

NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES



Hebrews 1:2b-4
 Second Message
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 August 21, 2022

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

“What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” One day the disciples followed Jesus into a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. “Suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping.” The terrified disciples woke Jesus up: “Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!” Jesus rebuked their lack of faith, then “rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.” The amazed disciples asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” (Matt 8:23-37). What kind of man is this? Surely only God controls the winds and the waves. Was God present in the boat with them?

What kind of man is Jesus? People have been asking this question ever since. It is a question that the Book of Hebrews explores in depth. Yet Jesus is not mentioned until 2:9. In chapter 1 the focus is on the identity of the Son and his relationship to God. The identity of the Son and the identity of Jesus are related, and Hebrews will eventually bring these two together. Discussion of their identities reached a climax in the fourth and fifth centuries in the first four ecumenical councils, when the church gathered together to debate exactly this: who is the Son, and who is Jesus? Their deliberations drew heavily upon the opening sentence of Hebrews. Over the next few sermons we will consider the identities of the Son and of Jesus. Who is the Son, especially in relation to God? And, who is Jesus, both in relation to us and in relation to God?

Last week we started exploring the long opening sentence of Hebrews:

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)

Last week’s sermon, entitled “God Has Spoken,” looked at the first part of the sentence (1:1-2a) which contrasts God’s two great acts of speaking. In the past, in many episodes, God spoke to Israel through the prophets. In these last days he has spoken to us in his Son. The past was the era of promise. God spoke promises to Abraham, to Moses, to David, promises sealed by covenant. These promises seemed to have their fulfillment, in Isaac and in Solomon. But they failed to live up to the promise. Fulfillment was partial and temporary.

But in these last days God has spoken in his Son. Indeed, it was God speaking in his Son that marked the arrival of these last days, the age of fulfillment. And all who hear what God has spoken in his Son enter into these last days, in which the promises are being fulfilled in the Son.

God has spoken in his Son. The sentence now pivots on the word

Son. The Son is the focus of the remaining two-thirds of the sentence (1:2b-4). The author describes the Son in seven statements. This is hard to discern in English where the single sentence has been split up into multiple parts. But there are structural clues in the Greek that indicate seven statements. God is the subject in the first two statements, the Son is the subject in the last five, but the Son is the focus throughout.

The first statement is this:

whom he appointed heir of all things.

Inheritance is father-son language. In the ancient world and still in some societies today the oldest son is the father’s heir. Now it is common for younger sons and for daughters to also be heirs. Behind this statement lies Psalm 2, a coronation psalm for the Davidic king of Israel:

I will proclaim the LORD’s decree:

He said to me, “You are my son;
 today I have become your father.

Ask me,

and I will make the nations your inheritance,
 the ends of the earth your possession.” (Ps 2:7-8)

Under the Davidic covenant the king of Israel was in a Father-son relationship to God. God’s intentions were to expand the king’s rule beyond just Israel, to the nations, indeed to the ends of the earth. But of the Son here in Heb 1:2, God grants him title not just to Israel, or to the nations, or to the ends of the earth, but to all things, to the entire creation. He is looking ahead to the end of time when the Son will be ruler of all. “It will all belong to the Son at the end” (*The Message*).

The second statement looks in the opposite direction, back to the distant past:

and through whom also he made the universe.

The Son was the agent of God’s creative activity at the beginning. As we read last week in John’s prologue: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3). And in the Christ Hymn in Colossians: “The Son is...the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created...all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:15-16).

God is the subject of these first two statements, but the Son is the focus. It is a comprehensive view of what God has done in and through the Son. He has appointed the Son heir of all things with a view to the distant future, and through the Son has created all things in the distant past.

The Son is now the subject of the remaining five statements. The third statement is twofold (v. 3):

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.

The Son is the perfect image of God, in two ways. First, the Son

is “the radiance of God’s glory.” What do we mean by glory? It is a very important Biblical concept, but it is a hard concept to pin down. I think of it as pure light. God is Light and dwells in impenetrable light. The Son is the radiance of that light, the shining forth of the light. He is that light made visible. Speaking of the eternal Word made incarnate, John, again in his prologue, writes: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

In the OT God’s glory filled the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and in the temple, where its intense brightness was contained from human view. John’s choice of word for “dwelt” evokes that indwelling of God’s glory. The glory had departed from the temple prior to its destruction. Now the glory has returned, not in a building but in a person: in the Word incarnate, in Jesus. Yes, God was present in the boat with the disciples. Jesus was “God with us,” Immanuel.

