

UNTO WHOM ALL HEARTS BE OPEN

Hebrews 4:12-13

Tenth Message

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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

In the commentary on the recent third indictment of Donald Trump, one word caught my attention. It's a familiar word, but was being used in a way unfamiliar to me. It's the word *discovery*. As a lover of geography, discovery to me means explorers sailing the ocean blue or traveling upstream to find the source of a river. Scientists work in their research labs in the hopes of discovery. But here was discovery being used as a legal term.

Special Counsel Jack Smith's team built their case through discovery, attempting to uncover the facts and learn the truth. When they felt that they had a sufficient case, they convened a grand jury with whom they shared their discovery. This grand jury concluded there was a case for indictment; it is this decision that was unsealed by the Special Counsel. Now the prosecution will discover the discovery to the defense, to Trump's lawyers. Trump himself has just been sternly warned not to share any sensitive elements of this discovery with his followers, as he is wont to do, because the discovery is privileged information. His lawyers have complained that Smith's discovery process was too long, and that they, the defense, now have insufficient time for their discovery and preparation before a trial next year. So, there has been much talk about discovery. Discovery is about getting at the facts, which may be well-hidden.

With discovery rolling around in my brain, while pondering today's text, a prayer popped into my mind: The Collect for Purity, from the service of Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer*. This prayer that goes back a thousand years. It begins, "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid." I have heard this prayer many, many times, which is why it was locked away in my brain, available for random access. This is the value of liturgy: repetition leads to memory. It was repetition that locked it into my brain.

"Unto whom all hearts be open." No discovery is necessary for God. Our hearts lie open to him. No secrets are hidden from him. No subpoena or search warrant required. God has complete access to us.

This ancient prayer quickly led my thoughts to Psalm 139, which I then decided to use as today's Scripture reading, which we have just heard. This psalm of David begins, "You have searched me, LORD, and you know me" (Ps 139:1). God has discovered us, in that legal sense. We are an open book before him.

The fact that God knows us entirely may be a terrifying thought or a comforting thought. Which side are you on? Are you terrified or comforted by God's all-seeing knowledge? It is clear that David found it comforting, because at the end of the psalm he invited God to continue his discovery: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts" (Ps 139:23). He was not afraid of God's discovery. Would we be so bold and confident as to ask God to search us and know our heart? What is in our hearts? Are they inclined after God? Would he find us to be whole-hearted and faithful?

Faithfulness is the major theme of Hebrews chapters 3-4, to which I've devoted three sermons so far. In 3:1-6 both Moses and Jesus were described as faithful. Moses was the great OT exemplar of faithfulness, even amidst the faithlessness of all around him. But Jesus in his faithfulness was even greater.

This is followed by a long section (3:7-4:11) about entrance into God's rest. It contrasts two groups of people. The first group (3:7-19) are those whom God brought out of Egypt under the faithful leadership of Moses. They failed to enter the Land because of their unbelief; they were unfaithful. This unfaithfulness led to disobedience, a deliberate rejection of God's word, a refusal of his good news. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." But they did not heed his voice; they did harden their hearts. This refusal to hear took the form of rebellion and sin. As a result, that generation perished in the wilderness.

The second group (4:1-11) are the dear brothers and sisters to whom Hebrews is addressed. They are different. They have heard the good news proclaimed to them and they have believed. They are in the process of entering God's rest. They are being faithful. But there is the danger that they will stop listening, that they will follow the example of the wilderness generation, and so will fail to enter God's rest. There is the danger that they will turn unfaithful. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Don't be unfaithful! Hence the preacher issues various warnings. Such warnings bracket the text we looked at last week. At the beginning: "Let us fear lest some of you be found to have fallen short [of entering into his rest]" (4:1). At the end: "Let us strive to enter that rest lest anyone perish by following their example of disobedience" (4:11).

To close out this section on faithfulness the preacher now provides a reason for his concern. Our text today is two verses, but a single sentence in the original:

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb 4:12-13 NIV)

The word of God is alive and active. Verse 12 is one of the most familiar verses in all of Hebrews. We consider this book of Hebrews to be part of God's Word, the Bible. In turn, this book of Hebrews is full of God's word. The book opens with a bold declaration of his word:

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. (1:1-2a)

Here we have two great acts of God speaking: God's word over a long period of time in the past through the prophets to ancient Israel; and God's word to us in a singular instance in, by, and as his Son. *We* are included in the *us* to whom this second word is addressed.

