

UPWARD I LOOK AND SEE HIM THERE

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 3:1-6

Seventh Message

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In May I took 40 of the PBCC family to Israel and Jordan. I have been leading tours for nearly thirty years. The first half-dozen tours were small: we traveled around in a minibus. I had no interest in taking a large group, certainly not a bus-full. But I slowly warmed to the idea. I came to think that taking a busload of people from the same church would be good for community life. And so it has proven to be. I have now run six tours using a large tour bus. It has been a joy to see community life strengthened by spending two weeks together. On some tours we have faced particular challenges, to which the groups have rallied together in care and support for one another. This was true again this year.

We left for Israel one week after the WHO declared the end of the pandemic Public Health Emergency. But at the end of the first week we were hit with Covid. This spread through the bus, and eventually nearly half the group tested positive. But we got to see the group's care and loving concern for one another. We were a family together, brothers and sisters.

We return today to the book of Hebrews after 11 weeks. Let me quickly recap what this book is about. Though we frequently call it the Letter to the Hebrews, this is not a usual letter. It has no introductory greeting, identifying the author or the recipients. These are unknown, though it is clear that the author knows the recipients and cares deeply for them. He is temporarily separated, perhaps by imprisonment, and longs to see them again. In the meantime he writes to encourage them to persevere in their Christian walk, and to strengthen their community life. His letter is best understood as a written sermon, expounding the opening statement:

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 writer repeatedly quotes Israel's Scriptures—what God spoke at many times and in various ways, in the past, to our ancestors, through the prophets—to clarify how he has spoken uniquely, in these last days, to us, in the one who is in the category of Son, a category of one. Most of us here are Gentiles not Jews. Our ancestors were not part of ancient Israel nor of first-century Judea and Galilee. But we, who were formerly far off, have been brought near. In Christ Jesus, God has made the two one, Jew and Gentile together in Christ as the people of God. We have been grafted into Israel's story. We are children of Abraham. Through Christ “we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:18).

Therefore we can say that God spoke to *our* ancestors in the past, and that he has spoken to *us* in his Son. Therefore we read Israel's Scriptures as our back-story, not least so that we can better understand the greater word which God has spoken to us in his Son. And we take trips to Israel to see the places of Scripture.

The book of Hebrews is full of Israel's Scriptures, of quotations from and allusions to our Old Testament. It soon acquired the title “To the Hebrews” on the assumption that the audience was Jewish believers. But it's clear elsewhere in the NT that Gentile believers

were instructed in Israel's Scriptures as well as, indeed to make sense of, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore I assume that this book is addressed to a mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, brought together in Christ, in fulfillment of Israel's Scriptures. It speaks to us.

In chapters 1–2 the preacher has shown the superiority of the Son to the angels. In chapter 1 he made seven statements about the Son (1:2b–4), ending with “he sat down at [God's] right hand...having become superior to the angels.” He followed with seven quotations from Israel's Scriptures (1:5–14), ending with the invitation, “Sit at my right hand...”

But in chapter 2 he shows that the Son was made lower than the angels. Incarnate as Jesus he entered into our human world. He became like us, sharing our flesh and blood. He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. He shared our humanity to the point of death so that by his death he might break the power of Satan who holds death. Now, crowned with glory and honor at God's side, Jesus has become a merciful and faithful high priest, representing us in service to God in God's very presence.

In sermons preachers often alternate between exposition and exhortation. The preacher of Hebrews does the same: exposition of the Son who is Jesus now in God's presence, and exhortation to action, which is usually to pay attention to the Jesus he has been expounding. These exhortations usually include a warning.

His first exhortation was in 2:1–4: “We must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard,” that is, to what God has spoken through his Son. And it comes with a warning: lest we “drift away. For...how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?”

Now in 3:1–6, our text for today, he exhorts again and issues another warning.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. (3:1)

As indicated by “Therefore,” his exhortation is rooted in the exposition of chapter 2. We are holy brothers and sisters. Jesus became like us, as our elder brother, because God wants through him to bring many sons and daughters to glory (2:10). Because he is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters we are united together as brothers and sisters of one another. This is the most common way for the NT to refer to Jesus-followers: not as Christians—a word used only three times—but as brothers and sisters, a new family in Christ. Furthermore, we are holy, because “the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family” (2:11). When we are in Christ we are set aside unto God. Jesus makes us holy because God has appointed him high priest, in which capacity he has entered God's presence there to make atonement for our sins.