The second way in which the Son perfectly images the Father is that he is “the exact representation of his being.” “Exact representation” is the Greek word *charaktēr* from which we get our English word. It refers to the stamping of an image onto a coin, making a perfect impression. The Son exactly and faithfully mirrors the fundamental reality of God. “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

God created human beings in his image to represent him in the world he had created, something we have done imperfectly. But the Son is the perfect image of God, something far superior to created humans. During the fourth century there was much debate about this identity between Father and Son. The result of the first two ecumenical councils was the language in the Nicene Creed: “the only Son of God... God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God... of one Being with the Father.” The Creed confesses the closest possible identity between Father and Son. They are distinct yet one. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.

The fourth statement about the Son is this:

sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Not only was the Son the agent of creation in the beginning, and will be Lord of creation at the end, but in the middle he keeps all creation going.

Particle physicists and cosmologists are eager to discover what sustains the universe. The current Standard Model requires 25 fundamental physical constants. As fundamental constants, they cannot be derived from anything else, which means they can’t really be explained. They just are; they are “givens.” It takes 25 of these for the Standard Model to work. Nor can the Standard Model explain everything. Hence the quest for a Grand Unified Theory. What has become clear is that the universe is very finely-tuned in terms of these constants. If they were just slightly different the universe would not be sustained. Some get around this by proposing a multi-verse—not a multiverse. With an infinite number of universes anything is possible, even whales and petunias falling from the sky. It’s an infinite probability drive.

Scripture presents the eternal Son as the sustainer of the universe. Here in Hebrews. Also in the Colossian Christ hymn, “in him all things hold together” (Col 1:17). And Ephesians tells us of God’s purpose in Christ “to bring unity to all things... under Christ” (Eph 1:10). The Son is front and center in God’s administration of his

cosmos: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. The Son sustains all things by his powerful word.

The fifth statement is this:

After he had provided purification for sins.

In ancient Israel purification for sins was the task of the priests. They offered sacrifices, sprinkled blood, prescribed cleansing rituals, and pronounced purity. But the blood of bulls and goat could never accomplish full atonement for Israel’s sins. The work of the priests was never done. A better priest and a better offering was needed. Where could these be found? God provided by speaking in his Son. The Son became human. He “had to be made like them [Abraham’s descendants] in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (2:17). The Son entered Israel’s history as Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. Messiah implies a king, and Jesus did come to be the true king. But the central chapters of Hebrews are devoted to his ministry as high priest, as a great high priest better than all former high priests. Jesus the better priest, offered up a better sacrifice to accomplish true purification for sins. He offered up himself. He was both offerer and offering, and superior in both respects. He thereby accomplished such a great salvation. The Son provided purification for sins.

The sixth statement is the main clause; it contains the main verb:

he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Having accomplished purification for sins through his own shed blood, the Son sat down at the right hand of God in the highest. He sat down as high priest, because his sacrificial ministry was finished. He sat down as king, enthroned at God’s right hand. We pay attention to Good Friday and to Easter, but we don’t pay enough attention to Ascension Day, forty days after Easter, nor indeed to Pentecost, ten days later. Ascension Day is the day of the Son’s investiture and enthronement. We live in a presidential republic, so you might not understand what investiture and enthronement are.

In 1969 Prince Charles was invested by his mother as Prince of Wales, the crown prince, heir apparent to the British throne. The root idea behind the word “investiture” is to dress someone in a robe, symbolizing a new office or status. The Queen placed a crown on Charles’s head, and a fancy robe was placed on his shoulders. Then he took his seat at the Queen’s right hand. He is still heir apparent 53 years later. In 1972 I was in Bangkok during the investiture of Prince Vajiralongkorn as crown prince, as heir to the Thai throne, then occupied by his father Bhumipol. It was 44 years before he ascended the throne as King Rama X. Both these investitures were huge events at the time, extensively covered in the media and celebrated by the public. In a monarchy investiture of the crown prince is a big deal.

The Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Finally, the seventh statement (v. 4):

So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

He became superior to the angels, implying that previously he was not. Yet surely he had been superior in the beginning. Why had he become inferior? We can trace the Son’s path this way. As the one through whom all things were created, including the angels which are created heavenly beings, the eternal Son was always superior to the angels. But he gave up his status and became lower than them as a human being, incarnate as Jesus. When we first read the name

Jesus, we learn that he “was made lower than the angels for a little while” (2:9). At his ascension he became superior again. But he did not put off his humanity. It is as God incarnate in flesh that he has become superior to the angels within history. The exalted Son is the exalted Jesus Christ. A human being has entered into God’s very presence.

And his superior status is matched by a superior name that he has inherited. This brackets the first statement that God appointed the Son as heir of all things in fulfillment of his promise to David.

The Son’s trajectory is also described in our Scripture reading from Philippians 2, which likewise ends with a name. We read of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. Being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself further by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil 2:6-11).

