



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Melchizedek

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 21, 2021

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Holy Melchizedek, pray for us. Amen.

I hope I'm not sharing too much with you all if I tell you that I've recently been thinking about baby names. I don't have a spouse or partner at the moment, nor is a potential spouse or partner even on the horizon—and, to be honest, I'm not sure that I want to have kids of my own! Yet, for whatever reason, whether it's turning thirty or living alone in a studio apartment for the duration of a pandemic, I've begun brainstorming names for my very hypothetical children. I haven't been brainstorming long, but I already have a pretty good idea of the kinds of names I like and the kinds of names I don't. Based on these initial intuitions, I've developed a set of guidelines for myself as I further discern the appropriate nomenclature for my imaginary progeny.

Rule #1: My children should be named after Biblical figures, or, at the very least, Christian saints. I love the fact that I can open up the Bible and read about someone who has my first name. I'd want my children to also have the chance to see themselves in the stories of the Christian faith. Rule #2: My children's names should have positive associations. No naming them Beelzebub or Judas or Jezebel. Rule #3: My children's names should have at least three syllables. My children will be people of substance and therefore they need substantial names. My five-letter first name has always looked disproportionately small next to my seven-letter middle name and my eight-letter last name. I'd want greater balance in the names of my children. And Rule #4: My children's names should give them an aura of sophistication and distinction. My children will not be common, boring people, so they shouldn't be called anything common or boring.

When it comes to girls' names, the choice for me is easy. There are comparatively few names for women in the Bible, and, with all due respect to the Rachels among us and the members of the St. Tabitha's Guild, I have always loved the name Elizabeth. In the Bible, Elizabeth is the relative of Mary who graciously hosts her after she becomes pregnant with Jesus. A literally regal name, Elizabeth has also been used by two long-serving queens of England, both of whom, at least until recent controversies, were widely admired. When it comes to boys' names, however, I am less clear. There are lots of names for men in the Bible, but, while Matthew, Mark, James, and John are all perfectly good options, they don't exactly excite me. There are so many Matthews, Marks, Jameses and Johns walking around already! The world hardly needs another one.

Believe it or not, I actually quite like the name Bartholomew. While not a particularly notable disciple, Bartholomew gave his name to this august parish of which I am privileged to be a part, as well as to a less august animated character in a certain television show I watched as a child. I also like the name Sebastian. Though not a Biblical figure, Sebastian was a martyr in the early Church. Two of my favorite composers, Johann Sebastian Bach and Samuel Sebastian Wesley, were given Sebastian as a middle name, and the creators of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* chose Sebastian as the first name for its singing crab. The name

Isaiah is appealing to me, too, since his book contains some of the most lovely and inspiring passages in all of Scripture.

Until preparing for this morning, however, I hadn't yet considered the name Melchizedek. I soon realized that Melchizedek satisfies all of my baby naming requirements: the historical Melchizedek was a Biblical figure so positively viewed by the Christian tradition that several times he was mentioned by a Biblical writer in the same breath as Christ himself. And the name Melchizedek has eleven letters and four syllables, meaning that it wouldn't look too short next to Thompson or Thompson-hyphen-something-else. Perhaps most importantly, Melchizedek is a distinctive name. It is not common and it is not boring. How many people do you know named Melchizedek? The Social Security Administration reports that Melchizedek has not once been among the one thousand most popular names for male American babies since the U.S. Government began keeping track in the year 1880. I can see it already: Little Baby Melchizedek Thompson-hyphen-something-else will be an object of fascination from the day of his birth, even if his teachers may have to take steps to keep him from being bullied on the playground.

And when Melchizedek Thompson-hyphen-something-else grows up and becomes an adult, his cocktail party conversations will immediately become an opportunity for the teaching of the Christian Gospel—because Melchizedek Thompson-hyphen-something-else will not be able to explain who he is and why his name is so strange without talking first about a shadowy figure from the pages of the Bible.

The figure of Melchizedek is so obscure that even the most Biblically literate among you can be forgiven for not knowing who he is. His story begins in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis, where, in three short verses, Melchizedek, identified as the king of Salem, offers bread and wine to Abram, who has not yet been given his new name of Abraham. Melchizedek is not just a king, Genesis tells us; he is a priest as well. It is presumably through his priestly authority that Melchizedek is able to give Abram a blessing in the name of “the God Most High.” In response to this blessing, Abram gives Melchizedek a tenth of everything he owns, offering up the earliest example of what we now call a tithe. That's all we hear in Genesis about Melchizedek. Melchizedek also makes an appearance in the book of Psalms, in which God makes the following declaration to an unnamed person, thought by some to be the Messiah: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

What exactly this means is anyone's guess. Several works outside of the Hebrew Bible speculate about the mysterious Melchizedek, yet what we sometimes call the Old Testament only gives us three verses in Genesis and one verse in the Psalms. Melchizedek might have gone the way of Og, the King of Bashan, and disappeared entirely into the fathoms of Biblical history had Jesus not come along.

