

GOD HAS SPOKEN



Hebrews 1:1-2a

First Message

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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

“It was a dark and stormy night.” The quintessential opening sentence, much-mimicked and much-mocked. It was first used as an opening sentence in 1830, but the phrase itself is earlier. It has been re-used many times since. For example, Madeleine L’Engle started *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) this way.

The most famous borrower of the phrase is Snoopy. Every single time he sat atop his kennel at his typewriter, he began, “It was a dark and stormy night.” He had no trouble composing a first sentence, but he did often struggle with a second sentence. So sometimes that second sentence was simply, “The End.”

For the past forty years there has been an annual competition named in honor of the author of that 1830 novel: The Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest. The challenge is “to write an atrocious opening sentence to the worst novel never written.” This contest is run out of the English Department right here at San Jose State University, and attracts thousands of entries every year.

English literature is full of genuinely-good first sentences. Shakespeare wrote some classics: “If music be the food of love, play on; give me excess of it, that, surfeiting, the appetite may sicken, and so die” (*Twelfth-Night*). And, “Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York” (*Richard III*).

Some first sentences are very short: “Call me Ishmael” (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 1851), or, “Life is difficult” (Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, 1985). Others are long, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1858) seems short, but is just the beginning of a sentence that runs for 119 words.

For the past month or two I’ve been thinking about first sentences. I usually find the first sentence of a sermon the hardest to write. A lot hangs on this first sentence. A good first sentence has two important tasks. Firstly, it should capture your attention. Here I face competition, because your mind may be elsewhere as I start speaking. First words should generate interest and goodwill on your part so that you are ready to pay attention to the next sentence, and the next. So that you don’t stop listening before I stop speaking. Secondly, the opening words ought to be relevant to the rest of the sermon—or speech or book. They should indicate something of what is to come.

The *Gettysburg Address* (1863) is a great example of a strong first sentence. Abraham Lincoln began, “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

I have been thinking not only about my first sentences, but about first sentences in the Bible. Some are well-known. The OT begins: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). There is a similar first sentence in the NT, as we heard in our Scripture reading: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Other first sentences in the Bible deserve to be better-known, as I hope to show you today.

I start a new series, preaching through Hebrews. The book begins with a long first sentence. It is so long that English translations break it up into multiple sentences: three (NASB, ESV), four (NIV), or even six (CSB). Here is the opening sentence of Hebrews, as rendered by NIV in four sentences:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Heb 1:1-4 NIV)

Though we often call this the Letter to the Hebrews, this is not how a standard NT letter begins—telling us the author, the recipients and their location. We are not told these details. The last few verses of Hebrews *are* like a letter, but not this opening sentence. More recent translations title the work simply “Hebrews.” It is best considered not as a letter but as a sermon, written and sent to Christians among whom it would have been read aloud at one of their gatherings. The actual letters in the NT were also received this way: read aloud to the gathered community. So also the Book of Revelation, which is, among other things, a letter, and in which a blessing is pronounced on the one who reads it aloud, and on those who hear and respond appropriately (1:3). Some of you heard Michael Reardon recite the entire Book of Revelation in 2001 and 2007, at the beginning and end of my sermon series on that book. Some of you have participated in readings that I have organized. Encountering Revelation this way is a profound experience. Encountering Hebrews this way would also be profound. A public reading takes about 45 minutes. Hebrews is a sermon to be heard.

The author calls his work a “word of exhortation,” and states that he has written “quite briefly” (13:22). If you have read or heard the whole work you will smile at that, for it does not seem brief at all.

Just like a sermon today, Hebrews alternates between exposition and exhortation. The author explains and then he applies. The exposition feeds into the exhortation. The exhortation is rooted in the exposition. Over these next four Sundays I will cover the first block of exposition (1:1-14) and exhortation (2:1-4).

Who wrote this sermon and to whom? KJV entitles it “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.” But it is very unlikely that Paul wrote it. Who did is an open question. As for the recipients, the most common view is that it was written to Christians in Rome in the 60s during the reign of Emperor Nero. What we do know is that the author is part of the community to whom he writes. He is temporarily separated from them, perhaps by imprisonment, and hopes to return to them again. Meanwhile he sends them this “brief” word of exhortation to encourage them to persevere in following Jesus. He

writes to people whom he knows and cares deeply for. He knows their situation and their struggles. He is therefore well-placed to give appropriate words of exhortation.