What is the name that the Son has inherited, the name that God has given the risen and ascended Christ Jesus? There are several possible answers. I will consider three.

Is it the name *Jesus*? The Philippian hymn states that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.” It was a significant name: Yeshua or Yehoshua (Joshua), meaning Yahweh saves. But this was the name placed upon him at birth, indeed even before birth, when the angel told Joseph, “you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). It was a common name, and is still a common name today, in Spanish. So, I don’t think it was the name *Jesus*.

In the Philippian hymn the name is given at the ascension. It is probably *Lord*. Jesus has been exalted so that all would eventually “acknowledge that Jesus Christ is *Lord*.” What does it mean to confess that Jesus is *Lord*? *Lord* is a significant name. God’s personal name, as revealed to Moses at the burning bush, and by which he was known to the Israelites was Yahweh. But so concerned were Jews about not profaning the name of the Lord their God, that they ceased pronouncing the name. It became too sacred to say. Instead they said *Adonai*, meaning Lord, master or sir. The Greek translation of the OT rendered this as *kurios*, with much the same meaning. For a Jew to acknowledge “Jesus Christ is *kurios*, Lord” was to affirm an identity between Jesus Christ and Yahweh, Israel’s God. Yet Jewish Christians did so without compromising their monotheism, their staunch belief that there is only one God. For a Gentile to confess “Jesus Christ is *Lord*” was to affirm that others who claimed the title Lord were not Lord at all. Who else claimed the title of Lord? Caesar, the Roman emperor. So Gentile Christians were declaring that Christ is Lord, Caesar is not.

There is a third option. The inheritance of the superior name is mentioned immediately after the session at God’s right hand, and echoes the appointment of the Son as heir of all things in the first statement. So we should look at God’s covenant with David (2 Sam 7), where he promised David a great name.

The Davidic covenant involves a wordplay with *house* and *name*. After the Lord had given David rest from all his enemies, David was living comfortably in his *house* (palace), and wanted to build a *house* (temple), for the ark of the covenant, which was then in a tent. Through the prophet Nathan, the Lord replied that David would not build a *house* (temple) for the Lord; instead the Lord would build

David a *house* (dynasty). “I will make your *name* great, like the names of the greatest men on earth” (7:9). The Lord promised David a son: “I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a *house* for my *Name*, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son.” (2 Sam 7:12-14)

David’s son Solomon did indeed build a magnificent house for the Lord, the temple where God placed his name. But Solomon failed to live up to fulfillment of the promise. The risen and ascended Jesus did fulfill the promise as the Son of David. When he took his seat and inherited the name, he fulfilled God’s promise, “I will make your name great.”

I want to say a few words about the image I am using for this sermon series, “Christ before us.” This type of image is Christ Pantocrator, Christ, Ruler of All. It is common in the iconography of the Eastern church. This particular one is a beautiful 12th-century mosaic in Cefalù cathedral in Sicily. It had long been on my bucket list, and I was finally able to see it in person in 2012.

The Pantocrator image is usually placed high up in a church; this one is in the half-dome of the apse at the very front of the cathedral. Christ’s face is stern. He seems so high up and so far off, rather like a distant emperor.

This is not the perspective of Hebrews. Yes, Christ is seated in glory as ruler of all. But he is also seated as the great high priest. He has finished his high-priestly work of offering a sacrifice for purification from sins. But he continues his high-priestly ministry. He remains a compassionate and faithful high priest. He is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters (2:11), to be identified with us. He is able to help us. We can therefore “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need” (4:16). Jesus is the “great Shepherd of the sheep” (13:20).

Yes, God was in the boat with the disciples. Jesus’s action in stilling the storm, ruling creation, showed that God was present among them in Jesus. But now Jesus is present at God’s right hand as both king and high priest. When God spoke in Jesus, God became present among humanity. Now that Jesus has been exalted, humanity is present with God.

Hebrews finally ties together the identities of the Son and of Jesus in chapter 4:

Therefore, 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. (4:14)

How do we hold firmly to the faith we profess? By having Christ before us. By setting our gaze on Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is what Hebrews does again and again: it puts Christ before us so that we can fix our eyes on Jesus. A second way we hold on is by encouraging one another:

let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another. (10:24-25)

Today is Connection Sunday. There are tables outside showcasing many different ways to connect with each other, so that we can encourage one another to hold firmly to the faith we profess.

But first, because these seven statements about the Son were so important during the first four ecumenical councils, I would like us to recite together the Nicene Creed, the product of the first two councils. Some of you have been with me in Istanbul where we have

stood in the very place where the Creed was finalized and have recited it together. Let us stand and together profess our faith.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

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