



# Christ Before Us

## The Book of Hebrews

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Cover art: *Christ Pantocrator*, mosaic 1148, Cathedral of Cefalù, Sicily

Open book:

Greek (left page): ἐγώ εἰμι τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου· ὁ ἀκολουθῶν ἐμοὶ οὐ μὴ περιπατήσει ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ, ἀλλ' ἔξει τὸ φῶς τῆς ζωῆς

Latin (right page): *ego sum lux mundi qui sequitur me non ambulabit in tenebris sed habebit lucem vitae*

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12)

On arch:

*Factus homo factor hominis factique redemptor + judico corporeus corpora corda deus*

Made man, the maker of man, and redeemer of the one made + I judge bodies as embodied, hearts as God

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# GOD HAS SPOKEN

Hebrews 1:1-2a

#1 2022.08.14

“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 Sundays 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)*

2022.08.14



# NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES

Hebrews 1:2b-4

#2, 2022.08.21

“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 metaverse. With an infinite number of universes anything is possible, even whales and petunias falling from the sky. It's an infi-

nite 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.

# HE WHOM ANGELS WORSHIP

Hebrews 1:5-14

#3, 2022.08.28

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” On the first Easter Sunday two discouraged disciples were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, deep in conversation. A stranger drew alongside and asked “What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They were surprised and replied, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” These two were trying to make sense of these recent events: the crucifixion of Jesus and breaking reports that very morning that his tomb was now empty. The stranger set them straight: “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” It could have been a long explanation: they had seven miles to walk. Yet the two did not recognize him.

When they reached their destination they invited the stranger in: “Stay with us.” So he went in to stay with them. At table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and was giving it to them. Only then did they recognize this stranger as Jesus, but at that moment of recognition he vanished. It was then that they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” Immediately they hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the others (Luke 24:13-35).

Their hearts burned when Jesus opened the Scriptures to them. He explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. These Scriptures were Israel’s Scriptures: Moses and the Prophets.

Seven weeks later, on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the believers in Jerusalem, Peter was empowered to preach his first sermon. He began, “this is that which was spoken by the prophet” (Acts 2:16 KJV). *This is that!* As he continued his sermon, under *this* he included the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, his exaltation to God’s right hand, and the gift from God through Jesus to them of the Holy Spirit. Death, resurrection, ascension and the gift of the Spirit. These four events constitute *this*. And *this*, Peter said, equals *that*: that which was spoken by the prophet Joel, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...” The transition from *that* to *this* marked the arrival of the last days. Peter was able to put the two together, the old and the new, the former word and the new word, what God said in the prophets and what he has now done in the Son. Peter could not have done this the day before. It required the gift of the Spirit to see that *this* is *that*.

The writer to the Hebrews does a similar thing in his opening chapter: *this* is *that*. In his magnificent opening sentence (1:1-4) he has introduced two major themes of his work. First, God has spoken: he spoke in the past to ancient Israel through the prophets, and now in these last days he has spoken definitively to us in the Son. Secondly, the Son has become superior to the angels and inherited a better name. He was exalted to this superior status and name at his ascension, when he sat down at God’s right hand on the Davidic throne, received the great name promised to David, and is now

Lord.

The author now brings these two themes together, showing how the superior status of the Son to the angels is in fulfillment of that which God spoke of old; it is in fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures. It is his own way of saying *this* is *that*, just like Peter. *That* is what God had spoken long ago to ancient Israel by the prophets. *This* is what God has spoken to us in the Son. They are connected as promise and fulfillment. As Augustine said, referring to the two testaments, the two halves of the Bible: “The new is in the old concealed, the old is in the new revealed.”

Our author shows how *that* is fulfilled in *this* using a string of seven quotations from Moses and the Prophets, the same sources as Jesus used on the Emmaus Road. By Moses is meant the first five books of Israel’s Scriptures: Genesis through Deuteronomy; what Jews call the Torah, what we call the Pentateuch. This is Israel’s birth narrative, as it were. One quotation is from Moses, from Deuteronomy. The Prophets is a more comprehensive term than we normally think. It includes the books about Israel’s history after the death of Moses, from the entrance into the land through until the exit from the land into exile. It includes the accounts about David and Solomon. One quotation is from that history, from 2 Samuel. The other five are from the psalms. David as psalmist was considered a prophet.

The seven quotations can be taken in three blocks, each beginning with a reference to the angels. Each block contrasts the angels and the Son, showing the superiority of the Son to the angels. The first group is the first three quotations, linked by “again and again.” The first two concern the Son, contrasted with the third concerning the angels. First, the two about the Son:

**For to which of the angels did God ever say,**

**“You are my Son;  
today I have become your Father”?**

**Or again,**

**“I will be his Father,  
and he will be my Son”? (Heb 1:5 NIV)**

The initial question is rhetorical, expecting the answer “none.” God has never said of the angels what he says of the Son.

The first quote is from Psalm 2:7, the second from 2 Samuel 7:14. I quoted both of these last week, because they lie behind God’s appointment of the Son as heir of all things (1:2). In 2 Samuel 7 God promised David a son who would be king, who would build God a house for his Name, and with whom God would enter into a Father-son relationship. This relationship was inaugurated at the coronation and enthronement of the king in Jerusalem. That is the “today” of the Psalm 2 quote. Today came for Solomon on the day of his enthronement as king. Today came for each of his dynastic successors at their enthronement. The line continued for many

generations.

But after Judah went into exile there had been no king. For 600 years there had been no Davidic heir on the throne. The throne had been unoccupied. There had been no “today.” Was the promise dead, along with Solomon and Hezekiah and Josiah, the kings that particularly aroused Israel’s hope? As our author connects what God spoke in the past and what he has spoken in his Son, he is confident that Today has now arrived. The Today towards which all the previous lesser todays pointed. The last days had arrived. At his ascension the Son sat down at God’s right hand as the true king, in fulfillment of these two texts.

He who had always been the Son from before creation, was now installed as Son in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. David’s true heir was on the throne. Of no angel did God ever say this!

What did God say concerning the angels?

**And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,**

**“Let all God’s angels worship him.” (1:6)**

This third text is from Moses, from Deuteronomy 32:43. When said long ago, it called the angels to worship God. But the text now speaks into a new situation: “when God brings his firstborn into the world.” The firstborn is the Son, the heir. When did God bring him into the world? Was it at the incarnation? Or at the ascension? Or is it yet future, at the parousia, at Christ’s return? The Son did enter the world at the incarnation. But the word translated “world” here is not the usual word for earth or world: it is neither *gē* nor *kosmos*, but *oikoumenē*. Given the whole context, this is best understood as God’s realm where he installs the firstborn as heir. So this is yet another reference to the Son’s enthronement at God’s right hand, another reference to Today, when the Davidic covenant was fulfilled. What do Israel’s Scriptures say concerning this day, Today? “Let all God’s angels worship him.” This ancient text still speaks, but now with reference to the exalted Son.

The fundamental divide in the universe is between creator and creature, established in the very first verse of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). On one side is God the Creator, eternal from before the beginning of time. On the other side is everything else, the Creation, which had a beginning. It is appropriate for creation to praise and worship its creator. As we read in our call to worship: “All your works praise you, LORD... Let every creature praise his holy name for ever and ever” (Ps 145:10, 21).

The eternal Son is on the side of the Creator. The angels are on the side of creation, though they are heavenly beings. The one whom they are now called to worship is the newly-exalted Son. The one who for a little while had been made lower than the angels but is now crowned with glory and honor (2:9). He is the eternal Son who had taken on humanity, and did not put off that humanity when he sat down at God’s side, having become as much superior to the angels as superior to them the name he has inherited (1:4). It is fitting for the angels to worship him.

Our Scripture reading (Rev 5:6-14) showed the Lamb standing at the center of the throne in heaven, receiving the praise, adoration, and worship of all the heavenly creatures: the four living creatures (the cherubim), the twenty-four elders, and an enormous multitude

of angels:

**“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 5:12)**

Then the choir grew even larger, encompassing every creature everywhere, in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea. The entire creation sang:

**“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be praise and honor and glory and power,  
for ever and ever!” (Rev 5:13)**

Let all God’s angels worship him, the exalted and enthroned Son. The angels never worshiped human beings. God made human beings a little lower than the angels. But now the angels worship the risen Lord Jesus Christ. How much more should those who have laid hold of so great a salvation in Jesus worship him. And so, Christians worshiped God and they worshiped the risen Jesus. This was not something added later. It was something they did from the beginning, as soon as they realized what had happened in the enthronement of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. As soon as they starting calling him Lord. It started with Jewish Christians; they worshiped Jesus while holding on to their firm conviction that there is only one God. As Gentiles were added to the church, they did so as well.

This was shocking for non-Christians. How can you worship one who has been crucified? One who has suffered the most shameful death possible, who has been publicly humiliated? One who has been rejected by all: by Jew and Roman alike? But the Scriptures are clear: the one who has been so scorned, rejected, humiliated, and utterly shamed, is the one whom God has crowned with glory and honor and seated at his right hand. He is therefore worthy of our worship. He is worthy of our worship despite the shame he endured. No, he is worthy because of the shame he endured in our place. He experienced death so that we might be set free, liberated to become sons and daughters also. He was shamed so that we might receive honor.

He is honored now at God’s right hand. The eternal Son has returned to the glory which he had with the Father from the beginning. And he took with him the humanity that he had put on to become like us. The risen Lord Jesus Christ has entered into the fullness of God’s glory.

That is the first block of texts. The enthroned Son is he whom angels worship, and whom we worship also.

Moving on to the second block of three texts (vv. 7-12), the first two contrast what God says of the angels (7) and what he says of the Son (8-9).

**In speaking of the angels he says,**

**“He makes his angels spirits,  
and his servants flames of fire.” (1:7)**

This fourth quotation is from Psalm 104:4. This is a psalm of praise to God as creator, who uses what he has created. He sends winds and flames of fire, which can herald a theophany, a manifestation of God’s presence. Similarly he sends his angels; they are his servants or ministers, sent out to accomplish his purposes. But the Son is different: he remains seated on God’s throne, as shown in the

fifth quotation, from Psalm 45:6-7.

**But about the Son he says,**

**“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;  
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.  
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
therefore God, your God, has set you above your  
companions  
by anointing you with the oil of joy.” (1:8-9)**

Psalm 45 is a wedding psalm, celebrating the king. The psalmist uses exalted language, even addressing the king as God. This language was never realized in Solomon with all his flaws, nor in any subsequent king in Jerusalem. But it has been fulfilled in the eternal Son. He has been enthroned to an eternal rule. The God language that was hyperbolic when used of Solomon is not so of the Son. He is indeed God. It is fitting that this one be king, because he rules in righteousness and justice. This was the vision for the Davidic king, but a vision never fully realized. This king has been anointed with oil. He is the Messiah, the anointed one.

Again we see that the Son is far superior to the angels. They are ministering spirits, sent here and there, but he is seated forever.

In the sixth quotation our author reiterates the Son’s eternal status, contrasting it with creation which is ultimately ephemeral.

**He also says,**

**“In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the  
earth,  
and the heavens are the work of your hands.  
They will perish, but you remain;  
they will all wear out like a garment.  
You will roll them up like a robe;  
like a garment they will be changed.  
But you remain the same,  
and your years will never end.” (1:10-12)**

The quotation is from Psalm 102:25-27. This psalm addresses the Lord, meaning Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one true God. But with the ascription of the title Lord to the risen Jesus, our author sees this as applying to the eternal Son, the risen Lord Jesus. The Son was there in the beginning, when the heavens and the earth were created. It was through the Son that God made the universe (1:2). The heavens and the earth will eventually wear out like a garment. They will be changed, just as one puts off one set of clothing and puts on a new set. The world is currently corruptible, indeed corrupted. But it will be exchanged for a world that is incorruptible, imperishable, a world that will not wear out. The New Jerusalem shall descend and heaven shall fill earth. The risen Lord Jesus has already entered into this world of incorruptibility. He is changeless. The Son, the Lord, remains the same. His is an eternal kingdom.

The Son remains the same. One of the best-known verses in Hebrews is “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8). We are not. We still have corruptible, perishable bodies. But one day we will put them off and put on ones that are incorruptible, imperishable. We shall put on spiritual bodies—not in the sense that they are non-material, but that they are filled and empowered by God’s Spirit as incorruptible. The risen Jesus has already led the way. He has put on his new body. When we hold fast to Jesus, the same

yesterday, today and forever, we have a secure anchor that cannot be shaken. We are changeable but Jesus is not, and so, in him, we have stability.

The final quotation is on its own, but echoes the first two and has the same introduction:

**To which of the angels did God ever say,**

**“Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet”? (1:13)**

The quotation is from Psalm 110:1. Of all the verses in the OT this is the one that is most-quoted in the NT. It had a great influence on the early Christians. This, too, is a Messianic psalm. The Jews knew that no king of Israel had fulfilled this. Instead they were now looking ahead to a future Messiah of whom this would be true. The early church realized it had been fulfilled on Ascension Day when the risen Jesus ascended to heaven and took his seat at God’s right hand. God has appointed him heir of all things. So God will bring all creation under his rule. Every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The opening sentence (1:1-4) has been about the Son, ending with his superiority to the angels. The chain of seven OT texts has shown that this superiority of the Son is in fulfillment of Israel’s Scriptures. The Son is now seated at God’s right hand, having finished his earthly ministry. He has an ongoing heavenly ministry as our great high priest, interceding for us. But he remains seated at God’s side for this.

Verse 14 provides the counterpart concerning the angels. They are not seated.

**Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (1:14)**

All of the angels are ministering spirits. Though not itself a quotation, this echoes the fourth quotation (v. 7). The angels are spirits. That is, they are part of the spiritual realm, the heavenly realm. They are in God’s presence, but they stand in his presence, while the Son remains seated. They stand at the ready, ready to be sent on official business, God’s business. Even the highest category of angels, the archangels, stand in God’s presence ready to be sent.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah in the temple, he said, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news” (Luke 1:19). He had been sent by God on a mission from heaven to earth. Five months later he was sent again from God, this time to the virgin Mary (1:26-27). In Revelation we read of all the angels standing around the throne (Rev 7:11), of the seven angels who stand before God to whom seven trumpets were given (8:2), of the seven angels who were given bowls and told, “Go, pour out the seven bowls” (16:1). All the angels are ministering spirits, sent out in God’s service. The Son remains seated.

The angels of the Bible are not the cute cherubs of Raphael’s paintings. They are not the angels of current popular imagination. Angels are awesome beings that evoke awe, even fear. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, “they were sore afraid” (Luke 2:9). Zechariah “was gripped with fear” (1:12). In Revelation, John was so awed by the angel showing him the visions that he fell down at the

angel's feet to worship him—not just once but twice (19:10; 22:8). On each occasion the angel said, “Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you... Worship God!” (19:10; 21:9). The angels worship God and the angels worship the Lord Jesus Christ, his Son, enthroned at his right hand. He whom angels worship, and so do we.

The angels are sent out in God's service for the benefit of “those who will inherit salvation.” For the benefit of us. We were briefly mentioned in the “to us” to whom God has spoken in his Son (1:2). Now he brings “us” in again in preparation for the next paragraph which will be his first exhortation to us (2:1-4).

God has given the Son all things as his inheritance, and the Son has inherited a superior name. Now we have something to inherit: salvation. But wait a minute, you may say. I thought we had already received salvation. Christ has accomplished purification for sins. We have come to Christ. But this is the beginning not the end of the journey. We have begun to follow Jesus. We have embarked on a journey, a pilgrimage towards God and his rest. We need to follow the path faithfully. We need to keep following Jesus. We do so by setting our eyes on Jesus, by having Christ before us. Here in chapter 1 the preacher has put before our gaze Christ in his excellence and glory, Christ at God's right hand. He whom angels worship, and whom we worship also. We gather on Sundays to worship, to pay attention to God and to Jesus. We gather to have Christ before us,

to look to Jesus.

Christ is before us also in the journey. He faithfully completed the course set before him and has entered into God's rest. We now follow our pioneer, our forerunner, the one who has gone ahead. We don't follow alone. We journey together as brothers and sisters. We encourage one another to not lose heart, to not lose sight of Jesus. We walk this path together.

We persevere in following Jesus. There are dangers along the way. The biggest danger is taking our eyes off of Jesus. And so the author intersperses his exposition of the excellence and superiority of Jesus with exhortations. These exhortations contain warnings, the so-called warning passages of Hebrews. The first will come in the very next verse (2:1), which we will look at next week. This final phrase of chapter 1, “those who will inherit salvation” shifts the focus to us in preparation for chapter 2, which begins with a therefore. Therefore, in light of the excellence of the Son, of his superiority to the angels, of his place on the throne at God's right hand, “we must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” (2:1). So that we remain faithful. We must pay attention to Jesus: Christ before us.

2022.08.28



# PAYING ATTENTION TO JESUS

Hebrews 2:1-4

#4, 2022.09.04

It is Labor Day weekend, the traditional end to summer. But with our scorching temperatures, it feels like the height of summer. Labor Day is also the traditional end of the summer break and the start of a new school year. But most students have been back in class for a couple of weeks already. Both teachers and parents hope that these students are transitioning back to paying attention in class. They might impress on them the seriousness of what they're doing: "You must pay the most careful attention to what you hear, or else..." An exhortation to listen and a warning of the consequences for not doing so. A carrot and a stick. The carrot: the prospect of future reward. The college of your choice, the possibility of a scholarship. The stick: or else, the dire consequences of not paying attention. You'll fail the test, your grades will suffer, and you won't get into your choice of school. Our students, especially in the Bay Area, are under enormous pressure to perform. You, their parents, are also under great pressure for them.

Students face great challenges. It can be difficult to pay attention in class. Kids have spent their summer on their phones: on social media or playing video games. Now they have to adjust to spending each day without them. Many schools have cell phone policies, not allowing them in class. If students do bring them to school, the phones have to stay in their lockers all day. All this to prevent distraction in class, and enhance the likelihood that the students might pay attention. Many students struggle with ADHD; they struggle to pay attention and maintain focus. Students wonder whether they even need to pay attention. "Will it be on the test?" they ask the teacher. If not, why bother paying attention?

The best teachers inspire their students to pay attention, whether or not a particular topic will be on the test. They make their classes interesting. They keep their students engaged.

Three weeks ago I closed my first sermon on Hebrews with the collect for the Second Sunday of Advent from the *Book of Common Prayer*. It begins: "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..."

This is the hope of every teacher: that the students will hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. "Mark" here means to observe and take notice of, as in the phrase "mark my words." I grew up with this phrase, "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest." It is well-known in the UK, where the English language has been shaped by Shakespeare, the King James Version, and the Prayer Book.

Hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest. This is what every teacher wants of his or her students. It is what the preacher wants of his or her listeners. It is what I hope of you. And it is what the author of the Book of Hebrews wants of his readers. His work is best heard as a sermon. He wants his listeners to pay attention: to the sermon, to the Lord Jesus Christ about whom he speaks, and to their own lives. He periodically warns of the dangers in not doing so. These are the so-called "warning passages" of Hebrews. We come to the first

such passage today.

**We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (Heb 2:1-4 NIV)**

This is essentially another very long, skillfully-written sentence, comparable in length to the opening sentence (1:1-4). It breaks readily into three parts, though NIV divides it into four sentences.

## 1. Paying attention to Jesus (2:1)

Therefore... What is the therefore there for? In light of everything we heard in chapter 1, the preacher now transitions to application. Therefore, we must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard. So, what have we heard?

We have heard that God spoke in the past to ancient Israel, and that he has now spoken definitively in his Son (1:1-2a). We have heard seven statements showing the excellence of the Son (1:2b-4). We have heard seven quotations from Israel's Scriptures showing how the word God spoke in the past is fulfilled in the word he has spoken in his Son (1:5-13). And the preacher has finished with a reference to us: those who will inherit salvation (1:14b).

