went into the war seeking fame and glory, they certainly came back to find they had gained the respect and goodwill of the whole country. There's that old picture that graced the cover of Time magazine that shows a sailor, newly returned from the Pacific, enthusiastically kissing a nurse. Life is good. He won the war and now he's home. He's a hero and he's still young and his life is full of potential.

It's the stories that aren't captured on the footage that tell a more poignant story. Not just from that war, but from every war since and probably every war before that. The soldiers who have gone to war, perhaps with idealistic hopes and dreams, perhaps not. Either way, nothing could really prepare them for what they found. Death. Death such as their friends and family back home could never conceive of.

A squadmate suddenly falls dead and moments later the tell-tale crack of a sniper rifle echoes. An infantry unit tries to sneak up on a German fortification. A wrong step has a soldier step on an unseen landmine and he is gone before anyone even knows what happened. The explosion alerts the Nazis who cut down the rest of the unit in a hail of machinegun fire. The sailors who manage to escape their capsizing ship only to find others are trapped below decks. They helplessly bang on the hull trying to get them out as those trapped slowly drown. The soldiers in enemy territory who have to be on high alert every moment of every day because the enemy could come upon them at any moment and if they fail to raise the alarm in time they will all be killed.

It hasn't really changed in the wars since. Whether you're one of the few to survive the devastation of the Normandy landing or you're fighting through the dank and confusing wilderness of Korea and the jungles of Vietnam. The street to street warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, where anyone you come across could be an enemy, could even be a suicide bomber. Missing even a little detail could mean stumbling across a bomb or not seeing an ambush before it's too late and suddenly your whole squad collapses in a chaos of fire and noise. Even if you survive to make it home, you may not make it intact.

You come home. You're a hero! You have taken the fight to the enemy. You are a patriot who stood up to the Nazis, the Communists, the Islamic terrorists, or whatever the enemy happened to be. You get a military discount at all kinds of places. You get some veteran's benefits. People look up to you and respect you for what you've done. But all you see are the faces, the lifeless, staring faces of the fellow soldiers and friends you knew over there, the cries of the children who looking for parents who they will never find, even the enemy soldiers crying for mercy.

It's interesting that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) wasn't really given a name until the 1970's, after the Vietnam War. Many soldiers simply couldn't cope with life anymore because of all of the horrors they'd seen. They'd left the war but the war hadn't left them. They were still riding that adrenaline and had forgotten how to live without jumping at every shadow that an enemy could hide in. Others had terrible nightmares, which often plagued them for the rest of their lives.

For those at home, this didn't make any sense. They were heroes! They had vanquished the enemy! How could they have any regret or remorse? What could they possibly be afraid of anymore? Those soldiers might try and talk about it, but words could never truly communicate the experience of fire and thunder of bombs falling around you, of never knowing whether you will live from one day to the next because many didn't, of stumbling over an enemy soldier and the only deciding factor of who lived and who died was who was quicker on the draw. People back home simply could not understand because they never had experienced anything like this.

War is bad enough. The devastation of war, not just on those who die but also on those who survive, is more than anyone should have to bear. But it is not the only terror out there. Each of us fights our own private war against our own sins. So many sins that claw at us and threaten to pull us down into the darkness. Anger, fiery and hot, a temper that constantly burns

anyone who gets too close to you. Anger, slow and simmering, always contained until finally bursts on the last person who just happened to push you past the breaking point. Bitterness and envy, seeing everyone else doing so much better than you are, handling life better or at least the challenges that come their way. That feeling that everyone is leaving you behind and you need to pick at everyone because that bitterness seeps out everywhere in your life. The mistrust, being unwilling to allow anyone to do anything because you can't handle letting anyone else be in control. No one else can do things your way and your way is the only way things should be done.

The list goes on and on, each of us fighting every day in an endless war. Some days we crawl into bed feeling like heroes. We had a great day. We took on the enemy all by ourselves and came back victorious. Then there are the days we learn what kind of war we're fighting. A war we can't win. A war that will devastate us and everyone around us. A war that leaves us broken and despairing because we see the kind of hurt it inflicts on us and on others when our sin gets the better of us.

It's when you can't function anymore than you realize how powerless you've been all along. You can't put your life back together. Even if you could form a plan for getting back on track, you can't undo the damage you've already done. You need someone who understands what that kind of pain feels like, what it feels like to have the whole world against you. You need someone who can help you make sense of it and start putting your life back together.

The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as a high priest. That sounds like he's way up above you, unapproachable and too important to deal with your problems, but that's not the point here at all. Jesus has come down here, where all of the pain and misery are, where anger and bitterness lurk in every heart. He has suffered in every way possible, suffered more terribly than we can even fathom. He comes down here to know what you're going through, to experience all of it.

He's not someone who will come by and just pat you on the shoulder and say, "There, there. It'll be ok." As the frustration, the despair, the tears start coming out all on their own he'll be the one to hold you close and say, "I know. I know it hurts. We'll work through it together. I won't leave you." You come to him and tell him how sin keeps terrorizing your life and you can't break free from it. He says, "I know. I forgive you for what you've done. Let's try again together." Then there are those times where everything has fallen apart completely and you

don't even know what to say. Jesus, your high priest, say, "Don't worry. Let me say it for you. I know what's in your heart."

In the Old Testament days, faithful people would come to the temple with a sacrifice as a way of showing outwardly what was in their hearts. Sometimes it would be to give thanks to God for what he had done for them. Sometimes it would be to say they were sorry for what they had done. The priest would take the sacrifice and offer it to God. They didn't earn forgiveness. They were given because of forgiveness. That forgiveness comes because our high priest, Jesus Christ, offers himself as our sacrifice. The only payment that can be made for sins. In order to be able to do that, he had to suffer the worst the world could bring. He does so willingly. He suffers it all so that, wherever you are and whatever you're going through, he can stand beside you and share it with you. He suffers these terrible things and by the grace and encouragement of God endures it and is blessed by God for trusting in. He does not promise it will be easy. In fact he says it won't be easy at all. But he does promise to always help you through it and that you will see the other side. Your trust in him will not be in vain.