God is bringing many sons and daughters to glory. Therefore, as holy brothers and sisters, we share in this heavenly calling; our vocation is to faithfully follow the upward call into God's presence. We have a path set before us, at the end of which lies Rest—Rest into

which Jesus has already entered. We will hear a lot more about this Rest in the next two passages.

The preacher's exhortation is to "fix your thoughts on Jesus," or as Eugene Peterson renders it, "take a good hard look at Jesus." Time and again the preacher sets Christ before us. In his exposition he places Christ before us to be the object of our attention, the one whom we see. But Jesus is also the one who has gone before us. He is the Pioneer, the Forerunner, who has faithfully completed the path set before him, and has entered into God's presence. We are to faithfully follow him into that same glory. In my series title, *Christ Before Us*, I have both these meanings in mind.

We acknowledge Jesus as our apostle and high priest. When we make our confession about Jesus, as in a credal statement such as the Apostles' or Nicene Creed, we affirm certain truths. Here the preacher draws attention to two specific aspects of Jesus: apostle and high priest. This might seem surprising for none of our creeds make these two statements. This is the only place in Scripture where Jesus is called an apostle, but Jesus is described, and describes himself, as one who was sent, which is the meaning of apostle. In the immediate context, God sent the Son into the world to become like us, to share our humanity even to the point of death. He became human so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest.

So Jesus's identity and ministry as apostle and high priest are closely tied together. As apostle, he was sent from God to earth to share our humanity. As high priest, he returns, as human, to God's presence to minister. He ministered there by making atonement for the sins of the people. He continues to minister there, helping those who are in need, helping those who are being tested. Our heavenly calling is to faithfully follow him to glory, into God's presence.

After this exhortation, the preacher returns to exposition (3:2-6a). Having already compared Jesus to the angels, now he compares Jesus to Moses, the greatest figure of Israel's Scriptures, the greatest prophet of the past when God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets. He develops the comparison in three stages. First, Jesus is comparable to Moses:

He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. (3:2)

Jesus and Moses were both faithful. It was because Jesus was faithful even unto death that God vindicated him in resurrection and exaltation. Jesus continues to be faithful as our high priest.

Moses was faithful in all God's house. He led the Israelites out of Egypt, he mediated the covenant between God and his people, he received the instructions for the tabernacle and assembled the tabernacle. He remained faithful when all around him were faithless. Twice he interceded for the people when they rebelled against God and himself. Even his siblings Miriam and Aaron rebelled against him.

It was on that occasion that the Lord distinguished Moses with the words quoted here from Numbers 12: "He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord" (Num 12:7b-8a). Moses had a unique relationship with God, unparalleled in the OT.

Just as Moses remained faithful though surrounded by people who were unfaithful, so Jesus remained faithful despite all around abandoning him. He was faithful to the end when he committed his Spirit to God and cried out, "It is finished!" Both Jesus and Moses were models of faithfulness.

Next the preacher distinguishes Jesus from Moses, not to put

Moses down but to exalt Jesus:

Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. (3:3-4)

He likens the relationship between Jesus and Moses to that between a house-builder and the house. A house is not a natural feature, nor does it come together spontaneously. It is manufactured; it is conceived and constructed by someone. The builder is greater than his or her building. In May in Israel we saw some of the buildings of King Herod the Great. His buildings, some of which still stand, testify to his greatness as a builder. Therefore he is called Herod the Builder.

Signature buildings today are often known by their architect. To name just a few: I. M. Pei's Louvre Pyramid, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Norman Foster's Gherkin (and Apple Park), and Calatrava's Chords Bridge visible from our hotel in Jerusalem.

In associating Jesus with the builder, and naming the ultimate builder as God himself, the preacher makes an implicit claim that Jesus is God. Indeed, the opening sentence identified the Son with creation: "through whom also he [God] made the universe" (1:2).

Because Jesus has been found worthy of greater glory and honor, we now see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor (2:9). He has already entered into glory, going before us.