Inheritance is mentioned three times in chapter 1. God has appointed the Son *heir* of all things (1:2b). The entire creation will come under his rule. At his enthronement the Son has *inherited* a superior name as true heir to David's throne (1:4). God intends that we also be heirs: *heirs* of salvation (1:14b). Salvation is something that we will inherit. Coming into this inheritance is yet future. Coming into possession of the inheritance requires faithfully finishing the journey, following Christ who has gone before us as our forerunner, our pioneer.

Meanwhile, we must keep paying attention to what we have heard. What we have heard is Jesus. The preacher has expounded the greatness of the Son. He has set Christ before us in his excellence and glory. He has lifted up to our gaze the risen, ascended and enthroned Lord Jesus Christ. This is his carrot, as it were: to place Christ before us in all his beauty. He also has a stick, a warning: "lest we drift away." The preacher will alternate back and forth throughout his sermon: on the one hand, expounding the excellence of Christ, and, on the other hand, exhorting his hearers to continue to pay attention to Christ, with warnings about the consequences for failure to do so. He expounds Christ not as abstract theology, but to place Christ before us in such a way that we are inspired to follow him. So that we are overwhelmed with his excellence and beauty, respond to him

in appreciation and love, and follow him whom we love.

We pay attention to what we love. We love what we pay attention to. The preacher is determined that this be Christ. Christ whom we pay attention to, Christ whom we love, Christ whom we follow. He is determined that it be Christ before us.

The warning is “lest we drift away.” If we don’t keep paying attention to Jesus we will drift away from him. Some people do commit outright apostasy. They renounce Christ. But the more common danger is a slow drift away from Jesus. Imperceptible at first and therefore not alarming. The once-burning heart slowly cools. Less and less attention is paid to Jesus. Other things become more important. This is what happened to the church in Ephesus, to whom the risen Jesus says, “You have forsaken the love you had at first” (Rev 2:4). Their love for Jesus and for one another had chilled.

One can continue paying attention but to the wrong things. These may sound quite noble and spiritual. They might have a veneer of Christian activity. But it is not Jesus that is the focus of attention. To the church in Sardis Jesus said, “you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (Rev 3:1). One might have seen much activity in Sardis but little attention to Jesus himself. It is easy for Christians and churches to pay primary attention to things other than Christ. They have drifted away from Jesus himself. Eventually the drift may lead to a complete loss of connection to Jesus. This is what happened in the church in Laodicea, where Jesus was shut outside the door.

How do we keep paying attention to Jesus? One way is to gather together regularly. We gather on Sundays to pay attention to the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On our handout each Sunday are these words about why we gather. Let us read them together:

We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. Our desire is to praise God and receive afresh his Spirit in us, to affirm that we are family reconciled one to another, and to be empowered to reach out to the world.

We have used these words on the handout every week since 2014. They go back to a short three-part sermon series I preached in 2012.<sup>1</sup>

We gather in worship. We draw near to God, as the preacher later urges (10:22). We re-orient ourselves, because we have all become disoriented through the week. Our attention has been drawn elsewhere. We gather and we turn to pay attention to God in Christ through his Spirit. We pay attention in song, in prayer, in the reading and exposition of the Scriptures. We see Jesus, high and lifted up, seated on the throne, just as Isaiah saw the Lord. And, like Isaiah, we bow in worship. We draw near, we pay attention, we reverse the drift.

We gather to remind ourselves. We hear afresh, and we pay careful attention to what we have heard. We refresh our memory, our understanding of who God is, what he has done, and what he is continuing to do. We refresh our memory of who we are in light of that. Who we are in all our relationships: with God, with one another, and with the world. We pay attention vertically and we pay attention horizontally.

We do this regularly, weekly. Because we need to. We reorient ourselves because we have all drifted during the week, however

slightly, however imperceptibly. Some of the Hebrews had given up meeting together. The preacher urges them not to do so (10:25). They needed to keep meeting. So do we. And not just on Sunday. There are opportunities throughout the week to meet together in various connection groups.

Are you drawing nearer to God today? Are you stationary? Or are you slowly drifting away? The preacher places Christ before us, and urges us to pay attention to him.

We are what we love. We become like what we look at. We are formed by what we pay attention to. The best thing to pay attention to is Christ. As we do so we are formed into Christ. This is God’s goal for us, that we become Christ-like, like his beloved Son.

“We must pay the most careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.”

## 2. Warning from past history

Our preacher continues with a solemn warning from history:

**For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? (2:2-3a)**

The message spoken through angels was the Torah, the Law that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai. That word was legally binding; God and his people entered into covenant with one another. Moses read the Book of the Covenant to the people, and the people confidently responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey (hear/listen)” (Exod 24:7). The agreement was sealed with the blood of sacrificial animals: the blood of the covenant.

But within forty days that generation had broken the covenant by worshipping the golden calf. They continued to rebel against God, the one who had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. Their violation and disobedience received its just punishment. They wandered in the wilderness until they all died. They failed to enter God’s rest because they failed to pay attention to what they had heard: the voice of God through the prophet Moses. Our preacher will expound this failure more fully in chapters 3–4.

This disobedience, this failure to hear and heed God’s word, was repeated by Israel after it entered the land. Eventually Israel received its due punishment: exile from the land. Why? Again, a failure to hear. A failure to pay careful attention to what God had spoken. They had heard, but they hadn’t heard. They knew the commandments, but they failed to heed God’s word. Just like Adam had heard but not heard. Adam and Eve listened to another voice. They were exiled from the garden. Israel was exiled from the land. All for failing to pay attention to what they had heard.

Now God has spoken a much greater word in the Son. How much more is it the case, then, that failure to hear this greater word will bring greater negative consequences. How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? We ignore or neglect something when we cease to care about it. We disregard something when we cease to pay attention to it.

Again, how do we counteract this? How do we ensure that we continue to care about this great salvation? By reminding ourselves of this greater word that God has spoken in his Son. By paying most careful attention to it. So that we remain faithful in the journey as we travel together. And at the end of the journey we shall enter God’s

promised rest. We shall enter into our inheritance.

### 3. Supremacy of the word of salvation

God has spoken in his Son. The Son has made purification for sins, and has sat down at God's right hand. He has accomplished redemption. So great a salvation!

**This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (2:3b-4)**

Our preacher now makes three points about this great salvation. It was spoken by the Lord, it was confirmed by those who first heard, and it was validated by God. His aim is to show us the reliability of this word of salvation, so that we will pay attention. This word of salvation is well-attested.

#### 3.1 Announced by the Lord

This salvation was first announced by the Lord. Again the Lord here is Jesus. The former word was spoken through angels. This greater word has been spoken through the Lord. It is therefore so much greater. Jesus announced the good news, that the kingdom of God had arrived: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 4:17). The good news was announced in his death, resurrection and ascension. He provided purification for sins, and sat down at the right hand of God in heaven (1:3). His earthly, high-priestly ministry of purification for sins is complete. So great a salvation!

#### 3.2 Confirmed by the first hearers

Secondly, this word of salvation was confirmed to us by those who heard. Neither the preacher nor his audience are in the first generation that heard. They were not eyewitnesses to Jesus. But the word spread. At Pentecost many Jews, visiting Jerusalem for the festival, heard and believed, then returned home with the good news. After the death of Stephen the believers in Jerusalem were scattered. They took the word to Judea, to Samaria, to Antioch, even to Rome. In fulfillment of Jesus's word, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And so the word came to this community, the community of the preacher and his audience. They heard, they received what they had heard, and they believed. They began following Jesus.

The author to the Hebrews was not a first-generation believer. He heard from those who had heard. This is one of several reasons why Paul cannot be the author. Paul heard directly from the Lord who met him on the Damascus Road. We know neither the author nor the recipients, nor where either was located. But this did not prevent the early church accepting this book as canonical, as part of authoritative Scripture. We can be profoundly grateful that we have this book as Scripture.

We see here an intergenerational transfer: from those who first heard the Lord to those who in turn heard them. And so down through multiple generations until today. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Those who have heard, and passed on to us what they have heard. Paul wrote to Timothy, his spiritual son: "the things you have heard me say in the presence of many

witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim 2:2). That is four generations: Paul to Timothy to Timothy's disciples and to their disciples. Hearing and passing on what they have heard. And so it has continued until this day. Generation after generation learning about Jesus from those ahead of them, then turning around and teaching those who are following them. This is tradition, which literally means a handing over. A handing over from one generation to the next. Tradition often has a bad reputation, as being old and stuffy. But tradition is a positive thing. The church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously distinguished: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

What we receive and pass on is now written in the Christian Scriptures, in the New Testament, in addition to Israel's Scriptures. We hear the holy Scriptures. We read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. As we absorb them, God through his Spirit shapes us into the likeness of Christ. We are formed as we pay attention to Jesus. Then, as we become the older generation, we transition to passing on to the next generation.

Earlier in the service we heard from Todd Poulter. He and Karla joined Wycliffe over 40 years ago to be Bible translators, so that others could hear and read the Scriptures in their own mother tongue. Todd was soon moved into leadership, first within Wycliffe, then in fostering cooperation between multiple Bible agencies. For the last many years he has focused on passing on to the next generation of leaders. And he has been paying attention to Jesus. These two have come together in his first book, published just 8 weeks ago: *Learning to Lead at the Feet of Jesus*.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3.3 Validated by God

Thirdly, this word of salvation was validated by God himself. God gave supporting testimony, supplementing the Lord's proclamation and the passing on of the word of salvation. What was this supporting testimony? The first instrument used by God was signs and wonders and various miracles. These are extraordinary events, things outside ordinary experience. They indicate that God is at work. This was so at the time of the Exodus from Egypt. God performed signs, wonders and miracles. He sent a pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. He parted the waters of the Red Sea. He provided water and manna and quail; food and drink in the barren wilderness. All of these were supernatural events, explainable only as God at work. God was evidencing his presence in the Exodus.

