Matthew 26:63-66
Midweek Lent 3 • March 14, 2007
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
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The Priest

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 26: [63b]And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" [64]Jesus said to him, "*It is as* you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:63-64).

This is the Word of the Lord.

Among the people of Israel in the Old Testament, the High Priest stood out. He was the one man who stood between the people and God. It was he who interceded for the people. It was he who offered the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement so that they might be forgiven and preserved. It was he who entered the Holy of Holies one day a year, coming into the very presence of Yahweh, God Most High; there, he would pour out the blood of the sacrifice before God. And, since the priests were in charge of the Law and its enforcement, the high priest was the top dog when it came to making sure that the doctrine and practice of God—His truth—was preserved. Clearly, the office was important. And clearly, the office was to point to the Messiah who would come and make the sacrifice for the sins of the world.

In our reading from the Passion of our Lord this evening, the high priest is going about his duties of enforcing law. A captured criminal stands before him. This is a "special" trial, because it has already been agreed that the Man must be condemned for the good of the nation. The council is gathered, and the high priest goes through the prescribed steps of the trial. If the Man is to be condemned, two or three witnesses must testify against Him. Many do so, but there is a problem: they cannot agree with each other. If anything, they're hurting the case, making the trial appear to be the set-up that it is. This will never do, so the high priest opts instead to get the Criminal to confess. "I put you under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" The Man on trial answers simply, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

That's enough for the high priest. He tears his clothes and declares, "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses?" The Man has condemned Himself. He has made the outrageous statement that He is the Christ, the Son of God. That's blasphemy—it's speaking evil against God and breaking the Second Commandment, because it claims to take God's place. The Man has proven Himself a dangerous liar…unless, of course, He is the Christ, the Son of God. In that case, He speaks the truth, and the high priest unjustly convicts an innocent man…and condemns God's only-begotten Son.

But the high priest is satisfied with the trial. He has followed procedure; and in his mind, he has done what is best for the nation. He has gotten a dangerous man the death sentence. For the sake of the people, he is willing to make the sacrifice. He's had to use trickery and deceit to get the job done, but he is firmly convinced that this is for the greater good. Furthermore, he is fully convinced that he has done these things all in service to God. He firmly believes that he and the Pharisees are following God's will, as they continually teach the people that they are saved by their own works and efforts. Therefore, he believes he glorifies God by putting this Jesus to death, for He taught the people that they are saved by His work, not theirs.

The high priest wears the robes of his office, and he looks far more godly than the battered man who stands before him. In reality, however, that night he represents every manmade religion that stands opposed to the Lord, to His Word and grace. That night, he teaches that we save ourselves by keeping rules. Furthermore, we save ourselves by keeping the rules that we make up for ourselves—it's okay, for instance, to lie and bring in false witnesses in order to get the job done, contrary to God's Word. But as long as you're satisfied that you've done what's right, you can be sure that God agrees with you. That's manmade religion in a nutshell.

Much is made of the priesthood of all believers these days: according to I Peter, Christians are a chosen generation, a holy nation, a royal priesthood. All Christians are priests—which, as a side note, does not mean that all Christians are pastors. However, all Christians are priests in that, like the high priest of old, they can come into the presence of God—as they do in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Furthermore, all Christians are priests in that they offer a sacrifice: but here is where we must be careful. The Sacrifice for sin has already been made: Christ has paid the full price for our sins. Therefore, the offering that we make today is not one for sin. Rather, we offer praise and thanksgiving to God that He has made the Sacrifice for our sin through His Son, Jesus Christ. We have the joy of making a sacrifice of praise—by our confession of faith in speech and song, by our service to those around us, and by those offerings we bring to the Lord here. All of this is in thankful response to God that our salvation is completed in Christ.

But beware, priesthood of God. Your sinful flesh is never far away. Daily, you'll be tempted by expedience, to set aside the Law of God for sins that make your life easier, more relaxing, more pleasurable. You'll be tempted to believe you're making great sacrifices for God when you give up old sinful habits; when in reality, this is like giving up arsenic as part of your regular diet. In other words, this doesn't deprive you; rather, it's leaving death behind by God's grace and living the new life He's given you. You'll be tempted, always tempted, to believe God's love for you depends on you: that God's loves you because you find yourself loveable, or that God is angry with you because you're angry with yourself, or that God will hear your prayers more when you've done good things for Him. All of these are interwoven in the beliefs of the high priest who sacrifices Jesus in our text; and, with all of these sins, you sacrifice Jesus in a sense. You sacrifice Him in that you declare Him expendable. If it's okay to set aside God's Law for

your favorite sins, then why did Jesus have to die for them? If you're saving yourself by giving up sinful habits and doing good things, what need do you have for Jesus to save you? And if you elect to follow Jesus by "what works for you," then you sacrifice the Word of God for your own manmade faith. So beware: it is easy to be an unfaithful priest. It will happen to you each day before you know it.

That is why, as you meditate on tonight's reading, you give thanks that there's one more high priest in the room. Remember that, throughout the Old Testament, the office of the high priest pointed to the Messiah who would come and make the sacrifice for the sins of the world. It is the Messiah who stands on trial—it is the Christ whom the council condemns. The Messiah does not even contemplate deceit or trickery. Rather, He silently endures the accusations of sin (He's going to die for them, after all) and speaks only to declare the truth: He is the Christ, the Son of God. He is the long-awaited Messiah who has come to make the sacrifice for the sins of the world. Furthermore, He is about to use the high priest's murderous evil for your good: on the cross, He *is* the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. For your sins, so that you might have life.

Jesus, your High Priest, stands before Caiaphas and council and declares that He is the Christ who has come to save the world. He further declares, "hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." I doubt that Caiaphas takes this well, but you hear and give great thanks: Jesus here announces not only that He is the Sacrifice for your sins, but He also foretells His Resurrection. Furthermore, He declares that He sits at the right hand of God. What does He do there? He serves as your high priest. He intercedes for you. He says of you to God the Father, "I have died for them. I have made them My own in Holy Baptism. I have forgiven them, and by My grace they believe in Me." And God the Father responds, "Because You have forgiven them, they are My beloved children. I will provide all that they need for now and forever."

So you repent of your sins and rejoice. The One who stands before Caiaphas that night is your Savior. He always tells the truth. He is the Christ, the Son of God, and He has made the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. He promises that He forgives you; and as He always speaks the truth, there will never be a time where He does not. He intercedes for you, and there will never be a time where He does not. And because He has gone to the cross, you will see Him coming on the clouds of heaven at God's right hand—to deliver you to eternal life with Him in heaven forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen