

# BUT WE SEE JESUS

Hebrews 2:5-9

Series: Christ Before Us #5

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Today is the Second Sunday of Easter, connected in some traditions with Thomas, because it was on the eighth day that Jesus appeared to Thomas, who had missed his first appearance to the disciples on the evening of his resurrection. “See...and believe,” said Jesus to him. Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God!” To which Jesus said, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:27-29).

But perhaps you have already put Easter behind you and have moved on. Perhaps you are now looking ahead to Memorial Day and the beginning of summer. But not so fast! I want to pause a little and reflect on religious calendars.

In the beginning God made the lights in the sky “to separate the day from the night, and...serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years” (Gen 1:14). The sun, the moon, and the stars since time immemorial have been our time-keepers, dividing our time into days and months and years. They give a rhythm to life on multiple levels. Part of that rhythm is the seasons: not just summer and winter, seedtime and harvest. But also religious seasons: sacred times on our religious calendars. Perhaps you pay no attention to the sun, moon, and stars as timekeepers; you just look at your phone. But our religious calendars do.

God gave Israel a religious calendar, commanding them to celebrate three annual festivals: Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, *Shavuot* or the Feast of Weeks, and *Sukkot* or the Feast of Tabernacles. These were rooted in Israel’s history; they were memorials to remind Israel of its history, that it had been liberated from bondage in Egypt into freedom, bound for the Promised Land. Each involved eating a meal in God’s presence.

As Christians we believe that Jesus reshaped Passover around himself, transforming the Passover meal into a meal about himself. The bread was now his body; the wine was now his blood. He invited his disciples to repeat this in remembrance of him. And we do so still today, and will do so at the end of this service. This is the one festival commanded of Christians, though we tend not to think of it as a Festival.

Fairly quickly the early church did create a series of festivals. These are not commanded in Scripture, but they have proven valuable in structuring the year, a liturgical year. The year begins not with Jesus but with four weeks of waiting and anticipation in Advent, leading up to the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord, of the wonder of the incarnation. Next is Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles in the form of the Magi from the east, and his manifestation in baptism as the Father’s beloved in whom he is well-pleased. Then another somber period of reflection in Lent, ending in the joy of Palm Sunday. This soon becomes the sober time of Maundy Thursday, so-called Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. But then the glorious celebration of Easter Sunday: He is risen! He is risen indeed! But that’s not the end. There are two more Feasts we so often forget: Ascension Day when we remember the Lord’s return to heaven back

into his Father’s presence, but now as a human being. Ten days later is Pentecost when God pours out his Spirit so that we can be the beneficiaries of what God has done in Christ Jesus, so that we can participate in the resurrection life of this new creation. Then follows a half-year of Ordinary Time, of us seeking to live out our lives in light of what God has done in Christ and is continuing to do through his Spirit.

Again, this liturgical year is not commanded of us. But it has proven helpful for many, and its appeal seems to be growing as evangelicals turn to liturgical churches. It has great value and we here at PBCC have sought to pay more attention in recent years. It is rooted in history. Paying attention to it reminds us of our history and anchors us in that history. It anchors us in our founding narrative: the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the pouring out of the Spirit to be God’s empowering presence through Christ in us.

But there are other narratives that seek to intrude into our lives. There is the narrative of nationalism. Now it is quite alright to be patriotic, but religious nationalism, the combination of nation and faith, is problematic, whether it be Christian nationalism here in the US, Jewish nationalism in Israel, Islamic nationalism in Iran, or Hindu nationalism in India.

There is the emoji calendar which reflects the narrative of commerce, epitomized by the changing packaging of candy in the stores: from white snowmen at Christmas, to red hearts for Valentine’s Day, to green shamrocks for St Patrick’s Day, to fluffy yellow chicks for Easter, and so on.

I have been thinking about calendars for a couple of reasons. One is the convergence last week of the major festivals in Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious calendars: Ramadan, Passover, and Easter. Last Monday I was invited to speak on the topic of Festivals and Interfaith Harmony at an Iftar meal, the evening meal that ends the daily fast during Ramadan. My talk included some of the thoughts I have just shared. I have also been thinking about the religious tension in Jerusalem during this convergence. Next month 42 of us will leave to tour Israel; some have been nervous.

But the major reason why I have been thinking about the Church Year, the liturgical cycle, is because of the Book of Hebrews, to which we return today. This book is all about Jesus. Christ is set before us. Indeed that is my title for this series: Christ Before Us! And my sermon today is titled “We See Jesus.” We look to Jesus so we can persevere in our believing, just like Thomas.

The major event of Jesus’s life that is highlighted in the book is not his birth, not his death, not his resurrection, but his ascension. It’s not Christmas nor Good Friday nor Easter Sunday, but Ascension Day. Now this may surprise you because we are so used to talking about the cross or the empty tomb. We talk of the finished work of Christ on the cross, but that is not the perspective of He-

brews. The Son's work reaches its climax when he enters into the Father's presence after his ascension from earth. And he continues to have a ministry there on our behalf.

Since it has been over seven months since we were in the Book of Hebrews let me quickly recap and get us up to speed. The book begins with one of the greatest sentences in all Scripture:

**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. (Heb 1:1-2a NIV)**

The rest of the book is best read as a sermon expounding this statement. The preacher repeatedly quotes Israel's Scriptures—what God spoke in the past through the prophets—to clarify how he has spoken to us in this one who is in the category of Son, a category of one.

As I said in one of my sermons last summer, he shows how “*this* is *that*.” Peter began his Pentecost sermon that way: *This* which is happening now on Pentecost morning is *that* which the prophet Joel declared as the word of the Lord (Acts 2:16). Similarly, the preacher of Hebrews shows repeatedly that *this* which God has spoken in the Son was anticipated in *that* which God spoke in the past. Now we cannot go from *that* to *this*; we cannot read Israel's Scriptures and see how they are going to be fulfilled in the Son. But once we hear *this*, the word spoken in the Son, we can go back to *that* and see how it anticipated Jesus.

The preacher continues his first sentence with a summarizing exposition of the superior word spoken in the Son. He makes seven statements about the 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. (1:2b-4)**

This raises some questions. If the Son was the agent through whom God made the entire universe, was not the Son already superior to the angels? His becoming superior to the angels seems to be associated with him sitting down at God's right hand—with Ascension Day. How and when did he provide purification for sins? This too seems to be associated with taking his seat—with Ascension Day.

After this magnificent opening sentence, the preacher uses seven quotations from Israel's Scriptures to show the superiority of the Son to the angels. The final one is from Psalm 110:1, the most quoted verse in the NT:

**Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet. (1:13, quoting Ps 110:1)**

Again we have the Son's session, taking his seat, at God's right hand—Ascension Day, yet again.

Next the preacher interrupts his exposition of the superiority of the Son to give a word of exhortation coupled with a warning (2:1-4). “We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For...how shall we escape if we

ignore so great a salvation?” What we have heard is the good news of salvation, declared to us by the Lord, attested by the ear-witnesses, those who heard in person, and validated by the Holy Spirit.

This is the pattern of Hebrews. The preacher alternates between expositions of the Son and exhortations to us to persevere in faithfully following him. We come now to the second block of exposition (2:5-18), which I'll cover in two weeks.

Long ago Gregory the Great, echoing an earlier statement by Jerome, wrote, “Scripture is like a river again, broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim.” When it comes to Hebrews, I still feel like a lamb paddling in the shallows. But in two weeks' time we will hear from one who has spent four decades swimming in the depths of this book. George Guthrie, NT professor at Regent College, will be our guest preacher on the 30th. We are bringing him down for our annual pastoral staff retreat that week to teach us from Hebrews.

After his word of exhortation, the preacher picks up from the end of chapter 1, where he had said that it was not angels whom God invited to sit at his right hand (1:13). Instead, the angels are busy, sent out to serve those who will inherit salvation (1:14)—us who hear and respond to the word spoken in the Son.