God was present in Jesus, who performed signs and wonders and miracles. Jesus stilled the storm, he restored sight to the blind, mobility to the lame. "Who is this man that even the winds and the waves obey him?" the disciples in the boat asked (Matt 8:27). The miracles indicated the presence of God, validating the word of Jesus. In his Pentecost sermon Peter told the crowd: "Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22). The signs, wonders and miracles corroborated, endorsed, confirmed, and attested to the word proclaimed by the Lord and received by those who heard. They were not an end in themselves. They were in support of the word, authenticating it.

After Pentecost the apostles proclaimed the gospel, the word of salvation, and God "confirmed the message of his grace by enabling

them to perform signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3). Again, the purpose of the signs and wonders was God’s confirmation of the word of salvation that had been proclaimed by Jesus and now by the apostles.

Do signs, wonders and miracles still occur today? Plenty of churches pay a lot of attention to these things. But I think for many of them the purpose is not the same. The signs and wonders become an end in themselves, rather than evidence that God is validating the word of salvation that is proclaimed. But I have read and heard enough missionary stories to believe that signs, wonders and miracles do take place on the mission field where the gospel is proclaimed in new territory. Especially so in Fear-Power cultures, where such mighty acts are rightly understood as manifestations of divine power to authenticate the word spoken by humans.

There is a second instrument that God uses to validate the word of salvation: “gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” It is God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to us that enables us to hear, receive, and respond to the word of salvation. And to each one who does respond, God gives gifts from the Spirit: spiritual gifts. He distributes these according to his will, not ours. He chooses which gifts to give to whom. He does so in a way that all the necessary gifts are present in a community. These spiritual gifts are further manifestation of God’s confirming testimony.

A further gift of the Spirit is our own spiritual transformation as we receive the word of salvation, embrace it, and begin to follow Jesus. As we pay attention to Jesus, Christ before us, we are changed into his likeness. We become more and more like Jesus, through the Spirit. As we become like Jesus we manifest the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience or forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). This transformation in the lives of those following Jesus is itself powerful testimony to the word of salvation.

In our Scripture reading, Eph 1:3-14, we heard about this great salvation that we have received from God in Christ Jesus through his

Spirit. The Holy Spirit, present in us now, is the down payment, the deposit, the pledge, of our inheritance until obtaining full possession. Until we obtain our blessed hope. God’s Spirit is with us as we continue our journey towards God’s rest. God’s empowering presence within us authenticates the word of salvation.

Notice that this three-fold testimony is Trinitarian: spoken in the beginning by the Lord, that is Jesus; validated by God; and further evidenced by the gift of the Spirit. God is at work in us in Christ through his Spirit.

I started with the first half of the Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, in which we ask God’s help to pay attention to Scripture. The second half expresses the purpose: so that we may hold fast to the blessed hope. So that we might persevere in our journey of faith until we reach our destination. So that we might press on until taking possession of the full inheritance. Meanwhile we pay attention to what we have heard, and we follow Jesus faithfully.

I close with the full Collect:

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. Amen.

1. Bernard Bell, “Embracing Relationships,” three sermons preached at PBCC, September 2012: 1. Embraced by God; 2. Embracing One Another; 3. Embracing the World?

2. Todd Poulter, *Learning to Lead at the Feet of Jesus: Encounters with Grace and Truth* (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2022).

2022.09.04

# BUT WE SEE JESUS

Hebrews 2:5-9

#5, 2023.04.16

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)*

2023.04.16



# BRINGING MANY SONS AND DAUGHTERS TO GLORY

Hebrews 2:10-18

#6, 2023.04.23

In his book *The Four Loves* C.S. Lewis writes about the four different Greek words for love. Three loves are natural loves: *storgē* is affection between family members; *philia* is love within friendship; and *eros* is the romantic love of passionate desire. The fourth love is unnatural; it is supernatural: *agapē* love is unconditional, selfless, and self-giving. It is distinctive of the Christian life. Indeed, it is mentioned many times in the NT.

*Storgē* family love is the empathy and affection within a family: between parents and children, and between the siblings. It is a natural love, and usually very strong and lasting. We will do anything for family, as the saying goes. Blood is thicker than water, says the proverb. But sometimes family love breaks down. As kids, siblings often squabble and engage in rivalry, but then they make up. But adult children may become estranged from one another, or from one or both parents. Children of divorce, young or adult, often find it difficult to navigate loyalty to both parents. In healthy families, family solidarity is extremely strong. But there are lots of reasons why family solidarity can break down.

Then there are the skeletons in the family closet. Most families have these; there are certainly a few in my family. We occasionally watch *Finding your Roots* with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. on PBS. As he and his team dig deep into family history they inevitably unearth surprises. If there were no surprises, it wouldn't be an interesting program to watch. Some of these surprises are good: hitherto-unknown heroes, whom one is proud to own as an ancestor. They confer glory and honor on the family line. Other surprises are questionable. Villains and shady characters are exposed. They cast a cloud of shame over the family line.

Honor or shame. Children can feel under tremendous pressure to increase the honor of the family, and not bring shame. Parents can seek vicarious honor through their kids.

So, a family can be a healthy environment for flourishing, for resilience. Or a family can become toxic, riven with dysfunction, even if it looks good from the outside. "Happy families" are not always happy families.

We certainly see this in Scripture. Genesis is full of basket-case families. In the early chapters this is understandable as humanity lives east of Eden. But the dysfunction continues after God calls Abraham to begin a new family through whom the Lord will restore blessing to humanity and the world. The behavior of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons is not promising material for a new humanity. They were close kin, all descendants of Abraham and Sarah. But healthy family love was in short supply. The clan of Abraham is not the poster child of a healthy family.

The NT continues the family language into the church. Only three times are Jesus-followers called Christians. The usual term for the people of Jesus is "brothers and sisters." People who had no blood connection to one another considered themselves to be sib-

lings. Why? This is what I want to consider today: why are we brothers and sisters together?

So far in the Book of Hebrews, the preacher has shown the superiority of the Son to angels. The Son was with God in the beginning before the angels were created, indeed through whom the angels were created. But he became lower than the angels for a little while, incarnate as Jesus the man. The Son, still now as the man Jesus, has been exalted above the angels, crowned with glory and honor. He has entered into glory in two respects. He has entered into God's full presence, which is glory. And he has been enthroned with the glory and honor befitting the king. At the end of last week's passage we saw that the turning point between being made lower than the angels and exaltation above the angels was "because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (2:9).

How does this work? How does the work of Christ accrue to us? Why should I gain from his reward? I will try to give an answer. The preacher continues his sermon to show us how in 2:10-18. He develops his argument in four stages.

## I. Jesus our Pioneer (2:10)

**In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. (Heb 2:10 NIV)**

The Son has already entered into God's glory, returning to the mutual love that the persons of the Godhead enjoyed from before the beginning of time. But God has greater ambitions: he wants to bring many more sons and daughters into his glory.

Like last week, we have a question here of gender. ESV has "sons" whereas NIV and most other recent versions have "sons and daughters." I know we sang, "Bring many sons to glory," but Stuart Townend was working within the constraints of the form of his song. In both Hebrew and Greek the word "sons" can be gender-specific or gender-inclusive depending on context. Here it is clearly inclusive, "sons and daughters." I think it should be translated as such. Again, this is one reason I preach out of the NIV: to make it clear to women that you are fully included. God wants you just as much in his family in Christ Jesus. English Bibles should make this clear.

In the ancient world, and up until recently, only male sons were heirs, able to inherit their Father's estate, though Zelophahad's daughters received special permission to inherit their father's estate, given that he had no sons (Num 27:1-11). Inheritance is a major theme in Hebrews. God has appointed his Son *heir* of all things (1:2); the Son has *inherited* a name above all others (1:4). We who follow Jesus are about to *inherit* salvation. This inheritance is for men and women equally when we enter into Christ.

God wants to bring *many* sons and daughters to glory. He doesn't restrict the inheritance to just a few. He doesn't admit just 144,000 then close the door, as some groups believe. No, God wants many sons and daughters in his presence. He is not a God of scarcity, but a God of abundance. His abundant glory can encompass a vast multitude of people.

How do we reach that glory? God has provided a leader to bring us into his glory: the Pioneer of our salvation. A pioneer goes first, and opens up the way for others to follow. Elsewhere Jesus is described as our forerunner (6:20). He has gone ahead and entered into God's presence on our behalf. He has opened up the way for us to follow.

The Son is qualified to function as our Pioneer because God has made him perfect through suffering. But, you may ask, wasn't Jesus perfect throughout his life? We tend to think of *perfect* and its opposite *imperfect* as polarities of *good* and *bad*. But that's not the primary meaning. The polarity is between *complete* and *incomplete*. In grammar, for example, the imperfect tense is used for action that is incomplete; the perfect tense for action that has been completed.

The eternal Son entered into Israel's history and human history as a man. He needed to live out his earthly life as a man faithful to the end, to completion, to perfection. His path lay through suffering. He suffered in the wilderness when he fasted for forty days and forty nights and was hungry. Then the tempter, the devil, came and tempted or tested him three times. But Jesus remained faithful. Each time he resisted the tempter with the words which God had spoken in the past to his ancestors in the prophets. He emerged perfect, victorious over the tempter. He suffered again in his passion, beginning with the agony in the garden, when he submitted himself in obedience to his Father's will. He was faithful and obedient unto death, even death on a cross. In the resurrection he came out of the grave, vindicated by his Father and victorious over death. He was made perfect through suffering.

The preacher will reiterate this in chapter 5: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey (hear) him" (5:8-9).

It was fitting for God to do this. Yet many find this to be not fitting at all. It is unthinkable, unimaginable that God should do this. It is inconceivable that God should suffer and die, let alone in a way that conferred maximum humiliation and shame. Early graffiti shows that the Roman world mocked Christians for worshipping a crucified God. Muslims have a high regard for Jesus, considering him the greatest prophet. But his death by crucifixion is one of several reasons why they cannot accept that he is the Son of God. It is beneath the majesty of God to enter the world, even more so to suffer and die. But we have such a God.

God is the one for whom everything exists and through whom everything exists. He is the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega. But he sent his Son into the world to surrender all power, to submit himself to all powers, even to death. It was fitting for God to make the Pioneer of our salvation perfect through suffering. We bow in awe and wonder.

## 2. The Son's solidarity with us (2:11-13)

The preacher next explores the solidarity between the Son and the many sons and daughters:

**Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says,**

**"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises."**

**And again,**

**"I will put my trust in him."**

**And again he says,**

**"Here am I, and the children God has given me." (2:11-13)**

Jesus is the one who sanctifies, and we who follow him are those being sanctified or made holy. To sanctify means to set apart as holy, and thus fit for God's presence because he is holy. Sanctification is the work of a priest. The priestly ministry of Jesus will be the center of this sermon, but we're not there yet. First, how is the Son qualified to serve as priest so that we might be sanctified? How is it that the sanctifier and the sanctified are "of one"? How is it that we are knit together so he can act on our behalf and for our benefit?

Because we are "of one," the Son is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. ESV has simply "brothers" while all other recent translations have "brothers and sisters." This time ESV does offer "brothers and sisters" in a footnote, stating that the "plural Greek word refers to siblings in a family." But women, my sisters, you don't belong just in a footnote; you belong in the text itself.

Jesus identifies himself with us. He's not ashamed to have us tag along with him. Indeed, he's out front pioneering the way for us to follow. He's not trying to get away from a pesky younger sibling who keeps trying to follow. He is delighted for us to follow. He is pleased for us to be his peeps. And he affirms this with three quotations from the OT, each spoken in his voice.

The first quotation is from Psalm 22, the famous psalm that begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But after a long lament about his dereliction, the psalmist turns to praise for the Lord's deliverance. We heard these words as our call to worship: he will proclaim and praise the Lord's greatness to his brothers and sisters, in the assembly (Ps 22:22). In the psalm this is the gathered congregation of Israel. In Hebrews it is those who follow Jesus, those whom he considers his younger siblings. God, his God and Father, has been faithful and has vindicated him by delivering him from death. Jesus proclaims this to his siblings.

The second quotation, "I will put my trust in him," is from David's song of praise when God delivered him from his enemies. He had taken refuge in God his rock (2 Sam 22:3). Three centuries later Isaiah said the same thing in the face of invasion by mighty Assyria (Isa 8:17). David the king, Isaiah the prophet, and Jesus the Son each placed their trust in God and he delivered them.

The third quotation is also from Isaiah, from the next verse. With his trust placed in God, Isaiah can say "Here am I, and the children God has given me" (Isa 8:18). God had given him two sons, with significant names: Shear-Jashub, meaning "a remnant will return" (Isa 7:3), and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, meaning "quick to the plun-

der, swift to the spoil” (Isa 8:1, 3) They were signs from God given to inspire confidence, faith in God. But for Jesus, these children are the brothers and sisters whom God has given him.

Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, and to present us to his Father. In the Upper Room Jesus prayed to his Father for “those whom you have given me,” as Shawn talked about recently. “I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory” (John 17:24). He wants his younger brothers and sisters with him.

### 3. Made like us (14-16)

In the third section, the preacher describes the incarnation: why God became man, why he became human.

**Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. (2:14-16)**

All humans share together in blood and flesh. Externally we may look different: skin color, color of eyes and hair, height, and many other features. But beneath the surface we are all the same in being blood and flesh. The Son, therefore, in his solidarity with us, partook of the same blood and flesh. He became fully human. He became like the children as their brother. He became like us. The eternal Son, present in the Godhead before the beginning of time, stepped down into our world. Agent of all creation, he entered into creation as a creature, as a human. The Greek text is triply emphatic about this identification with us, though only NASB captures this: “He *Himself likewise* also partook of the same,” of our same blood and flesh.

His identification with us in incarnation had a dual purpose. First, it was to nullify the power of the one holding the power of death, that is the devil, the accuser. He did this “by his death.” He entered into death itself to fight Death. He could do so because Death had no claim on him. Death had to let him go, and in doing so Death died. The death of Death in the death of Christ.

The result of this is to liberate all who were enslaved all their lives by the fear of death. People live in fear of death; they try to avoid it. More and more people live beyond 100, thanks to medical advances and better nutrition. But many researchers and investors have much more ambitious goals to postpone or even abolish human death. Many people here in Silicon Valley are working on this. The dream is to reach longevity escape velocity, where life expectancy of an individual increases faster than the time taken to make those gains. But it is in the death of Christ that death has been defeated; in his resurrection that a human has entered into the new creation; in his exaltation that a human has entered into the eternal world of God’s presence; and in the gift of the Spirit that we are invited to enter into new life also.

It is not angels who need this liberation. They are not part of the material world that is subject to decay and death. It is the seed of Abraham, his descendants. After sin and death had entered the world through the unfaithful disobedience of Adam and Eve, it was to Abraham that God made a promise of a new beginning. Aged Abraham and his barren wife would have a son, who would become

a great nation, and through whom God would restore blessing to the world. God was faithful to his promise. He gave to Abraham Isaac, to Isaac Jacob, and to Jacob twelve sons who multiplied to become the children of Israel. God took them to be his people: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” But Israel failed to enter into its inheritance, as we’ll see in the next chapter and a half of Hebrews. Has God’s purpose failed? In Christ Jesus, his faithful Son, born into Abraham’s line, God helps Abraham’s descendants. “Help” really is a weak translation here. The verb implies reaching out and grabbing hold of someone. It is used this way later in the sermon. Referring to Israel’s exodus from Egypt, God says, “I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt” (8:9, quoting Jer 31:32). Jesus our Pioneer saves us by taking hold of us to pull us out of death and lead us to glory.

The image I’ve chosen for this week’s sermon is the *Anastasis* icon. This particular one is in the Chora Church in Istanbul. Those who have been to Turkey with me have seen it. Within the Eastern Orthodox church an icon is not a painting, but a theological picture that is written not painted. *Anastasis* is the Greek word for resurrection. In the icon, the risen Jesus has grabbed hold of Adam and Eve, and is pulling them out of their tombs, pulling them out of death into resurrection life. Beneath his feet lies trampled death.

It is the seed of Abraham that the risen Lord pulls out of death. But who is the seed of Abraham? In the OT it was Israel, Abraham’s physical descendants. But in the NT membership is refined and expanded, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Gal 3:26–4:7).

**So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:26-29)**

If we are in Christ, symbolized by baptism, dying to our old self and rising to new life in Christ, then we are Abraham’s children. We are the heirs of the promise made to Abraham so long ago.

The Son became like us, entering into our story, so that he could raise us to be in God’s story, his story of how he is restoring life, blessing, and shalom to a world sunk into slavery to sin and death. Our older brother has taken our hand and is leading us out of death towards God’s glory.

### 4. Our High Priest (2:17-18)

In the final two verses, the preacher concludes with what happens when Jesus, our Pioneer who has gone before us, enters into glory, into God’s presence:

**For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, 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. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (2:17-18)**

It was *fitting* for God to perfect his Son through suffering (v. 10). But here it was *necessary* for the Son to be made like us, his brothers and sisters, in every way.

The reason for this necessity is so that he might become high priest. Israel had three covenant offices, three different roles mediating the relationship between God and his people. The prophet, the priest, and the king. Each was one of the people, but also interfaced with God. The king ruled over God's people on God's behalf, leading with righteousness and justice to ensure a flourishing society. The prophet spoke God's word to the king or to the people. The priest represented the people "in service to God." This service was the liturgical action conducted in God's presence, in the tabernacle and later the temple. The various sacred rites that allowed a holy God to dwell in the midst of a sinful people.

Jesus is our high priest. He is both merciful and faithful. He is faithful towards God, unlike some former high priests who had not been so. God pronounced judgment on the house of Eli the priest for the wickedness of his sons in their priestly duties, and he promised he would raise up a faithful priest (1 Sam 2:35). Jesus is this faithful priest. He is also a merciful high priest. The service of the priests in the tabernacle and temple mediated God's mercy to his sinful people. God had revealed himself as "the compassionate and gracious God, abounding in love and faithfulness, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exod 34:6-7). His mercy is now mediated to his people through Jesus their merciful high priest.

The result of Jesus being the merciful and faithful high priest is that he is able "to make atonement for the sins of the people." Sin separates us from a holy God. It needs to be dealt with if we are to be brought into God's glory. Dealing with sin requires both expiation and propitiation. Expiation removes the sin itself. Propitiation removes God's wrath at sin. He is satisfied and relationship is fully restored. Jesus our high priest accomplishes both.

In Israel's liturgical calendar the most significant and solemn day was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would enter through the veil into the Most Holy Place, taking with him two types of blood: a bull's blood for his own sin, and a goat's blood for the people's sin. These he would sprinkle on the lid covering the ark of the covenant, the lid known to us as the atonement cover or the mercy seat. He would thus make atonement for himself, the priests, and the whole people of Israel. But he would have to do the same next year, every year.

The service of Jesus as our merciful and faithful high priest will be the major theme of Hebrews, covered in the extensive central section (4:14–10:18). Jesus is the high priest. He is also the offering. Being sinless he does not need to present blood for his own purification. Instead he presents his own blood for our atonement. He also is the mercy seat, the atonement cover on which that blood is sprinkled. He is the place where God's righteousness and human sinfulness meet. Having accomplished purification for sins, Jesus has sat down

at God's right hand (1:3). And now God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.

Jesus has an ongoing ministry there at God's right hand on our behalf. "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (2:18). The specific temptation that the hearers are facing is to turn back from following Jesus. Some were suffering. Was it worth it?

The preacher now turns to an extended section of exhortation and warning (3:1–4:13). He encourages his hearers to "hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory" (3:6). He warns them of the danger of falling along the way, like Israel in the wilderness, and thus failing to enter into God's rest. Then he returns to Jesus as high priest, picking up at exactly this same point:

**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)**

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, God has himself provided for us the Pioneer of our salvation. Jesus has already entered into God's glory, has already made atonement for us, and now intercedes on our behalf. Our older brother has opened up the way for us to follow. Why should I gain from his reward? Because he is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.