His opening sentence is complex but beautifully-written. It befits detailed exposition, so I will devote two weeks to it. I hope to be able to convey to you some of its beauty. As a good first sentence it introduces major themes of the sermon. This sentence is entirely about God and the Son. God is the subject of the verbs in the first two verses; the Son is the subject in the second two verses. The first half is about the God who speaks, contrasting two eras of speaking. God has spoken in the distant past and God has spoken recently. There are four points of contrast between these two acts of speaking.

1. Formerly God spoke “at many times and in various ways,” but now, it is implied, he has spoken in one singular, unique manner, a one-time event.
2. He spoke “in the past”; now he has spoken “in these last days.”
3. Formerly he spoke “to our ancestors”; now he has spoken “to us.”
4. Formerly he spoke “through the prophets”; now he has spoken “by his Son.”

God speaks. Why does God speak? His speaking is a gift; it is an act of divine generosity. Speaking is relational because it implies a hearer. The spoken word doesn't work unless it is heard and received. In speaking, God extends beyond himself. He speaks to someone or something other than himself. God is inherently relational because God is Love. Love assumes relationship. Love has three aspects: the lover, the beloved, and the love itself that flows between lover and beloved. Ideally this love is reciprocated by the beloved back to the lover. Such is the case within the Godhead, as Augustine described long ago: the Father loves the Son, his beloved; the beloved Son loves the Father back; and the Spirit mediates the love. It is a community of perfect love. As we heard earlier, “In the beginning...the Word was with God” (John 1:3). The Word was present to God. The Son was face-to-face with the Father, as they looked on one another in perfect love. It was a love much deeper than words.

God in his generosity decided to create a world beyond himself to also receive his love and care. A world to whom he could speak. He created this world by speech. “Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). God's act of speaking was heard and it was effective. He spoke, and it was so—seven times. Ten times in Genesis 1 we read, “Then God said.” He created an ordered cosmos by his ten words. He spoke the world into being. Our call to worship, Psalm 29, mentions “The voice of the LORD” seven times: “The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic” (Ps 29:4).

God continued to speak. He formed a human being whom he placed in his garden. A human being capable of hearing and receiving his word. The Lord God spoke again, to this human: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Gen 2:16-17).

God spoke. His word required a response. It needed to be heard. The act of hearing is two-fold. First the words enter the physical ear. But that does not guarantee hearing, as the exasperated parent or spouse says, “Do you hear me?” or “You're not listening!” The spoken word must penetrate the mind and the heart, generating a response. The Hebrew and Greek words for “to hear” imply both actions, both the physical hearing and the response to what is heard. So, often these words are best translated as “to obey.”

God spoke to Adam, who at this point is an undifferentiated human. God spoke an abundant permission and a single prohibition. In heeding the prohibition lay Adam's perfect freedom to enjoy the provision. This is contrary to the modern attitude where commandments, be they negative or positive, limit our human freedom, restrict our autonomy, hinder our authenticity. But in serving the Lord, hearing what he has spoken, we are truly free. But the man and woman did not listen to the Lord. They did not receive his word. Instead they listened to other voices. So God expelled humanity from the garden, from his presence. Humanity lost its true freedom.

But God did not give up speaking. He spoke again. He spoke to Noah, whom we are repeatedly told did all that God commanded him (Gen 6:22; 7:5, 9, 16). Noah heard and he responded. And so he was saved in the ark.

God spoke again, to Abraham, who “believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Taking God at his word was the right response to hearing God speak. And so God fulfilled his promise of a son.

God spoke again, to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. But they were terrified and begged Moses to stand between them and God. So God spoke to Moses, and Moses spoke to the people. Moses functioned as the Lord's prophet, not foretelling the future, but forth-telling God's word. Through the prophet Moses God spoke to Israel's forefathers. He spoke gracious words, words of life.

God spoke Ten Words, the Ten Commandments, giving Israel the gift of moral order. He spoke seven words of instruction for the tabernacle, giving Israel the gift of his presence among them. At the end of his life Moses urged the Israelites to hear and obey God's commandments. Here lay the way to life and prosperity. Failure to hear and obey would lead to death and destruction. That death had already happened. Moses was speaking to the children of those who came out of Egypt, because their parents had all died in the wilderness for their refusal to hear. The parents failed to enter the rest that God had promised.