**It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified:**

**“What is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
a son of man that you care for him?  
You made them a little lower than the angels;  
you crowned them with glory and honor  
and put everything under their feet.” (2:5-8a NIV)**

If you are reading along in ESV, you may notice a significant difference. The third-person pronoun occurs in each of the five lines quoted. NIV renders four of them as plural: *them*. ESV renders them all as singular: *him*, and in the first line has *man* instead of *mankind*. Which is correct? It's not a simple answer.

“There is a place where someone has testified.” The preacher knows full well that this is Psalm 8, attributed to King David, and heard as our call to worship today. The psalmist has been looking up at the sky in wonderment,

**When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place... (Ps 8:3)**

Then he looks at himself, or, rather, at mankind in general:

**what is mankind (*man* ESV) that you are mindful of them,  
human beings (*the son of man*) that you care for them  
(*him*)? (Ps 8:4)**

A few days ago I watched *New Eye on the Universe*, the recent PBS Nova episode about the James Webb Space Telescope. There is a vast difference in scale between the cosmos and us humans. A million miles out there in space is a tiny speck, this amazing telescope, a distant outpost of human civilization. But on a cosmic scale that is no distance at all. Nevertheless, humanity has been able to build this instrument and put it there. From its to-us distant perch it peers into the farthest reaches of the cosmos, farther than anyone has seen

before.

As the psalmist reflects on humanity against the backdrop of God's heavens, he is amazed that God should think so much of us, should have such purposes for us:

**You have made them (*him* ESV) a little lower than the angels and crowned them (*him*) with glory and honor.  
You made them (*him*) rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their (*his*) feet. (Ps 8:5-6)**

Again, NIV consistently uses plural pronouns, ESV singular.

In writing Psalm 8, David was reflecting on Genesis 1. God created mankind (*man*) in his own image, male and female he created *them*. He blessed *them*, and said to *them*, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen 1:27-28).

In Psalm 8, then, it is clear that David is referring to humanity as a whole. "Man" in the Hebrew and Greek, and in English until recently, could be used in a gender-specific or a gender-inclusive way. The "masculine" word is not marked for biological gender whereas the feminine is. But now "man" is heard primarily in a gender-specific way. So I support how NIV has chosen to translate Psalm 8 in a gender-inclusive manner. This is one of the main reasons why I preach out of the NIV not the ESV. I want women to hear that you are fully included in the text. It helps that the translation committee behind the NIV includes women, whereas the ESV one, by design, does not.

In light of Genesis 1, the statements that David makes about humanity are synonymous and simultaneous. Humans are a little lower than angels, who are heavenly beings in God's presence, but humans are above all other earthly creatures. They are crowned with glory and honor, these latter terms "glory and honor" being closely associated with rule. And all earthly creatures are under the rule of humans.

The preacher now expounds this quote from Psalm 8, doing so in light of Psalm 110:1, his previous quote (1:13).

**In putting everything under them (*him* ESV), God left nothing that is not subject to them (*him*). Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them (*him*). (2:8b)**

The pronouns are again singular, and NIV again translates them into plurals, "them" three times. There is a disconnect between vision and reality, between the grandeur of Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, and what we see today, between what humanity was created for and humanity's current condition. God put *everything* under human beings: all the creatures of all three realms: the sea, the sky, and the land. But that is not what we see. Humanity has failed to live up to God's creation intent. Humanity has frustrated the purposes for which God created it.

Now the preacher moves from what we do *not* see to what we *do* see:

**But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (2:9)**

He re-reads Psalm 8 in light of the Son. He splits apart the

Psalmist's three statements about humanity and reads them as three separate, sequential events concerning the one man, whom now he names for the first time in the sermon, Jesus. Read *this* way, all the pronouns in vv. 6-8 are singular: *him*, that is, Jesus.