The earliest Christians needed a way to fully explain Jesus' death on the cross. In the years after Jesus' death, Christians gradually came to understand Jesus as a priest, as a person specially appointed to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of human beings and to otherwise mediate between God and humanity. The priestly aspect of Jesus' identity was suggested by Jesus himself in his actions and words at the Last Supper and hinted at by Paul in several of his letters. In Romans, Paul refers to Christ, “who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”¹ In a verse from Ephesians we often hear on Sunday mornings, the writer invites us to “walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God.”² Christ is the sacrifice, but he also seems to be the priest who makes the sacrifice of himself.

Of all the books in the Bible, however, only the letter to the Hebrews actually calls Jesus a priest, and, in order to do so, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews has to solve an important conundrum. The Torah,

¹ Romans 8:34.

² Ephesians 5:2.

Jewish law, states clearly that all priests must be descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, that no priest is legitimate unless their bloodline can be traced back to him.³ Jesus, we know from the extensive genealogies in Matthew and Luke, does not descend from Aaron.⁴ So how can Jesus be a legitimate priest?

Here's where Melchizedek comes in. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, possibly informed by apocryphal literature, reaches back into the Torah to find another kind of priest—one outside of the Aaronic bloodline—and the priest that the writer of Hebrews finds is Melchizedek. Melchizedek's priesthood, which predated Aaron and the rule that all priests must be descended from Aaron, was recognized as legitimate in both Genesis and the Psalms. By tying Jesus to Melchizedek, the writer of Hebrews can convincingly call Jesus a priest and thus substantiate his vision of Jesus' true identity and mission. As the writer of Hebrews understands it, Melchizedek has actually paved the way for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Had Melchizedek not come before, Jesus' priestly action at Golgotha might not have been possible.

It's helpful to note that this pivotal player in the drama of Christian salvation was a complete outsider to Christianity. In her book *Holy Envy*, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that, however authoritatively Jews and Christians might write about him, Melchizedek never became a Jew or a Christian. He was what she calls a "religious stranger." Like the Magi who visited the infant Christ, he entered the story for a brief moment, offered his blessing, and then left, never to be heard from again. According to Brown Taylor, Melchizedek and the Magi and many others like them reveal that "God works through religious strangers. For reasons that will never be entirely clear, God sometimes sends people from outside a faith community to bless those inside of it. It does not seem to matter if the main characters understand God in the same way or call God by the same name. The divine blessing is effective, and the story goes on."⁵

If Brown Taylor is right in her interpretation, Melchizedek should serve a warning to those of us who may be tempted to underestimate strangers and the impact they can have. According to our Bible, an unknown guy with a funny name, a non-Jew and non-Christian who was for the most part left out of our Sunday school lessons, blessed the patriarch of three of the world's major religious traditions and founded the order of priesthood that our Lord and Savior Jesus merely joined. Melchizedek, then, was no sideshow. Melchizedek the outsider was as vital to the Christian project as any insider named Peter or Paul. The Christ who declared that he would draw all people to himself—that the goal of his ministry was full, uncompromising inclusion—made a complete stranger—a total fringe figure—the absolute key to understanding who he was and what he had done.

We wouldn't know the whole significance of Melchizedek's role, though, if it weren't for the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. This person is the other hero of the Melchizedek story. By unearthing forgotten threads of ancient tradition and weaving them together in innovative, admittedly somewhat dubious ways, he became the patron saint of astute lawyers everywhere. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews had to find a way to make the evidence fit the argument, and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews succeeded. The Torah said that the only legitimate priesthood was the priesthood of Aaron, but the Torah contained another legitimate priesthood within its very pages. The argument that seemed on the face of things to be so wrong—that a legitimate priest could lack a genealogical tie to Aaron—turned out to be exactly right. By bending the tradition, by creatively playing with it rather than uncritically adhering to it, the writer of

³ Numbers 18:1-7.

⁴ Matthew 1:1-17, Luke 3:23-28.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, 109. In researching Melchizedek, I was also helped by *Jesus Our Priest* (Gerald O'Collins, SJ and Michael Keenan Jones), *Raising up a Faithful Priest: Community and Priesthood in Biblical Theology* (Richard D. Nelson), the Yale Bible Study course on Hebrews (<https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/hebrews/>) and Barbara Brown Taylor's October 29, 2017 presentation at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, "The Melchizedek Effect" (<https://stphilipscathedral.podcastpeople.com/posts/69349>).

the letter to the Hebrews discovered the surprising truth. When we are willing to be led similarly into unknown territory by our rigorous intellectual explorations, we might also find that what we had once thought could not possibly be true has been true all along.

Once Melchizedek Thompson-hyphen-something-else is finished relaying a version of this sermon at his first cocktail party, he will probably wish that he had been named after a singing crab instead. But I hope that over the years of telling people about his name, Melchizedek Thompson-hyphen-something-else will come to appreciate just how much of the Christian faith is wrapped up in the enigmatic figure whose name he bears. And I hope he'll come to see how, like the first Melchizedek all those years ago, he can lay the groundwork for the Savior of the World simply by showing up and offering a blessing to a stranger.

Amen.

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