Finally, the preacher places Jesus in a completely different category than Moses:

"Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house," bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. (3:5-6a)

The preacher again quotes Number 12:7. Both Moses and Christ were faithful, but in quite different roles. Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house. The Greek word here is not the usual word for servant. In the NT it is used only here; in the Greek OT it is used only of Moses, suggesting his unique role and status. His service to God was not a menial role, but an exalted, privileged position. His ministry was not just for that time, but had a forward horizon. He bore testimony to what would be spoken in the future, to the greater word which God would speak in these last days through his Son. Moses, a servant in God's house, foreshadowed the one who would be son over God's house.

This Son, incarnate as Jesus the Christ, now exalted and enthroned at God's side and ministering as high priest, is faithful over God's house as Son, as the one who inherits. What is this house? The preacher tells us:

And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory. (3:6b)

We are his house. Most of us are familiar with this language. We are the household of God, a disparate people all brought together under one roof. We are one new family, brothers and sisters together. We are also God's house inasmuch as we are his temple wherein he makes his dwelling. As we were reminded in our Scripture reading, we are:

members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being

built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph 2:19b-22)

But there is a conditionality, an *if* clause. We are God's house, both his household and his dwelling place, *if* "we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory." This doesn't sit well with many. Surely, once saved, always saved. But here it seems there is a possibility of losing our place in God's household. How can there be an *if*? This is but one of several warning passages in this book. These warnings trouble many people depending on their theology. As we make our way through Hebrews, we will consider these warnings as we encounter them.

There are two things that we need to hold on to: "our confidence and the hope in which we glory." Both of these need some explanation.

The first word denotes a state of boldness and confidence, especially in the presence of someone of high rank. It is the confidence that we have access to that presence and that we belong there in that presence. It is what a child ought to feel in the presence of a parent; that the child can run into the parent's presence, into the parent's arms. Here it means the confidence that we have access to God's presence, that we belong there. Sadly, many Christians don't really believe this.

There's a line in the hymn, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*, that runs, "Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face." Providence refers to the circumstances of our life. When things are going against us we can readily assume that God himself is frowning on us, that he is displeased with us. We neither see nor sense his smiling face.

When you think of God's face turned towards you, what do you see? A frowning face? An angry face? A disappointed face? A face that is turned away? An absent face? Do you see someone else's face on God's face? Does the thought of God's face looking at you fill you with fear lest he strike you? Or with with shame because you don't measure up, you're not good enough, or you have been found out? Or with resentment because he hasn't come through, he hasn't delivered what you feel owed or promised? Or even with horror because of some trauma? I am sure many of you do? You feel that God doesn't like you, let alone love you. God's presence is not a safe, welcoming space. Several times I have heard Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, speak. Twice I have heard him say it took fifty years to wipe his father's face off of God's face. Only then did he see God's face as a safe place to be. Some of you, I'm sure, feel the same: God's presence is not a safe place.

But for others of you, I am sure you do see a smiling face, one that fills you with comfort and joy. You are secure in his love and pleasure.

How is it that we have this access to God's presence? Because Jesus is our high priest. Sent from heaven to be like us, he has now returned as one of us into God's presence, where he ministers as high priest on our behalf. He is one of us there. But he is also God's best beloved, the one in whom he has always been well-pleased. When we are in Christ, in corporate solidarity with him as those whom he is not ashamed to call his brothers and sisters, then God is well-pleased in us as well. We, too, are his beloved.

Furthermore, because Jesus shared our humanity, he knows our weakness. He knows when we need help. He is merciful, and therefore he is able to help those who are being tempted or tested (2:18). This theme will be repeated throughout the sermon. A major

concern of the author is that his brothers and sisters to whom he writes know that they are welcome in God's presence.

This word *confidence* is a crucial word in Hebrews, used four times in significant places. The great central section of the book (4:14-10:25) is about Jesus as high priest, both his superior status as high priest and his superior offering of himself. This section begins and ends with assurance of our access to God through Jesus our high priest.

At the beginning,

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. For 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—yet he did not sin. Let us then 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. (4:14-16)

At the end,

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have *confidence* to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. (10:19-23)

In both cases, confidence is associated with drawing near to God through our great high priest. So Charles Wesley wrote in his great hymn, "Bold I approach the eternal throne." So we hold on to this privileged access that we have to God's presence even now through our high priest, Jesus.