He who was made a little lower than the angels is Jesus. In Psalm 8, made lower than the angels is exaltation above the rest of creation. But in the person of Jesus, being made a little lower than the angels is descent. Here we have the mystery of the incarnation: that the eternal Son, present in the Godhead before the beginning, should step down, humble himself, and enter into human history as one of us.

He who is crowned with glory and honor is Jesus, whom we now see. Here, as in Psalm 8, the glory and honor are associated with rule, the rule of the one who is crowned. When did this coronation happen? At the ascension.

In three weeks' time, on May 6, Charles III and Camilla will be crowned king and queen of the United Kingdom. The coronation will be in Westminster where monarchs have been crowned since 1066. Charles will sit upon the ancient coronation chair, over 700 years old. There he will be crowned with St Edward's Crown.

At his ascension, Jesus entered into God's very presence, and sat down at his right hand, crowned with glory and honor. He who was made lower than the angels (2:9) has now become superior to the angels (1:4). The Son, pre-existent with the Father, his agent of all creation, was made lower than the angels, incarnate as Jesus the man. Without putting off his humanity he has now returned to the Father, becoming superior to the angels as the God-man, Jesus the Son.

We see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels, now crowned. But we do not yet see the third stage: "we do *not yet* see everything in subjection to him," to Jesus (2:8). Bringing in Psalm 110, quoted in 1:13, God said to him, "Sit at my right hand *until* I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." Not yet...until... The third stage is yet future. Jesus, already enthroned in heaven, will return to earth to receive his inheritance, rule over all things. At Advent we anticipate not only the coming of the Promised One, but also this second coming of our Lord, the return of the King. His *parousia* to be present with us.

So we see here a past, a present, and a future in the narrative trajectory of the Son, as previewed in Psalm 8. In the past he humbled himself, taking a position lower than the angels by becoming incarnate as Jesus, one of us. In the present Jesus, in his ongoing humanity, is enthroned at God's right hand, superior to the angels. In the future he shall come again to earth and all will be brought under his rule.

The eternal Son took on humanity, and he did not put off that humanity when he returned to the Father's presence. Therefore, Psalm 8 with singular pronouns really is about him. He is the true human, the one perfect man, who fulfills Genesis 1.

At the hinge, between the lowering below the angels and the exaltation above the angels to rule, lies the statement "because he suffered death." This is the extent of his self-emptying: "he made himself nothing...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil 2:7-8), as we heard in our Scripture reading. He descended to earth, into our story. He descended into death. Not just any death, but the most cruel, painful, humiliating, shameful death of all. He descended into Sheol, Hades, the

realm of the dead. He descended as low as it was possible to go. In faithful obedience to the one who sent him. “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (Phil 2:9).

Because he suffered death, a death he did not deserve, Death had no claim on him and had to let him go. It is because of this suffering of death that God has exalted him and crowned him, so that... There is a purpose here: “so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:9). Tasting death does not mean just a little nibble; it is an idiom meaning to fully experience. He fully experienced death so that it might be on our behalf. How do we avail ourselves of that? How does the death of death in the death of Christ work for us? By hearing this greater word that God has spoken in the Son. By responding in faith, like Thomas. By following him, who has gone before us to open up the way into God’s presence.

This is a remarkable text. In Psalm 8, David the psalmist riffs on Genesis 1 as he considers humanity’s place in God’s cosmos. Here in Hebrews 2, the preacher riffs on both Psalm 8 and Psalm 110, to help us see Jesus. To see Jesus so that we will keep on believing, perse-

vering in the life of faith as we follow him, our Lord and our God!

Skeptics wonder how one can believe in the resurrection. The greater wonder is the incarnation. Once you accept that God really entered into human history, that the eternal Son humbled himself, took on human form, and died, then I find the resurrection no problem at all.

It is fitting that we should now come to the table for the meal Jesus gave us, the one festival commanded in the NT. In preparation, I invite you to stand with me, as together we confess our faith in the words of the Apostles’ Creed. We remind ourselves of, and affirm, the narrative arc of Jesus’s life.

*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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