

CARRIERS OF THE COVENANT
(Jeremiah 31:31; Hebrews 5:1-10)

It took a while this week for me to begin to find enough light to illuminate my way into any kind of relevant or contextual or meaningful understanding of the scriptural texts we have before us this morning. That could be due in part to some of my own feelings of darkness and non-creative un-illumination that I have lately been dwelling in; an experience of emotional human being-ness that is known to all but the rarest of us. There are points in most of our lives where we can feel like the light is not able to penetrate our usually elaborate and sometimes ornate and sometimes even home-made armor—even though we are literally being *bathed* in light: light that is seeking to shine our way, to guide our feet, to order our steps, to rejuvenate our souls, to uplift our spirits, to renew our minds, to renovate our inner dwelling places, and to clear the pathways to the doors that are *within* us that lead to the *outside* of us—to others, and to love for others . . .

Once some light began to reach me, it led me to this remembrance from my early days in seminary:

In my entering class in seminary was a fellow student named Jim, quite the arrogant and overconfident mid-westerner, who always made a point of saying how sure he was about his call to ministry, because his paternal lineage went back five generations of Lutheran pastors! I skeptically watched him play out his brash confidence in his call, even as I continued to struggle with the reality and relevance of mine. I was discovering, through some of the interactions and experiences of my initial seminary year, that God doesn't only work through the rituals and lineage and signs and seasons that we are used to experiencing God through; but that God also decides to show up in our lives in ways that are *new* to us, and can get our attention, and can speak to our souls.

As our first year came to a close, I ran into Jim in the seminary courtyard one day. His usually brash, overbearing demeanor was much

more demure and introspective this time. He stated that he would not be returning to seminary the following year, because he seemed to have lost his sense of call. I could tell that for the first time in his life, he seemed to not be tied to the safety of the shore of his ancestral purpose; to the moorings of the immovable certainty of his paternal lineage. He was being spoken to and dealt with by the Spirit of the Living God, in ways that were unfamiliar to his cognizance, but which were beginning to see the light.

My classmate Jim fashioned himself to be a “carrier of the covenant” that God had made with God’s people through Jesus. But there is a way that I imagine that Jim was seeking to be a carrier of an OLD covenant—a covenant of predictability, of presumed authority, of old traditions and ways of thinking, of paternal lineage and systemic preference.

The first words that we see and hear in our scriptural presentations this morning are that God is going to make a NEW covenant, a NEW

agreement, with God's people; a new covenant that will allow God's people to know God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength, and to feel and know of God's love and forgiveness and eternity.

It seems that when it comes to figuring out as best we can the presence and purpose of God, it's always good to look in some new places; some unexpected places; some places that up until now you may have never imagined it leading you to the presence of God.

Because the "carriers of the covenant"—be they tangible or intangible—come in all shapes, forms and sizes.

II.

Let me move to another illumination in a related vein that began to shine brightly at me through the words of scripture.

But first let me add to and illuminate the lesson from Hebrews by adding the four verses that come before our reading, and reading it from the Inclusive Bible translation:

This past Thursday morning I facilitated a discussion among a group of retired pastors from our synod; and it did not escape me that present in that room, that space, that gathering, were a group of men and women who had been called and set aside by God to help deal with the things of God among the people of God, and who had spent significant portions of their life doing, professionally and faithfully, formally and informally.

The writer of Hebrews talks about “high priests.” I just want to talk about “priests” for a moment. Priests, like that gathering of retired clergy. Priests, like me and Pr. Katya. Priests, like you.

Because in Lutheran theology we speak of the “priesthood of all believers”, everyone who believes being called and purposed by God—clergy or lay, formally or informally, professional or volunteer—to be a “carrier of the covenant.”

And what is it that we carry?

None other than the grace of God!

No matter what covenant you want to talk about that God has made with and for God's people, it is a covenant filled with grace, with unconditional love overflowing; with the ability to offer ourselves to others led by that grace, and filled by that grace.

The writer of Hebrews talks about the priest being able to deal with others who have lost their way, because the priest—being human and knowing personally all about times of weakness and darkness and being lost—is able to not only make sin offerings on behalf of themselves as well as others, but to also take the risk of helping others to find the light that needs to shine and warm them.

Today that light is shining on me in a way that seeks to illuminate the ministry that we all do in the vineyard of believers that helps to minister to one another.

And it's probably shining brightly on my mind and spirit because of the ways that I have felt ministered to in this particular vineyard of believers. And in this particular vineyard where I am compensated for

being one of the “professional priests,” I am moved beyond words at the level of ministering that I and Susan have received.

III.

But for all of the talk of ministering and priesthood, the writer of Hebrews points us to our reality as believers. We indeed have a high priest that has been appointed to us and anointed for us by God.

A high priest who is able to offer gifts and sacrifices for our sins;

a high priest who is able to deal patiently with us, knowing our weaknesses, and our vulnerability to darkness;

a high priest who is able to be heard by God on our behalf, and to bring us news of blessed reassurance from beyond the veil;

a high priest who paved the way for our eternal salvation, and who is able to open every door that seeks to lock us out from our way;

a high priest who may sit high, but who is present enough to be right by our side in every situation;

a high priest who is able to minister to us in every way, in every
circumstance, and in every situation . . .

And his name is Jesus.

Amen.

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