

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
Pastor Troy Schreiner www.victorylutheran.org

Worship Series: *Crushed*

Service Theme: *Our Temptation Is Crushed by Christ's Obedience*

Sermon Theme: *Our Perfect Substitute (March 13, 2022)*
Hebrews 4:14-16

This past Friday, I got to go to The Players Championship at TPC Sawgrass. And before rain washed out the day, it was so fun to watch the best players in the world hit shot after shot that left you saying, “Wow!” And I thought, “Wouldn’t it be nice if you could have one of these pros play golf for you, and you got to put your name on their scorecard?” I’d feel a lot more confident heading into the Victory golf tournament, that’s for sure! Or imagine if you could have a PhD in Mathematics take your 6th grade math test for you? Or if you could have Celine Dion perform for you at your talent show? How much easier would life be if you always had a better substitute who could do something in your place?

But the benefit of having a substitute correlates with who that substitute is. I doubt the players on the PGA Tour would be excited to have me play their round for them. Or that the math PhD would want a 6th grader to teach his masters Calculus class. Or that Celine Dion would be OK with some lady who’s “pretty decent at karaoke” performing her concerts in her place. Having a substitute is only good if they’re well-equipped to take your place!

This morning, we see Jesus as our substitute: the warrior who battles our most terrifying enemy; the high priest who represents us before God. Which necessitates the question: what kind of substitute is he? Jesus isn’t only a good substitute; he’s more than just well equipped to be our substitute. In every way, Jesus is **Our Perfect Substitute**.

One reason that Jesus is our perfect substitute is because he’s perfectly equipped for the role. As the author of the letter to the Hebrews encourages, *“Since we have a great high priest who has ascended*

into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses.”

To this audience of Jewish converts to Christianity, the author’s reference to Jesus being our “great high priest” would have been easily understood. But we probably need a little more explanation. In the plans God laid out for Israel’s worship life, there was to be one High Priest, a man from among the Israelites that God would choose to serve as the main representative of the people before God.

It was the High Priest’s job to offer up prayers to God on behalf of his people, and offer sacrifices for their sins. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter into God’s presence in the Most Holy Place and offer a sacrifice to pay for the sins of all the people—including his own. Basically, the High Priest was the substitute for the rest of the people of Israel, acting on their behalf.

And it made sense that the High Priest could be their substitute, because he was one of them; like the people he represented in every way. That’s a necessary factor in substitutions, right? As good of a substitution as he might be, you can’t sub Trevor Lawrence in as the quarterback for your Pop Warner team, because he’s too old—not just like the rest of the kid’s he’d be playing with. And you couldn’t ask Celine Dion to sing for you in your high school talent show, because she’s not in high school—not just like the rest of the participants. But Jesus can be our perfect substitute, because he’s like us in every way!

If you’re a parent, at some point your child has probably said, “You just don’t understand!” Whether it’s giving them advice they didn’t want to hear, or disciplining them for something they’ve done wrong, their words imply that you don’t know their struggles, the pressures they’re under, or what it’s like to be in their shoes. Little do they know that you’re completely qualified to give such advice because you remember very much what it’s like to be in their shoes!

But sometimes, people really doesn’t understand. Like when the economy is hurting, and some Hollywood elite tweets from his

mansion, “Times are tough, but we’re all in this together,” before his chauffeur drives him away in one of his 10 Rolls Royces. Or when someone who’s never struggled with mental illness tells someone with depression, “Just be happy!” Sometimes, people aren’t qualified to comment, because they really don’t know what it’s like!

Many people assume that about God. That he’s just some distant, disconnected, oblivious, all-powerful being who sits in his ivory tower, judging people because he doesn’t know what it’s like to be weak, or suffer, or face the battles of temptation.

But Jesus, the Son of God made flesh, knows exactly what that’s like. As Hebrews says, *“We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.”*

We see that in today’s gospel. In ancient times, there was a custom called “battle by champion,” where two opposing armies each sent out their best warrior to fight each other, like the battle between David and Goliath. That’s what happened in the gospel too. The forces of evil sent out their champion, Satan, the prince of demons. And God sends his champion, Jesus Christ, into battle against Satan. Not with swords or spears, but with words. Satan tempts Jesus, and Jesus refutes Satan with God’s Word. And in that, we see that our perfect substitute is indeed like us in every way. All the temptations that Satan brings against us, he brought against Jesus too.