John the Revelator heard the number of people sealed as belonging to God: 144,000 from the 12 tribes of Israel. Then he saw the people gathered before God's throne and the Lamb: a multitude beyond counting from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They wore robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. "He who sits on the throne will spread his tabernacle over them" (7:15 NASB). God will spread his glory over us, for he is bringing many sons and daughters into glory.

The Lamb has conquered, let us follow him.

*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)*

# UPWARD I LOOK AND SEE HIM THERE

Hebrews 3:1-6

#7, 2023.07.09

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 journey. 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)



# BID MY ANXIOUS FEARS SUBSIDE

Hebrews 3:7-19

#8, 2023.07.16

Five years ago Sue and I spent ten days near Bordeaux with my family. We saw signage for *Les Chemins de Saint Jacques de Compostelle*, the Ways of St James. The routes were marked on the map I was using. And by brass plaques set in the city pavement, along with brass scallop shells, which is the symbol of the Way. These ways are several ancient paths from across France and beyond that funnel pilgrims into the more famous Camino de Santiago, the 800 km route across northern Spain from the Pyrenees to the city of Santiago de Compostela in the region of Galicia in northwest Spain. The Camino ends at the cathedral in that city, which houses the remains of Saint Iago, St Jacob. In English he is known as James the Greater, that is James the son of Zebedee. For a thousand years the Camino has been a pilgrimage route. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims now walk the Camino every year.

Many set out alone, but they don't remain alone for long. They quickly form small groups, usually after the first night together in one of the lodgings. They then walk the Camino together as fellow pilgrims. But a quite different scenario is portrayed in the movie *The Way* (2010). It was released under the tag line "Life is too big to walk it alone." Yet that is exactly what the main character tries to do. Tom, played by Martin Sheen, sets out to walk the Camino on his own. For most of the movie he resists all efforts of three others to pull him into their oddball group. He is stubbornly determined to be an island unto himself. It is not until two-thirds through the movie that his resolved isolation begins to crack and he begrudgingly accepts that pilgrimage is best done with others.

The Christian life is a pilgrimage. The most influential Christian book after the Bible is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written in prison by John Bunyan. It is presented as the dream of a journey by a pilgrim named Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. He sets out alone but he does not finish alone. Along the way he meets various characters who help or hinder him in his pilgrimage. Book Two tells the pilgrimage of his wife Christiana and their children; she had initially refused to join him on his journey. This second part includes several poems, one of which is very popular in Britain as a hymn. I sang it often when I was growing up. Each verse ends, "To be a pilgrim."

The Book of Hebrews also presents the Christian life as a journey, as a pilgrimage. Jesus has already gone before us as the pioneer and forerunner. He has entered God's presence. We follow him to that same destination. We make this journey together as brothers and sisters.

In last week's sermon we saw that *we* are God's house (3:6), that *we* are holy brothers and sisters (3:1). The Christian life is about *we* not just *I*. We also saw that there is a proviso to this status. We "are God's house, *if* indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory." This *if* troubles people. There is a condition to our status. There are two things we need to hold on to. The first is *confidence*, which we saw last week means our access to God's pres-

ence through Jesus our high priest. Boldly we now approach the throne of grace through faith. The second is our *hope*: at the end of our pilgrimage we will enter God's presence. Boldly we will approach the throne of grace in person. In both cases, Jesus is already there: Christ before us. We already have these two things: access and hope. We hold on to them as we faithfully follow the path set before us, following Jesus.

But there is a danger that we will give up and turn away from our pilgrimage. Hence the several warnings in this sermon. Hence the *if* in v. 6. The purpose of this sermon which the author has written to his friends is to encourage them to persevere together in their pilgrimage. Now in 3:7-4:13 he gives them an extended warning about the danger of turning away, the danger of being unfaithful. He draws from Israel's history to teach them a lesson from the past. Today we consider the first part, 3:7-19. We begin with vv. 7-11:

**So, as the Holy Spirit says:**

**"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,  
though for forty years they saw what I did.  
That is why I was angry with that generation;  
I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray,  
and they have not known my ways.'  
So I declared on oath in my anger,  
'They shall never enter my rest.'" (Heb 3:7-11 NIV)**

This extended quotation is the second half of Psalm 95. The first half of that psalm was our call to worship. It is indeed a call to worship:

**Come, let us bow down in worship,  
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;  
for he is our God  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
the flock under his care. (Ps 95:6-7)**

We are God's sheep. But sheep are prone to wander, far from their master's voice. Sheep are prone to stubbornly go their own way and get lost.

In the second half the psalmist appeals to the Lord's sheep of his generation to not be like the sheep whom Moses led out of Egypt. Moses was twice described as faithful (3:2, 5). But he was leading an unruly rabble of sheep. Repeatedly they rebelled against God and they rebelled against him. They wanted to go their own way.

This rebellion started straight away before they had even crossed the Red Sea. They encamped by the sea, but Pharaoh and his army pursued them. The people cried out to Moses,

**"What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't**

we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?’ It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Exod 14:11b-12)

Moses told them, “Don’t be afraid... The LORD will fight for you” (14:13-14). But they were terrified. They were full of anxious fear. This was just the beginning. God brought them through the Sea in what is the great act of salvation in the OT: God simultaneously saved his people and destroyed the enemy that had held them in bondage. But all the way through the wilderness, despite the leadership of the Lord and of Moses, the people grumbled and complained. They kept saying the same few things.

Firstly, they kept saying, “We’re going to die.” They accused Moses of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them with hunger or to kill them with thirst. They were afraid God was going to kill them, even though he had provided water and had provided manna as food. They were afraid the inhabitants of Canaan were going to kill them. Their anxious fears would not subside. They trusted neither the Lord nor Moses to keep them alive during their journey.

Secondly, they reminisced about how good they had it in Egypt. “There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted” (Exod 16:3). They never sat around the meat pots in Egypt! They were slaves pressed into hard labor on Pharaoh’s great building projects. After a year of manna they complained of this monotonous diet: “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt...also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic” (Num 11:5). Repeatedly they said, “We were better off in Egypt. We had it so good there.” This is revisionist history: they never had it good in Egypt. But they wished that they had never set out on this journey. They were full of regret and wishful thinking.

Thirdly, and as a consequence of that wishful nostalgia, they said, “We want to go back to Egypt!” They rejected all that the Lord and his servant Moses had done for them. They rejected God’s salvation. They rejected his good, gracious plan for them. Better the slavery they knew than the wilderness they didn’t know. Better the taskmaster Pharaoh they knew than the liberating God they didn’t know. They could not walk by faith because they had no confidence in God. They did not know his ways.

When God brought them out of Egypt under Moses’s leadership, they had two destinations. The first destination was Mt Sinai, there to meet with the Lord. He had said through his prophet Moses to Pharaoh, “Let my people go, so they may worship me.” They came to Sinai, where the Lord said, “I...brought you to myself” (Exod 19:5). There at Sinai he formally took them to be his people, his treasured possession. “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” But they were terrified, and said to Moses: “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Exod 20:19). So Moses acted as their mediator, entering God’s presence on their behalf. He brought back God’s word, which he wrote down as the Book of the Covenant. The people promised, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” (Exod 24:7). As many of you know, the word for *obey* also encompasses *hear*. They heard God’s voice and they promised to keep hearing it, that is to obey it. And so a covenant was made between God and his people. But they quickly broke that covenant.

For forty days their resolve was tested as Moses was atop Mt Sinai receiving instructions for the tabernacle in which God would dwell

among his people. But they let go of their hope of his return. Moses was nowhere to be seen, and they asked for something they could see. They asked for man-made gods. They had heard God’s voice, “You shall not make for yourself an image” (Exod 20:4). But they stopped listening to that voice, and so Aaron made them a golden calf that they could see. They reverted to living by sight not by faith, by the eye not the ear.

The Lord wanted to wipe them out and begin again with Moses, but Moses interceded on behalf of this wayward people, and God relented. He spared the people, and graciously put his presence among them in the tabernacle. After nearly a year they moved on from Sinai.

Their second destination was the land of Canaan, which God had promised Abraham long before: a land flowing with milk and honey. They soon came to Kadesh-barnea on the edge of the Promised Land. They sent twelve men to spy out the land. After forty days they reported back, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Num 13:25-14:4). They reported that it was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, but there were giants in the land. Ten of the spies said they should not enter for they would be killed. The other two spies, Joshua and Caleb, agreed that there were giants in the land, but, even so, they should enter for God was with them.

But the people wanted to choose a new leader and go back to Egypt, where life would be better. Again, the Lord wanted to wipe them out and begin again with Moses. Again Moses interceded, and again the Lord relented. He forgave them. But he imposed a consequence: that entire generation would perish in the wilderness. They would not enter into the land. So what did they do? They immediately tried to enter the land on their own but were soundly defeated by the Canaanites. They were stubborn, recalcitrant sheep.

That wilderness generation refused to enter the land because of their unbelief. They were unfaithful throughout their entire pilgrimage from Egypt to the edge of the land. They trusted neither the Lord nor Moses. Again and again they viewed Moses and the Lord as being *against* them, not *for* them. They had nostalgia for the good old days before they started their pilgrimage. They had a selective memory of how good it was before they started following the Lord. They succumbed to a revisionist history. They never had it good in Egypt! But they were determined: they wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt. A low point was reached when two of the rebel leaders accused Moses, “you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness... you haven’t brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey” (Num 16:13-14). They redefined Egypt as the land flowing with milk and honey. They rejected all that God had spoken. They would not hear, but instead hardened their hearts. As a result, what they feared did happen: they did all die in the wilderness. But it need not have been this way. If they had just listened to God, hearing his word, they would have finished their pilgrimage to the Land of Promise. If they had just known his ways:

**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exod 34:6-7)**

They had ears but they would not hear. They hardened their hearts and refused God. It was they who subsided under their anx-

ious fears. They did not know God or his ways.