God spoke. And so our preacher starts his sermon:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways. (1:1)

There is a lot of history packed into that statement. God kept on speaking again and again to the forefathers, to Israel of old. He sent them prophet after prophet as his messengers, proclaiming, “Thus says the Lord.” But Israel did not listen. Finally, God expelled them from the land, just as he had expelled Adam and Eve from the garden. And for the same reason: they did not listen. Eventually God stopped speaking; Malachi was the last prophet. For 450 years God was silent. But the later prophets left a message of hope for the future, that there would be a new age. God would speak again and his people would listen.

Finally God spoke one more time. The preacher continues:

in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (1:2a)

The last days arrived and God spoke again. He didn't speak commandments, he spoke a person. Not just any person, but the One and Only who is uniquely in the category of *Son*.

God's action is illuminated by a parable that Jesus told, the parable of the wicked tenants, included in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). A landowner, who had rented out his well-equipped vineyard, sent his servants to collect his

share of the harvest. But the wicked tenants beat or killed each servant in turn. The owner said, “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him” (Luke 20:13).

Perhaps they will listen. As a supreme act of love for a people that had persistently refused to listen, God spoke one more time, sending his best beloved into the world.

The prologue to John’s gospel, part of which we heard as our Scripture reading, carefully distinguishes two realms: the realm that already *was* before the beginning, and the realm that *came to be* after the beginning started.

In the beginning *was* the Word, and the Word *was* with God, and the Word *was* God. He *was* with God in the beginning. (John 1:1-2)

Four times we hear that, at the moment of the beginning, the Word *was* already there with God. The Word is on the side of God in being eternal, pre-existent. Everything else had a beginning; everything else *came to be*, as we hear three times:

Through him all things *came to be*; without him nothing *came to be* that has *came to be*. (1:3)

Given this strong distinction between the *was* and the *came to be*, it is then a great surprise to read in v. 14:

The Word *became* flesh and made his dwelling among us. (1:14)

The Son left the realm of the eternal *was*, and entered the finite world of the *came to be*. The Son humbled himself. He became like us. He entered into our human story. This is how God spoke! The Son became human, like us, because existing humanity had failed to be truly human. Humanity had failed to hear what God had spoken. In particular, Israel had failed to be the new humanity that God had saved and redeemed from bondage in Egypt, to whom he had given the gift of order, to whom he had spoken again and again and again. Israel had failed to listen, had failed to hear what God had spoken. Now he has spoken again in Jesus.

At the Transfiguration, God spoke to the three disciples, Peter, James, and John, who were with Jesus on the mountain: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matt 17:5). *Listen to him!* Again God’s speech requires a listening response. What is our appropriate listening response to what God has spoken in his Son? How do we listen to Jesus?

In calling his disciples Jesus said, “Follow me.” God has spoken “to us.” This initially was to the Jews of the early first century. But not many listened. Not many followed, especially when Jesus took the path to the cross. The disciples heard and followed, but they didn’t really understand, especially when Jesus took the path to the cross. It would take the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost to open ears and enable understanding, including of why Jesus took the path to the cross. Many did hear: first Jews, and then Gentiles also. In the context of Hebrews, the “us” is the preacher and his audience, his community from whom he is temporarily absent. They have responded in faith to what they have heard from those who had heard earlier. They heard from the previous generation of hearers. As *we* read Hebrews, the “us” includes all who have heard God speak in his Son. We hear what God has spoken, and we respond by following Jesus.

God spoke in the past by the prophets, and he has spoken in these last days in his Son. The comparison between these two acts of speaking is a major feature of Hebrews. The entire book is saturated with Israel’s Scriptures, with what God spoke in the past—what we

generally call the Old Testament. Throughout his sermon the author quotes from the Old again and again, and then shows how it is both fulfilled in Jesus and surpassed by Jesus.

How do we put the two halves of the Bible together? There is both continuity and discontinuity. Where to draw the line between continuity and discontinuity continues to be a major issue in Biblical hermeneutics, in Biblical interpretation. But for many readers, this is a moot point because they pay no attention to the Old at all, other than perhaps for moral lessons. But here at PBCC we do pay considerable attention to the Old and to how to read the two halves together.

Let me make four quick observations on this topic.