The preacher presents five attributes of God's word. They are prefaced with the word *for*. They provide the reason for the warning in v. 11, for why we should strive to be faithful so that we finish our spiritual journey and enter God's rest.

The first attribute of God's word is that it is *alive*. Several times in the book God is described as the living God. God's word is living because God himself is living; it is the living word of the living God. The first part of God's word, what he spoke in the past, is Israel's scriptures, our Old Testament. That word, though spoken long ago and written down, continues to be living. It is very alive to the preacher, because he constantly quotes it. There are nearly forty direct quotations from the OT in Hebrews and many, many allusions. Among NT books, Hebrews is rivaled only by Revelation in the depth of OT influence. Whenever the preacher quotes the OT, he doesn't begin, "as it is written," as most other NT books do. Instead, he introduces quotations with "it says," present tense. God's word from long ago continues to speak; it continues to live.

In the immediate context of our two verses, the word that continues to speak is this: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." This quotation from Psalm 95 is repeated three times (3:7, 15; 4:7). That word spoke in the days of David, author of the psalm. Implicitly it spoke in the days of Moses who urged the second generation to hear and heed God's word, unlike their parents who heard but did not listen. It spoke in the days of the preacher to the Hebrews as he exhorted his brothers and sisters to hear God's word. They had heard the good news proclaimed to them and had believed. He exhorts them to continue to be faithful. And it still speaks today, to us. We have heard the good news, the good news of Jesus, and we have believed. We, too, need to keep hearing. We need to persevere in our faithfulness until we reach the end of our earthly pilgrimage and enter fully into God's rest. The living God's word is a living word. It speaks today. Today is the day for hearing his voice.

Secondly, God's word is *active*. It is energetic in being both active and powerful. Therefore it is effective: it accomplishes its intent. As the Lord says in Isaiah:

**so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isa 55:11)**

We see this most clearly in the creation of the world. God created the cosmos through his word, through his ten words in Genesis 1. He spoke and it was. God said, "Let there be light, and there was light" (Gen 1:3). His evaluation that the light was good indicates that the light was exactly what he intended by his word. Into what started as non-ordered nothingness, God spoke an ordered cosmos. It was all very good; it was exactly what he intended by his ten words. His word was effective.

This is the voice of the Lord that we heard seven times in our Scripture reading, Psalm 29. "The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic" (29:4). In response, all his people in the temple cry, "Glory!" (29:9).

God's word is living. God's word is effective. The remaining three attributes describe, with increasing specificity, how God's word is energetic, both active and powerful, and therefore effective. The focus is not on God's word in creation, but God's word inside people, inside us.

The third attribute of God's word is that it is *sharp*: "sharper than any double-edged sword." Likening God's word to a sword is a famil-

iar biblical metaphor for most of us, I'm sure. I wonder if any of you, as kids, or your own kids, have participated in a sword drill? A competition to see how quickly you can find a verse in your Bible. Why do we call it a sword drill? Because of this metaphor: God's word is a sword.

Part of our spiritual armor listed in Ephesians 6 is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:17). Jesus used God's word as a powerful weapon against Satan. He defeated each of Satan's three temptations by correctly quoting God's word from Deuteronomy. He passed God's test by remaining faithful to God's word.

Five times in Revelation reference is made to the sharp and/or double-edged sword coming from the mouth of Jesus, indicating the power of his word. Indeed, the rider on a white horse, from whose mouth comes the double-edged sword, is himself called The Word of God (Rev 19:13). Several times Revelation mentions "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" as parallel terms.

But here in Heb 4:12, the sharp sword of God's word is not part of our armor against Satan, nor is it part of Jesus's weaponry. Instead it is turned on us. It is God's instrument to probe and examine us. When we go for a physical, the doctor will use various instruments to probe our body to determine our physical health. So it is with God and his word. God's probe, his Word, is sharp, very sharp.

This leads to the fourth characteristic of God's word. Because it is so sharp, it is *penetrating* or piecing. "It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow." This is not a statement about the composition of a human being: whether a human is bipartite: body and soul, or tripartite: body, soul, and spirit. I think that, biblically, a living human is a psychosomatic unity, a body that is alive. This unity between our physical body and our non-physical self is why people can suffer psychosomatic disorders. Our self is far more than just the physical material of our body. Strict materialism does not explain the human being.