The preacher now applies the lesson of the wilderness generation to his beloved brothers and sisters:

**See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. (3:12-14)**

He urges them to watch out, to be alert. He warns of the danger of a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. The danger is a lack of faith and a lack of faithfulness. Why would they turn away from the living God? Why would they abandon their heavenly calling? For similar reasons as the wilderness generation. If they came to doubt the goodness of God, no longer seeing him as for them but against them. If they were overcome with anxious fears that would not subside. If they were nostalgic for their former life, for how good they had it before they started following Jesus. For any of these reasons, and more, they might turn away. It might be a slow drift, slowly letting go of what formerly they held onto firmly; a slow drift away from Jesus and back to their former life. Or it might be a sudden apostasy, an abrupt turning away from following Jesus. Sadly, some of us, I’m sure, know people who have done this. As I wrote these words I had people in mind.

The preacher proposes a “precious remedy against Satan’s devices” to use a lovely Puritan phrase: “encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (3:13). When we come to Christ it is not the end of our journey of faith, but just the beginning. It is the beginning of learning to live a life of faith. We have a lifetime ahead of us in which to follow Jesus, until at death we enter into God’s Rest. This is our pilgrimage. We don’t walk this path alone; we do it together as fellow pilgrims. We encourage one another to persevere, to remain faithful. Together we keep our eyes on Jesus who has gone before us. When one of us lags or grows discouraged or feels like giving up, we come alongside to encourage perseverance. The best way to persevere is to look to Jesus. This is what the preacher does again and again in this sermon: he urges us to see Christ before us.

A second remedy is to remember our status as participants in Christ: “We have come to share in Christ” (3:14). Paul’s favorite way to describe us is that we are in Christ. We have participated in his death and resurrection, as symbolized in baptism. He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sister. We participate in him if...

Another *if*, and again it’s *if* we hold on to something—the same verb as v. 6 where we hold on to our confident access to God’s presence and our hope of arrival there at the end of our journey. This time he calls us to hold on to “our original conviction firmly to the end.” The word rendered here as *conviction* in NIV is difficult to translate. It can be translated as *substance* or *reality*, so we can think of it as our conviction of what is ultimately real. When we turn to Christ we accept a new reality, a reality that is shaped around Christ himself. As we pursue our pilgrimage we hold on to this reality from beginning to end, from the moment we confess Christ and start our pilgrimage to the end when we enter into the fulness of that reality, when we enter into God’s presence. Such perseverance is faithfulness. And we do this together, encouraging one another not to be

seduced or led astray by sin’s deceitfulness. We hear and heed our Master’s voice, and we stay the course.

Sin’s deceitfulness might try to persuade us of another reality. For the wilderness generation their reality was what they could see, not God’s voice which they had heard. Their reality was their stomach: food and water. It was their anxious fears. It was their comfort, or lack thereof. We can easily pursue realities under the name of God. We can easily substitute idols of our own making for the living God. We can easily attach the name of God to these idols: the God of our comfort, the God of our cause, the God of our nation, and many others. These can turn us away from the bedrock reality of our participation in Christ.

The preacher repeats his warning from Psalm 95:

**“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts  
as you did in the rebellion.” (3:12-15)**

If you hear his voice. We have heard his voice, what God has spoken in these last days to us through his Son. We now heed the heavenly calling to faithfully follow Jesus.

The preacher now adds his own analysis of the wilderness generation, using a series of rhetorical questions, based on Psalm 95:

**Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. (3:16-19)**

The preacher describes the four problems of the wilderness generation: they rebelled (16), they sinned (17), and they were disobedient (18), all summed up as unbelief or unfaithfulness (19).

In v. 12 the preacher had urged, “*See* that none of you has an evil heart of *unbelief* that turns away.” He closes with v. 19, “*We see* that they were not able to enter God’s Rest because of *unbelief*.” The root problem is unbelief. Unbelief is not primarily a failure to believe the right things, to have the right creed, or the right theology. Unbelief is primarily a lack of faithfulness. It is a failure to continue following Jesus, to whom we have given our allegiance, whom we have pledged to follow. Such unfaithfulness is contrasted with the faithfulness of both Moses and Jesus (3:2, 5-6). Faithfully following Jesus, our faithful one, is our earthly pilgrimage, at the end of which lies entry into God’s Rest.

Today, if you hear his voice. Today, as long as it is called Today. Today is lasting a long time. After forty years wandering in the wilderness, the second generation came to the plains of Moab on the east side of the river Jordan. The entire first generation had died, except Moses, Joshua and Caleb, and the children; they had all fallen in the wilderness. Moses reminded the second generation of their parents’ rebellion, sin, disobedience, and unfaithfulness. He urged them, “Don’t be like your parents. Be different. Hear the word of the Lord.” His charge to them, to hear the word of the Lord, forms the book of Deuteronomy: Hear, O Israel.

Centuries later the Psalmist urged his generation, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden you hearts.” God had spoken to them through the prophets. More centuries later, the writer to the He-

brews urged his generation, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” They have heard his voice, for now in the last days, God has spoken to them by his Son. Now we, 2,000 years later, hear the same exhortation: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Again and again, the preacher urges his brothers and sisters to look to Jesus in faith, to follow him in faithfulness, and to not turn back in unbelief. Today, for it is still Today, we hear this same warning.

The Christian life is a pilgrimage. Along the way there are difficulties and challenges, just as the Israelites faced in the wilderness. Like them we face tests and temptations as we walk by faith not by sight. Test and temptation are opposite sides of the same coin. We see this dynamic already in the garden of Eden. God gave the first human a commandment: do not eat of this one tree. God stacked the decks in favor of keeping that commandment. There was no need for the human to eat of that one tree, for God had provided an abundance for him, the fruit of all the other trees. But the crafty serpent focused the woman’s gaze on that one fruit denied. She saw with her eye that it was good, and failed to hear with her ear what God had said. God was testing them: would they be faithful to his word? But Satan was tempting them. The object was the same: the fruit of that one tree. God wanted them to succeed, to pass the test by being faithful. Satan wanted them to fail, to succumb to the temptation to be unfaithful. He deceived her to give in to what she saw, then take and eat.

This was true for the wilderness generation. God had given them his word. But they did not listen with their ears. Instead they saw with their eyes and they acted out of their anxious fears. Instead of God testing them, they tested him saying “Is the Lord among us or not?” (Exod 17:7). They had no confidence in him.

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness where he was tested and tempted. Three times Satan misquoted God’s word, tempting him to autonomy from God, to act on his own and for himself. Each time Jesus accurately quoted God’s word from Deuteronomy. He heard

God’s voice and did not harden his heart. He rejected the temptation and passed the test. He was proven faithful. He had conquered the tempter and was thus able to enter into his public ministry, doing God’s mighty deeds. Satan was defeated.

As we make our pilgrimage through life we will be tested and tempted. We need to remember that God wants us to pass the test by hearing his voice, and Satan wants to trip us up with what we see. God has provided help for us. He has put his Spirit in us. He has given us one another to encourage us to be faithful. And he has appointed a faithful high priest, Jesus. “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). Some English versions translate *tempted* as *tested*, again because they are the opposite sides of the same coin. God purposes to use the trials of life to strengthen our faith; Satan purposes them to destroy our faith. God bids our anxious fears subside; Satan cultivates our anxious fears.

On this pilgrimage of faith, let us encourage one another to listen to the right voice as we journey together. To hear the Lord’s voice Today. So that we can faithfully complete our journey and enter into God’s Rest, as did Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress*:

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.”

*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)*

2023.07.16

# ENTERING GOD'S REST

Hebrews 4:1-11

#9, 2023.08.06

The summer break is almost over and, with it, the end of R&R, the end of rest and relaxation. Soon we will all be back to work, whether in the classroom or office, real or virtual, or in some other space doing “real” work with our hands. I juxtaposed work and rest because that is how we usually think of these two words, as opposites. But what is rest? Scientifically speaking, true rest is achieved at absolute zero, where all motion stops. There is no work. But that is not a very appealing state at zero K. We could cite the laws of thermodynamics. But, I’ll let the British comedy duo Flanders and Swann do so in their song, *The First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics*:

Heat is work and work’s a curse  
And all the heat in the Universe  
Is gonna coool down ’cos it can’t increase  
Then there’ll be no more work and there’ll be perfect peace  
That’s entropy, man!

Is that what rest is: the end state of the universe when it has run down and lost all energy?

We long for rest, but what actually is it? My idea of rest on a Sunday afternoon after preaching is to cycle up Montebello Road. But that is not for everyone. Rest might be the absence of work, but certain types of work are actually good for us. In Pixar’s movie *WALL•E* (2008), the residents of the starship Axiom are in an advanced state of rest, but also, as a result, in an advanced state of atrophy. Their rest is doing them no good.

We hunger for R&R, but this means different things to different people. I grew up in rural Thailand during the Vietnam War. On the way to our local train station 50 km away we would pass an air base used by the US Air Force. Outside the gates had grown up a community to cater to the R&R needs of the base. You can imagine... No! Don’t imagine! We called it Sodom and Gomorrah. We would take the train to Bangkok where we stayed at the mission home. Not far away was Patpong, the infamous red-light district that grew up to provide R&R for troops and others from all over east and south-east Asia. But our family would go on to the beach in Hua Hin. Today the beach is lined with large hotels which, to me, looks very unrestful. But when I was young there were no hotels, no large buildings, just endless sand. It was indeed a restful paradise for both children and parents. It was a wonderful place for R&R.

Is that what R&R is: either bars and brothels or sandy beaches?

Here at PBCC our Women’s Ministry has its own R&R events: Relationships and Reflection. Opportunities for spiritual refreshment together.

What is the Biblical concept of rest? Our call to worship was Psalm 23:

**The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,**

**he refreshes my soul. (Ps 23:1-3a NIV)**

This pastoral image is very appealing, and Psalm 23 is a universally-beloved psalm. In Scotland Psalm 23 from the Scottish metrical Psalter is the most popular hymn.