The second thing we hold on to is "the hope in which we glory." That in which we glory is that which we treasure, that which we are not ashamed to own, indeed that in which we are proud or boast. For some it might be educational achievement, or professional advancement, or a fast car, or a nice house, or a perfect family. Here in Silicon Valley there are all sorts of things that people place their stock in, boast about, glory in. But the preacher says that what we should place our stock in is hope.

So, what is our hope? Later, the preacher will state that "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (11:1). Faith and hope are closely tied together. We are on a journey, at the end of which lies entrance into God's Rest. We are not there yet, but, by faith, we have confidence that this is the reality that lies at the end of our earthly pilgrimage. Therefore, by faith, we persevere in following Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (12:2). We fix our eyes on him, on Christ before us. Though we do not see with physical eyes, we hold on in faith that Christ is already in God's presence, where he ministers on our behalf as a merciful and compassionate high priest. And our firm and certain hope is that at the end of our pilgrimage we will follow him into that presence. That presence which is glory, and the prospect of which is that in which we now glory.

As God's household we already have this confidence and this hope. We already have access to God's presence now through our high priest. And we have the sure and certain hope that we will join him there at the end of our pilgrimage. Provided we hold on to these certainties that we already have, we will faithfully complete the jour-

ney. We already have this; it is a matter of not letting go. Jesus is the anchor for our soul. With our eyes set on Christ before us, we will avoid drifting away. Many things are not secure enough for us to hold on to, including all the things that the world glories in—the education, professional advancement, fast cars, and expensive houses. But Jesus is secure. We hold on to him. We hold on to the access that we already have to the Father through him. And we hold on to the hope that we have.

It is clear in Hebrews that some were being tempted to abandon the journey. They were being tested in their faithfulness. Hence the *if*. But God wants us to complete the journey, for he is bringing many sons and daughter to glory. And he has provided help: our great high priest.

How do we keep our gaze on Jesus, and hold on to these spiritual realities of our current access to God's presence through Jesus, and the hope of joining Jesus there in his presence? The preacher encourages us to keep meeting together.

We gather together to remind ourselves of these spiritual realities. As our worship guide states each week: *We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit.*

We remind ourselves who Jesus is so that we more clearly see him before us. We do this by reading Scripture and by hearing it expounded. We can do this by reciting the creed in which we confess our faith, in which we acknowledge realities about the triune God. We do this by singing hymns and songs, which set Christ before us. As we sang earlier,

Before the throne of God above,
I have one strong and perfect plea,
A great High Priest whose name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me...

When Satan tempts me to despair,
And tells me of the wrong within,
Upward I look and see Him there,
Who made an end to all my sin.

Because we are God's house, the preacher exhorts us to meet together, encouraging one another (10:25). We are so prone to think individualistically. But we are not isolated individuals walking the path on our own. We are on this pilgrimage together.

In saying this I am conscious that many of our songs are individualistic, even many of the great hymns. Including "Before the throne of God above, *I* have one strong and perfect plea..."; also "And can it be that *I* should gain...?" *I* not *We*. But this is not the language of the NT, and certainly not of Hebrews.

The preacher usually includes himself in his exhortations: "*We* must pay the most careful attention..." (2:1) "how shall *we* escape if *we* ignore so great a salvation?" (2:3); "if *we* hold firmly..." (3:6). When he speaks in second person, it's plural: "Fix *your* (plural) thoughts on Jesus, whom *we* acknowledge" (3:1). We are on this path together.

There are various ways that we can connect with one another here at PBCC, so that we walk the Christian life together. We have Connection Groups, Bible studies, the Life Together class, and opportunities to pray together.

We are God's house. We are a more beautiful building than any of the great buildings of the world. We are holy brothers and sisters. We are sons and daughters whom God is bringing to glory. God is for us: he has appointed a high priest to be in his presence on our behalf. Upward *we* look and see him there. Therefore, *we* can boldly approach the eternal throne. So, let us close by singing *And Can It Be*. Though it is written in the first person singular, we sing it together as *we*.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.
(Jude 24-25)

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