1. The former word was good, but the new word is better. It is not the case that the old was bad but the new is good. Both are good, but the new is better.
2. To understand the present word we have to understand the former word. This is part of why we pay attention to the old, so we can understand the new. So that we can understand how Jesus fits into humanity’s story, and into Israel’s story.
3. We now have to read the former word with an awareness of the present word. We know where the story is going. We know how God has spoken since then.
4. We can’t put aside the present word, the new word in Jesus, and return to the former word.

But it seems that some of those to whom the author sent this sermon were tempted to do just this—to put aside what God has spoken in his Son. They were in danger of letting go of Jesus. Why might they let go? Life following Jesus was hard. They were suffering. Some had already fallen away, denying Christ. The greatest danger was not outright apostasy, not outright rejection of Jesus, but a gradual drifting away from Jesus, a gradual ceasing to listen to what God has spoken in his Son.

What does the preacher have to say to those who are in danger of ceasing to listening? His response was to send them this word of exhortation. The first exhortation is this:

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. (2:1)

Hebrews is a pretty dense, theologically-rich sermon. But it has a straightforward purpose: to put Christ before us. I have chosen this as my series title: *Christ before us*. I intend a double meaning. In the exposition sections the preacher expounds the superiority of Christ Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures. He presents Jesus to his audience. In the exhortation sections he urges them to fix their gaze on Jesus, to have Christ before them in their attention. That’s the first sense of *Christ before us*: Christ in our gaze.

The second meaning is this. The preacher reminds his audience that Jesus has faithfully finished the course. Christ is before them in the journey of life. In contrast to ancient Israel and to Adam, he was faithful to God’s word. He heard. This is demonstrated in the temptation in the wilderness, where each time he rebuffed Satan’s temptation by quoting God’s word from Deuteronomy. Jesus was faithful, he completed the journey, and has entered God’s rest. He has taken his seat at God’s right hand, having finished his work. Jesus is the author and perfecter of faith (12:2), not of *our* faith as it is often translated, but of faith itself. He has perfectly modeled faithfulness, doing what Adam and Israel failed to do. He heard God’s word. He both was God’s word and he brought God’s word. He was faithful in both. As such, he is our pioneer, our forerunner, our elder brother

who has gone ahead. He is before us in the course. We follow him, and eventually enter into God's rest also.

Hebrews can be an intimidating book. It suffers relative neglect compared to Paul's letters. We all have our favorite verses from Hebrews, but tend not to know much about their wider context in the book. People are intimidated by Hebrews as a whole. It has never been preached here at PBCC in our 37 years. For the past dozen years it has been my intent to rectify that.

The book's message is one we need to hear today. It is a complex book, but it has a simple premise. Over the next few years we will pay attention to Jesus. Hebrews is very relevant today. Many of us know people who were once passionate about Jesus but have drifted away from him, imperceptibly at first, until finally they are no longer tethered to Jesus. They have lost their mooring to the anchor.

Hebrews is a book about the old and the new, about God speaking in the past to Israel and his speaking in these last days in his Son. It is supremely a book about Jesus. Yes, it is saturated with Israel's Scriptures, but even more it is a book saturated with Jesus. We are invited again and again to consider Jesus, to have Christ before us.

We are mimetic creatures. We imitate others, especially those at whom we look. This quickly becomes evident in young babies, looking into the face of their parents. It is widespread in social media. We become like what we look at. We imitate what we pay attention to. Hebrews directs our attention to Jesus, urges us to pay attention to Jesus, so that we will imitate Jesus by faithfully following him who has gone before us into God's presence. We listen well to what God has spoken in his Son when we gaze at Jesus and follow him. Christ is before us as we gaze on him, and Christ is before us as we follow him. We listen by seeing and following.

We gather together regularly to pay attention to Jesus as we sing and as we hear the Scriptures. We gather in community and connect with one another so that we follow Jesus together. The next two Sun-

days are Connection Sundays, learning of opportunities to connect with one another and to serve together. We cultivate our passion for Jesus, so that we remain firmly attached to him and not drift away.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). God has spoken. He spoke light into the world in the beginning. He spoke light again into the world in Jesus. He has spoken light into our darkness through his Spirit. God has spoken in his Son to us. Let us pay the most careful attention to what we have heard. Let us pay attention to Jesus. This is what Hebrews is about.

I close with a prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*. It is a prayer that we would hear and receive Scripture well. It is placed near the beginning of the church year to govern how we listen to Scripture throughout the year.

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

(Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent)

Let us hear what God has spoken, and ever hold fast to Jesus.

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

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