Hebrews makes no real distinction between soul and spirit. They are intangible anyway. How can you divide them with a sword? Joints are hidden under skin and flesh. Marrow is hidden inside bones and usually invisible. So, the preacher's point is more that God's word is so penetrating that it can divide the indivisible. It can penetrate the impenetrable. It can access the inaccessible. It can see into the most unseen places, and probe into the deepest parts. It is a most effective instrument of discovery.

Fifthly, because God's word is so sharp that it can divide the indivisible, it can access the innermost thoughts, it is *able to judge*. "It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." We might think that the thoughts and deliberations of our heart are secret, known only to ourselves. But God's word penetrates even this far. Our innermost thoughts and inclinations are known to him.

The result of this probing examination by God's living, energetic word is given in v. 13:

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (4:13)

The same point is stated twice in poetic parallelism. First negatively: no creature is unseen before God. Then positively: all things are naked and exposed to his eyes. As the prayer states: "unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid." When God turns his gaze upon us we have nowhere to hide.

When Adam and Eve heard the sound of the Lord God in the

garden they hid from him among the trees, having made skimpy coverings of fig leaves to hide their nakedness. Neither attempt was effective. There was nowhere to hide. The Lord found them out. He summoned them to give him an account. They had to answer for what they had done with his word: “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” (Gen 3:11). It was a simple word, this command to not eat of the one tree. God had heavily weighted the situation in favor of keeping this one word by providing an abundance of other trees with their fruit, all for eating. But that required faith in God’s provision, faith in his word. He was testing their faithfulness, but had heavily stacked the deck in favor of that faithfulness. The problem came when they saw the fruit of the one tree. They forgot what God had said. They stopped listening to his voice. The result was disobedience against God’s word.

We too must give God an account. The word translated *account* at the end of v. 13 is the same as *word* at the beginning of v. 12. God’s *word* is living, active, very sharp, penetrating, and able to judge, so that we are exposed before him. Thus exposed, we owe him a *word*. What word can we say in reply when under examination by his word? What response dare we offer? Do we have any better response than Adam and Eve?

These two verses form a single sentence which closes out the section on faithfulness. Moses and Jesus were both faithful. The wilderness generation, though led by faithful Moses, was itself not faithful but disobedient. The preacher’s brothers and sisters to whom he delivers this sermon are proving faithful so far. But he is well aware of the need for vigilance, hence the warnings throughout. How about us reading this now? Will we be found faithful?

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion during the time of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested and tried me” (3:7b-9a, quoting Ps 95:7b-9a). God tested Adam and Eve in the garden. He tested his people whom he brought out of Egypt. He tested them in order to know what was in their hearts. He already knew what was in their hearts. He tested them so that they might see what was in their hearts. But the wilderness generation turned the tables on God: they tested and tried him by refusing to trust him, his word, and his provision. They refused to believe his promise that he would bring them into the land of promise.

God tested Jesus in the wilderness immediately after his baptism. Jesus was faithful where Adam and Israel had been unfaithful. So now the word of God that we need to keep hearing is not just what he spoke in the past through the prophets, but what he has spoken in these last days to us in, by, and as the Son—the Son who has been faithful.

As I said a few weeks ago, testing and tempting are the opposite sides of the same coin. The object of the test and the temptation is the same. For Adam and Eve in the garden it was the fruit of the one tree. For Israel in the wilderness it was God’s promise. God wants us to pass the test by resisting the temptation. Satan wants us to succumb to the temptation, thereby failing the test. We pray, “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.” The evil one is up to no good. But we also seek to remain faithful through the test. The temptation which Satan intends for evil is the test which God intends for good. As James writes, the testing of our faith produces perseverance (Jas 1:3).

“Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” We acknowledge that we are known to God. Like David we say, “You have searched me, LORD,

and you know me.” No creature is unseen before God; all are naked and exposed to his eyes. Having acknowledged this, what then? Where do we go with this admission? The prayer continues with a petition: “Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit.” In this Collect for Purity we pray for purity. This request leads to an aspiration: “that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy Name.” And it closes with the basis for our plea: “through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

That we may perfectly love thee. God knows the hearts that love him, the hearts that long to love him more, weak though their love might be. He knows that beneath the outward show of some is a heart that really does not deeply love him. On the other hand, beneath the trials and struggles of this life he knows the heart that nevertheless does beat for him in love, however weakly.

