

SOMEONE UP THERE LIKES YOU

Hebrews 7:23-28

A sixty-six-year-old man and his son were enjoying the trip of a lifetime – shooting the rapids on the Colorado River. On the last day of their trip, as they were setting up camp on a small sandy beach, the man had a heart attack. Providently, a heart surgeon was in the party. The doctor restored the victim's breathing, but he knew this man might suffer another fatal attack.

Again, providence was good to them. A ranger with a two-way radio was found a short distance down river. He called the closest airport and reported that a man experiencing cardiac arrest needed to be evacuated ASAP. There was a problem. By this time of day, sunset was only minutes away. In less than an hour the canyon would be pitch black.

Soon a helicopter carrying a paramedic was in the air for the eighty mile trip to the canyon campsite. The sun had already set when they arrived. Even so, the pilot edged the chopper down between the narrow, perpendicular stone walls. For six stressful minutes, the chopper slowly eased down. When it finally touched the sandy beach, there were only five minutes before total darkness.

The sick man was quickly placed in the helicopter and the doctor climbed in beside him. As the chopper cleared the top of the Grand Canyon wall, total darkness had fallen. Within an hour the man was in a well-equipped hospital. By the next afternoon, he was sitting up in bed. It had been a stunning rescue under terrifying conditions. This man

was saved by the intervention of the doctor, the ranger, and the helicopter pilot.

The circumstances of this rescue were nothing short of miraculous. What are the odds of there being a heart surgeon in a vacation party, plus a ranger sitting nearby in the Grand Canyon, plus the availability of a helicopter pilot at just the moment needed? Can't you picture this heart attack victim saying, "Somebody up there likes me!"

Somebody up there likes us all and intervenes for us is the message for today. On days when life seems absurd and the world appears to be a cosmic joke with no apparent purpose – on days when God seems so remote as to be of no practical use in your life – remember that the author of Hebrews say that not only is there Somebody up there, that Somebody likes you! And, that Somebody lives to intercede on your behalf.

Hebrews insists that Jesus Christ is the permanent high priest. He is able to save us completely and he loves to intercede for us. When Hebrews was written, there were many priests in Palestine. According to Jeremias, a first century historian, there were 7000 Jewish priests entitled to exercise cultic functions. To be a priest one had to be a male from the tribe of Levi. A priest job description called for him to be an intermediary between God and people. A priest would celebrate the liturgy and offer sacrifices on behalf of his people. He was an official mediator between heaven and earth. But, the Levitical priesthood had become passé, says Hebrews. Jesus has become the author of a better covenant. Why?

Jesus' priesthood is permanent. The Levitical priesthood could only survive through a succession of high priests. Since they were mortal, replacements had to be found when they died. There was continuity of office but no continuity of person. With this setup the Levitical priesthood floundered with the inevitable changes that come with a change in leadership and administration.

When I was associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Sharon, PA, I served with three different senior pastors in three years. David Dietzel was the senior pastor who moved at the end of my first year. David Ross was the interim pastor for the second year. Tom Sebben was called as senior pastor during my third year. Each was one unique and much different than the others. Each had special gifts. Those three years were interesting and schizophrenic. All of us were continually in the turmoil of change.

In recent years the United Methodist Church has repented of its practice of moving pastors every three years. One consultant wrote, "Our studies show that long-term pastorates generally prove better for a congregation than a series of short ones. While change in leadership is sometimes necessary and helpful for a congregation, things tend to go better for an institution when people pull together for continuity over the long haul." The session and I have begun developing a plan for a long-term vision and fulltime pastoral leadership for this congregation. I am not the long-term person for you, but God has someone who is. Our job is to pull together for continuity.

Jesus has a permanent priesthood. This offers distinct advantages for us. He is permanently available to us. *"He is*

for all time able to save those who draw near to God through him.” Not only does he hold office forever, but he remains constant. *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow,”* Hebrews insists. We can count on our high priest to remain constant in his love for us. He won’t pout if he doesn’t get a raise, or quit if session refuses one of his pet projects. Plus, our high priest is always ready to respond to us. He doesn’t get tired, or need a day off, or have family responsibilities. Jesus is permanently available to us.

Jesus’ moral character exceeds that of any high priest. Hebrews insists, *“Such a high priest meets our needs – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners...Unlike other high priests, he does not need to offer daily sacrifices day after day first for his own sins and only then for the sins of the people.”* The character of the priest bears the burden of building the character of the people. Moral failures of spiritual leaders devastate the spiritual fabric of the congregation.

Look at what has happened in the Roman Catholic Church to the victims of abuse by priests and to the priest’s congregations as a result. The once mega-congregation, Willow Creek Church in Chicago, is reeling from the pastor’s sexual aggression. Fifth Avenue PC in NYC lost millions of dollars from a lawsuit due the pastor’s indiscretions. And remember how Jim Bakker’s 700 Club empire fell? The fact is that even those of us pastors who keep our noses clean and are committed Christians are unfortunately flawed human being and sinners.

Hebrews says Levitical priests are men appointed *“in their weakness.”* They contrast with Jesus. The difference is

clear. Christ is everything they are not. We clergy have feet of clay. We fail and disappoint you. Yet, we all have a high priest who never fails us. There are no skeletons in Jesus' closet. He perfectly obeyed God and established a perfection that is eternal. Because he is holy, blameless, and pure, he is uniquely able to meet our needs.

And meet our needs he does. Jesus not only makes a sacrifice on our behalf, he is our sacrifice. Hebrews says, "*He sacrificed for sins once for all, when he sacrificed himself.*" His death on the cross was the gift of the perfect person for the imperfect people. Somebody up there likes you enough to die for you.

Now Jesus lives to make intercession for us. He is able to save completely those who draw to God through him. The circumstances of his interventions in our lives are often surprising and moving, if not miraculous. Consider Hugh Fleetwood, a London journalist who for years found religion meaningless. Early one evening on his way home from his Fleet Street office, he passed an open-air gathering of Christians. A man was repeating the verse of a song:

I have a Savior who is pleading in glory,
A dear loving Savior though earth friends be few;
And now he's watching in tenderness o'er me,
And, O, that my Savior were your Savior too.

Sophisticated Hugh Redwood, tough, popular journalist, who had not prayed in years, stopped dead in his tracks. What did it? Not the music. Not the voice of the singer. Redwood said what did it was the sudden awareness that in his estranged years, "Somebody up there" had been interceding for him – reaching out to him, stoking his flickering spirituality. In a moment he realized what the

author of Hebrews was saying, “*Jesus always lives to intercede for us.*”

It was Blaise Pascal who in a flashing moment of insight heard God say to him: “You would not seek me had I not already found you.” This conviction has been expressed and interpreted in Calvin Lauder’s hymn:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew,
He moved my soul to seek him seeking me;
It was not I that found O Savior true,
No, I was found of thee.

We live in a world that is continually changing. Events, things, and people move around us so rapidly, we cannot track it all. Chaos and confusion push us to try to make sense of it. Is there any purpose to it all? Is there a system? Destiny? Direction? We are strongly tempted to agree with Shakespeare that life is sound and fury, signifying nothing. Then Jesus intervenes, We are reminded there is Somebody up there in charge, with a plan and purpose. On top of that, that Somebody up there likes you!

Your presence here today indicates that Jesus has intervened in your life and is at work in you. On the bad days, remember that in Jesus Christ you have a permanent high priest, and he lives to intercede for you.