

“...he always lives to make intercession for them”

First Reading: Jeremiah 31:7-9

Second Reading: Hebrews 7:23-28

In the biblical world, you want to be a sheep and not a goat. Yet, in our culture everybody either wants to be the goat, or has unyielding opinions about who qualifies as the goat. GREATEST. OF. ALL. TIME!!! Taylor vs. Beyonce. Michael vs. LeBron. Ohtani vs. Babe. Brady vs. Montana vs. Mahomes vs. Graham. Wait, who? Graham? You see, our circular conversations around goats tend to be limited to our personal exposure and preferences. To conclude that someone, who is your favorite and perhaps the greatest you have witnessed, must therefore be the greatest of all time is a bit of a stretch. After all, Otto Graham, the mid-century signal caller for the Cleveland Browns continues to hold the highest winning percentage among quarterbacks who played a minimum of fifty games. And who is to say that there wasn't a 5<sup>th</sup> Century Tahitian ari'i rahi who could throw a coconut eighty yards on a dime?

And amidst all the hubbub with Beyonce and Taylor, why would we not consider Billie Holliday, or Ella, or Streisand, or Maria Callas in the goat conversations. Or for that matter, what about Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, and grandmother of the Sirens? That's a lot of vocal horsepower.

The greatest? Of all time? At most, you have been a witness to the last 90-odd years. Our ancestors graduated from Neanderthal to Homo Sapien  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  million years ago, so our exposure to performance evidence is far too limited to make bold declarations about singular greatness in anything. Of all time? You mean over the last 13.7 billion years going back to the Big Bang? Perhaps you've forgotten what God said to Job — *Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth?*

Seven Super Bowls are impressive, Tom, but G.O.A.T? Greatest of all time? 13.7 billion years? That's a stretch, but we live in an era of hyperbole. The best movie ... ever. The greatest leader the world has ever known. The finest steak anyone has ever served. The largest crowd ever gathered.

The fastest man in history. Sorry, Usain, but anytime you hear the words, "of all time," someone is exaggerating, because the population of folks who can truly speak to questions pertaining to those three words is reduced to one — God, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. In Exodus, when Moses asks the Lord to attach a name to the voice, the Lord said, *I am*, inferring that there has never been a moment, and there will never be a moment when God isn't. In fact, even before time, God is. And bearing, as

the author of Hebrews puts it, *“the exact imprint of God,”* the same can be said of Jesus. In Revelation, John, referring to Christ, writes — *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.”* — and also, referring to Jesus, John says, *“The Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”* To the Colossians, Paul referred to Jesus as *“the firstborn of all creation.”*

Of all time? There is only one voice that can claim that perspective. Voices across the centuries rise and fall. Leaders, tyrants, and imposters explode onto the scene and ultimately fade away. The ubiquitous celebrity of today is forgotten tomorrow. Or, consider the political titans of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who now only *Jeopardy* champions can identify.

There is but one voice that can use those words with any credibility — Of all time. Why is this significant to the meaning and health of your days? Because of what we read in this brief passage hidden in this little epistle called Hebrews. *“Jesus has also become the guarantee of a better covenant. 23Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; 24but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25Consequently he is able for all*

*time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”*

To comprehend this we have to go back to that treasury of the Bible’s greatest hits, that page-turner that you just cannot put down — Leviticus.

Once the Law was handed down to Moses on the mountain, the Lord proceeded to codify instructions on how these escaped slaves were to conduct themselves as they journeyed through the wilderness and established themselves as a people in a promised land. Critical to this endeavor was worship, a priesthood was established, staffed by the descendants of Levi and Aaron — the Levites. The Levites were charged with all the cultic and worship rituals associated with the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, and later, the Temple.

Within the tabernacle was a curtained off area called the Holy of Holies where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. This large portable boxlike piece of furniture contained the tablets of the Law handed down to Moses. Placed atop the ark was the mercy seat, a gold lid with two cherubim placed at the ends creating a space where the presence of the Lord would descend and dwell, making the Holy of Holies the most sacred of spaces.

In fact, the space was so sacred that only one person, the Levitical High Priest, was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and the High Priest was only allowed to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement, the day associated with Yom Kippur in contemporary Judaism. From the time of the tabernacle in the wilderness until the destruction of the Temple in 70CE, in order for the Israelites to participate in and realize the forgiveness of Yahweh on the Day of Atonement, “the sinners seeking reconciliation laid their hand upon the head of a sacrificial animal, signifying their own identification with it.

With the shedding of the animal’s blood, the sinners symbolized the giving up of their own lives.” (Van Harvey, *Handbook of Theological Terms*) The high priest, on behalf of the people, would then take the blood into the Holy of Holies as an offering to the Lord, a ritual symbolizing the mercy of the Lord as celebrated by the Psalmist, “*The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him.*”

The ritual of the Day of Atonement would take place annually, the role of the high priest passed down from generation to generation among the Levites. What the author of Hebrews wants us to understand is that with his

incarnation, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ has once and for all time taken on the role of both high priest and offering. Once and for all time — not monthly like the mortgage payment; not bi-annually like getting your teeth cleaned, not annually like the subscription to the New York Times, not every five years as with the colonoscopy prep — Once for all time.

As our text phrases it, *“the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; 24but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever ... Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself.”* What does this mean for me and you? Hebrews tells us — *“Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”*

Christ is able for all time to save. Here’s a little social interaction hack for you. Do you know the best answer to give when cornered at the dinner party with the question, “When were you saved?” Why, the same day as you, right around 2000 years ago. Once for all time. Once for all God’s children. And as the voiceover on the commercial says, “That’s not all...” Listen —

*“Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”*

*“Since he always lives to make intercession for them.”* Do you hear that? Have you assimilated that? Now, I make no bones about it, and most of you already know it, but there are times when I can legitimately be called a — wimp, coward, doormat, chicken, wuss — particularly when it comes to registering a complaint or getting in the returns line at the mall. The shirt looks differently when I put it on at home than it did in the mirror in the dressing room, or the expensive soup at the restaurant is cold. The words — Take it back; or, just return it; or, register a complaint — terrify me, almost to the status of, I’d rather die. How many times has Donna been my voice, my advocate? Why she even has the strength, the courage, the moxie to return the product and tell them straight out that the reason she is returning it is because she can find it cheaper someplace else. I know ... I know ... I know, I’m not worthy. Everybody treasures an advocate.

But just imagine, amidst whatever brokenness there is in our lives, whatever challenges have knocked us down, whatever fears have paralyzed us, whatever sorrow has gripped us, whatever conflict has torn us from the

frame, whatever addiction threatens us, whatever diagnosis or prognosis has ripped the rug from under our feet, Jesus, our high priest, *always lives to make intercession for us.*

In Jesus Christ, who is, who was, and who is to come, we have, for all time, an advocate in the innermost life of God, not sporadically, not occasionally, not annually, not when the mood strikes, or just when the crisis looms, but for all time, *“Since he always lives to make intercession for them.”* Paul says that through Christ, we have gained access to this grace in which we stand. Our Book of Order states that “the Church’s life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work.” That’s what we celebrate here on Commitment Sunday, a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work, the Christ who is, who was, and who evermore shall be, whose once for all time gave his life so that we could live.

Did you ever make a long distance call on a payphone? If you are younger than fifty go watch a movie made before you were born, and you’ll probably see an old phone booth. I’m a squirt, but that phone booth was still tight quarters, and speaking of quarters, you had better have a stack of them, because the operator would tell you how many to insert for, say, a



five-minute long distance call. As that time was running out, the operator would tell you to insert another bunch of quarters to continue the call. You'd see these couples yelling at one another as they scrambled in search of other quarters before the call was cut off. Many marriages ended right there outside the phone booth.

Those calls were stressful to say the least, a stress that spiraled out of control if the call was an emergency, and you had to sprint to the bodega for more change. And, of course, you were always dependent on the mood of the operator, which was always a risky bet. *To avoid disconnection, please insert \$2.75 immediately.* Oh, the stress. Would you drop the quarters? Would you not insert them in time? Would you run out of money when you desperately needed to make an additional call? Would the operator cut you off?

Think of all the situations and times when your heart races because you have to meet a deadline once again — car inspections, driver's licenses, tax days, college class registrations, medical procedures before the new deductible kicks in. You know what relief you feel on those rare occasions when you are told that the vaccination won't require a followup, or the

warranty is good for the life of the car. You can appreciate the value of words and phrases like -- permanent; forever; always; for all time; once for all. Christ *“has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself.”* Christ *“always lives to make intercession for”* us. In Christ, we always *“have an advocate in the innermost life of God.”* Thanks be to God. Amen.