Is it our great desire to love God, and to love God more? Or is our primary desire that God will make life easy for us, that he will make our problems go away? Last week I was asked about the Prayer of Jabez: “Oh, that you would bless me...and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain” (1 Chr 4:10). This little prayer is hidden deep in the genealogies of 1 Chronicles, largely unexplored territory. But it suddenly became very popular twenty years ago, thanks to a book by Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (2000). It struck a chord, as indicated by the fact that the book became a best-seller. It struck a chord because this is what many people really want from God: to be free from pain. But the testimony of many is that God often uses pain to further our spiritual growth and deepen our love for him. He can use pain to wean us off our other loves, so that we remain faithful to him in our love.

When we love God, being naked and exposed before him is not intimidating. We can confess, “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” Then we can state our aspiration to love him more: “that we may perfectly love thee.”

Here at PBCC we have many opportunities to gather together in community around God’s word, this word that is living and powerful, sharp, penetrating, and discerning. It is a great thing to gather around the Scriptures and allow them to speak to us. Not try to bring our own agenda to the Scriptures, but allow them to work on us as God’s instrument, probing deeply into us. And as they expose us, to be led into a deeper love for God, so that ultimately we might perfectly love him. The Scriptures we gather around now include our New Testament: the Gospels that tell us of Jesus, Acts that tells us of the early church, and the Epistles which encapsulate the apostolic teaching about Jesus, the significance of this greater word which God has spoken in his Son.

After closing out this section on faithfulness, the preacher will next turn to the central theme of his sermon, the ministry of Jesus Christ our great High Priest (4:14–10:25). He begins with a word of great comfort for all who love him, a word of invitation beyond this sobering word about God’s all-penetrating gaze. This will be our text next week, but I want you to hear it now in the context of today’s text, of our complete exposure to God through his probing word.

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)

After all discovery has been made about us, we have an advocate and a friend in God's presence on our behalf. Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are. But he did not sin. He passed the test. He remained faithful to God's word, using God's word as a powerful weapon to repel Satan. What Satan intended for evil, God intended for good. Satan tempted Jesus, attempting to get him to fail. God tested Jesus, intending for him to pass. God's word, misused by Satan, but correctly used by Jesus, exposed what was in Jesus's heart. What was there? Love and faithfulness. He remained faithful and obedient to the one who had, just before in his baptism, beamed with pleasure on him, saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Jesus returned that love in faithful obedience to his Father's will.

"Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known." Can we survive the scrutiny of God's all-penetrating word and all-seeing gaze? C. S. Lewis writes in *The Weight of Glory*:

How God thinks of us is not only more important [than how we think of God], but infinitely more important... It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can scarcely sustain. But so it is.

In the end God will look on us in delight. But how does he look on us now? There is a widespread view that, because we're not lovely due to our sin, God actually doesn't look on us, prefers not to see us, but instead sees Christ. This is a well-meaning thought, but I'm not sure it is true—certainly not with the Book of Hebrews. Jesus is not

ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (2:11). He is not ashamed to represent us, to be in God's presence on our behalf. He is not ashamed to say to his Father of us, "They are my people, my family, my younger siblings." Yes, our hearts are open unto God, and all desires known. But this means that God sees the heart that desires him, he hears the prayer of the one who wants to love him more. He looks on us in love and delight.

We have heard the good news that God has spoken to us in these last days in, by, and as his Son. We have believed. We have begun to follow Jesus, the one who has gone before us as our pioneer and forerunner. He has opened the way into God's presence. He is there as our high priest, interceding for us, so that we can receive mercy and find grace to continue our journey. At the end God will say, "It is done!... Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children" (Rev 21:6-7). We will be a real ingredient in his divine happiness.

A few weeks ago I ended with this passage from *Pilgrim's Progress*, of the arrival of Christian and his fellow pilgrim at the Celestial City at the end of their pilgrimage. I end with it again today:

Now I saw in my dream, that these pilgrims went in at the gate; and as they entered they were transfigured, and they had Raiment put on that shone like gold. Then I heard in my dream that all the bells in the City rang again for joy, and it was said within, "Enter ye into the joy of our Lord."

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord... Amen.

Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28

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