But maybe when you hear how Satan tempted Jesus, you think, “Those aren’t the temptations I face!” And it’s true. I’ve never been tempted to use my divine power to turn stones into bread. But how often does Satan tempt us to ignore God’s will in order to satisfy the desires of our flesh? Lust. Love of money. Temporary relief through drugs or drunkenness. The enemy attacks us with that all the time, and how often we fall. And Satan has never promised to give me all the kingdoms of the world if I bow down to him, like he tempted Jesus to take the easy way out and avoid the suffering of the cross. But how often Satan tempts us to take the easy way out and bow to the sinful world’s desires, instead of enduring the suffering and sacrifice of

taking up our crosses to follow Jesus. The enemy attacks us with that all the time, and how often we fall. And Satan has never tempted me to jump off a building to test God’s love and protection. But how often Satan tempts us to test God’s love by being apathetic and careless about our faith, or using his gracious promises of forgiveness as a license to live in sin, instead of living for him. The enemy attacks us with that all the time, and how often we fall.

If we’re honest, we react to Satan and his temptations the same way the Israelites reacted to the giant Goliath—dismayed and terrified. Because Satan is a towering enemy far too powerful to defeat on our own!

But Jesus isn’t oblivious to our weaknesses and struggles. As true man, he faced them all. That’s why Jesus doesn’t look down on us with hatred and disgust because we struggle and are weak. Instead, he looks at us with loving empathy, because he knows what it’s like. Like how a person who’s dealt with depression treats someone who’s dealing with depression. He’s known the weakness of human nature. He knows the struggle and battle of temptation. And because he’s been tempted like us in every way, he can be our great high priest, our champion, our perfect substitute. And we need him to be that for us.

Notice that God didn’t send Jesus to be our “great general” who gives guidance and direction, but ultimately leaves our battles with Satan up to us. He’s our “great high priest.” The one who represents us before God. The one who intercedes for us, and makes the sacrifice for our sins. Our perfect substitute. Because although he was tempted like us in every way, he is also complete unlike us, because in the face of temptation, *“yet he did not sin.”*

Jesus is our perfect substitute, not just because he’s well equipped for the role, but because he was literally perfect. In the spiritual “battle by champion,” Jesus emerges victorious, completely unscathed by sin. Not falling for temptation a single time, but living the perfect life of righteousness that God requires! Our perfect substitute.

While the golfers I watched at The Players were pretty amazing, they still hit some in the water and missed easy putts. The math PhD still has brain lapses. Celine Dion sometimes hit her notes. But not our champion! That makes Jesus entirely unique, and therefore, the only perfect substitute that we can have. He is the only one like us in every way and yet perfectly without sin or error.

And the results of that substitution are life-changing! Because Jesus was our perfect substitute, we can ***“approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”***

What a picture! Because Jesus, our perfect high priest represents us before God, and because his perfection becomes our perfection through faith, we can approach the throne of God with confidence. We don’t have to dress ourselves up to look more impressive, or recite all our achievements to have an audience with him. This isn’t a throne of judgment, or a throne of justice, it’s a throne of grace—characterized by undeserved love! That means we can come before God without our knees knocking in terror, because we have a perfect substitute!

Not only does that give us grace for eternal life, as Hebrews says, it also gives us grace to help in our time of need. Christ defeated Satan, but Satan still looks for opportune times to attack God’s people. But the grace of God motivates us to go to battle with Satan, following Jesus’ lead to struggle against Satan by refuting his tempting lies with the truth of God’s Word. God’s grace empowers us as we fight those battles. And when Satan’s temptations pierce our armor and cut us down, we’re not defeated. Because we can approach the throne of grace, confident in forgiveness! Our words are the same as David’s when he faced Goliath. ***“It is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”***

Hold firmly to your faith in Christ. Keep fighting your daily battles against sin. Because the war has been won through our perfect substitute—tempted like us in every way, and yet he did not sin! Your

name is on his perfect scorecard! Our great high priest. Our warrior champion. Our Savior, Jesus Christ.