The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want,  
He makes me down to lie;  
In pastures green he leadeth me,  
The quiet waters by.

We sang it at the graveside as we committed both my parents in turn to the grave. *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*. Rest eternal grant them, O Lord.

Our Scripture reading included these famous words of Jesus:

**“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)**

How we long for rest! For the Shepherd God to refresh our souls. For Jesus the Good Shepherd to replace our burdens with his light burden.

God intends to give his people rest. But will we accept this gift? Three weeks ago, in Hebrews 3 we saw that the Israelites whom Moses led out of Egypt refused to enter the Promised Land. Why? Because their anxious fears would not subside. In response the Lord swore an oath, “They shall never enter my rest.” Israel’s failure was manifold: rebellion, sin, and disobedience. At the root of it all lay unbelief or lack of faithfulness. They failed to complete their journey, and all died in the wilderness. All except for two: Joshua and Caleb, who did have faith and were faithful.

Today we turn to chapter 4, where the major theme continues to be entrance into God’s rest. Our text is Hebrews 4:1-11. Verses 1-2 begin with a *therefore* that anchors us in chapter 3:

**Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. (Heb 4:1-2 NIV)**

*Entering God’s rest*: this phrase occurs eight times in just these eleven verses. The promise of entering God’s rest still stands. The rebellion and lack of faithfulness by the wilderness generation did not make God cancel his purpose to bring his people into his rest. That purpose remains, and it is here characterized as a promise.

But the preacher issues another warning, including himself as usual. It is a strong warning, stronger than “let us be careful” (NIV), for he actually says, “Let us *fear* lest any of you be found to have

fallen short.” Why does he fear? He is aware of the extreme consequences of failing to finish the journey of faith, of falling short like the wilderness generation due to a loss of faith and faithfulness.

He gives a reason for his fear: “we also have had the good news proclaimed to us.” One could render that “we too have been evangelized.” The dear brothers and sisters to whom he is writing have heard and received the evangel, the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Christ. The risen and exalted Son has entered God’s presence where he has provided purification for sins and sat down at God’s right hand, crowned with glory and honor. This is good news indeed. Why, then, the fear?

The wilderness generation also had the good news proclaimed to them. It was not the gospel about Jesus, but it was good news nonetheless. It was the good news that God was going to liberate his people from harsh slavery in Egypt, bring them to himself, then bring them into the land promised to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. The Lord appeared to Moses at the Burning Bush to commission him. Moses returned to Egypt, where he and Aaron told the Hebrews all God’s words, all his good news: “and [the people] believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped” (Exod 4:33). But their anxious fears quickly returned and they complained.

On Passover night Moses told them the Lord’s plan to strike the Egyptians but spare his people that very night. More good news. The initial response was the same: “And the people bowed their heads and worshiped” (Exod 12:27). But soon their anxious fears returned. Again and again and again. Moses proclaimed good news from God. But the people quickly turned to grumbling, unbelief, and disobedience. Instead of bowing down to the Lord, they bowed down to a golden calf.

Lest we be too harsh on them, we too are prone to anxious fears that will not subside. As we look around us there is much to make us anxious, fearful, angry, resentful, discouraged, disillusioned, depressed, and on and on.

In the end “the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed” (4:2), where “obeyed” could also be translated “heard.” They heard the good news but they never really heard it; they heard but they didn’t listen; they heard but they never took it to heart. As a result, the good news did them no good. They didn’t trust God whence came this good news. They didn’t consider him trustworthy and reliable, and as a result they themselves were untrustworthy and unreliable.

They did not join the community of faith. Who was in that community? Moses, whom we were twice told was faithful (3:2, 5). Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies who assured the people that God would be with them as they entered the land. The community of faith stretched back to include the Patriarchs to whom God promised the Land. It stretched forwards to include Joshua and David. It included all the OT saints who are included in chapter 11, all who lived by faith. But the wilderness generation refused to join this great cloud of witnesses. The community of faith is yet larger. It includes those to whom the preacher has addressed this sermon. And it includes us today. We have joined ourselves to those who have heard by faith. The preacher sees one large community of faith that stretches across both testaments, Old and New.

The preacher knows that his audience has responded better than

the wilderness generation:

**Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,**

**“So I declared on oath in my anger,  
‘They shall never enter my rest.’”**

**And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.” (4:3-5)**

*We who have believed:* they had truly heard the good news proclaimed to them and had received it in faith. They had joined the community of faith. As a result they are entering God’s rest. The verb is present and ongoing: they have started to enter that rest, are in the process of entering, but entering is not yet complete. Entering God’s rest encompasses the whole time from initial response of faith through to death or the Lord’s return. It is the entire period of our walk in faith, of our spiritual journey.

In vv. 3b-5 the preacher draws from God’s word in Scripture, but his reasoning is a little hard to follow. First he repeats the quotation from Psalm 95:11, God’s oath that the wilderness generation would never enter *his rest*. But what is God’s rest? The preacher goes far back in time to the beginning. He alludes to Genesis 2:2, that God’s “works have been finished since the creation of the world.” He then quotes that very text, “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” God has been in his rest ever since he completed creation. The first six days each had an ending: it became evening then it became morning, day *x*. But not the seventh day. This day in which God entered his rest is unending. Finally the preacher returns to Psalm 95:11, God’s oath: “They shall never enter my rest.” God has been in his rest from the seventh day. He invited the Israelites whom he brought out of Egypt to join him in rest, but they refused.

Is the pathway to God’s rest still open? It is:

**Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:**

**“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts.”**

**For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. (4:6-8)**

The promise of entering God’s rest still stands, or remains (1). Now we read that it still remains for some to enter that rest (6). Why does it remain? Because those who were formerly evangelized, who had the good news proclaimed to them, did not enter because of their disobedience flowing from unbelief. But God still wants people in his rest. He is determined to bring people into his rest. Therefore he has appointed a day, *Today*. Again the preacher quotes Psalm 95:7b-8a, that he had used in chapter 3. Today is the day to hear God’s voice and enter into his rest. Today is the day of invitation—invitation into God’s rest.

David, presumed author of the psalm, wrote this because rest had not yet been achieved. Joshua was unable to bring God’s people into rest, so God appointed another day. That day was open in David’s

time.

There was a brief moment when it did seem that entrance into God's rest was achieved. This was during the reign of David's son Solomon. The Lord promised David that he would have a son who would be a "man of *rest*" (1 Chr 22:9). He would fulfill David's desire "to build a house of *rest* for the ark of the covenant of the Lord" (1 Chr 28:2). In his prayer of dedication of the temple Solomon praised God: "Blessed be the LORD who has given *rest* to his people Israel, according to all that he promised" (1 Kgs 8:56).

So, the people were in their resting place, the Promised Land, "everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree" (1 Kgs 4:25). In their midst, God was in his resting place, as symbolized by the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies in the temple. And the king was at rest. Rest was place: the Lord in the temple, the king in the palace, and the people in the Land. God was in the midst of his people, in fulfillment of his promise, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." Rest was the presence of the Lord.

Alas, this did not last long. Solomon's heart was soon led astray. He stopped hearing God's word. Eventually the Lord removed his presence from the temple, and removed the people from the Land. What then of God's rest? Would it be recovered by putting the ark back in the temple and the people back in the land?

Jesus's invitation to come to himself to find rest is immediately followed by two accounts of what Jesus did on a Sabbath day under the watchful gaze of the Pharisees (Matt 11:28–12:14). In the first account, which we heard, his disciples picked some grain and ate it. In the second, set in a synagogue, a man had his shriveled hand restored. In both cases the Pharisees were upset. Jesus told them, "something greater than the temple is here...the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt 12:6, 8). In one fell swoop he transferred both the spatial and the temporal spheres of rest onto himself. He, greater than the temple, was where God was present on earth. He, sovereign over the sabbath, was where and when rest was to be experienced. He placed himself at the center of rest, and invited the weary and the burdened to come to him to find rest as his gift. This was too much for the Pharisees: they "went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus" (Matt 12:14). Today, the day of invitation into rest, was open in the days of Jesus. It was open in Jesus himself. The invitation was now to come to Jesus.

The invitation was open in the days of Hebrews. As the preacher wrote his sermon, the promise of entering God's rest remained (1). It remained for some to enter into his rest (6). Therefore God spoke about a later day, the day for hearing his voice and entering into his rest. What day is this? *Today!* Today is the day for hearing the greater word which God has spoken in these last days to us by his Son (1:2).

The preacher and his listeners had been evangelized with the good news of Jesus, this greater word. They had heard God's voice and not hardened their hearts. Today is still Today, the day for hearing the Lord's voice and responding in faith. The day of taking the first step in entering into God's rest. The day for coming to Jesus. The invitation remains open for us.

The preacher concludes:

**There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as**

**God did from his. (4:9-10)**

There are now three things that remain. The promise of entering God's rest remains (1). It remains for some to enter into that rest (6). Now a third thing remains: a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.

The word *sabbatismos*, translated here and in most English versions as Sabbath-rest, occurs only here and is very rare. It should probably be translated Sabbath-celebration. It is what you do on the day of rest; how you keep, observe, or celebrate the Sabbath. So, it is the celebration life lived in God's rest. Since God's rest is unending, it is the unending life of celebration lived in God's presence.

I'm from Scotland, where the two words *Sabbath* and *celebration* do not belong together. Sabbath, as Sunday is still referred to in various parts of the country, is a dour, solemn day. Sabbath is kept; it is kept by keeping yourself from doing all sorts of things that are done on other days.—although with the rapid secularization of the country this is quickly changing.

But in Judaism Sabbath *is* a celebration. We see this, for example, in the lighting of the candles at the beginning of the Sabbath meal, as beautifully portrayed in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Some branches of Judaism have long understood Sabbath to be a token of eternity. So Sabbath is enjoyed as a foretaste of the age to come.

Celebration is appropriate because the one entering into God's rest also rests from his or her works, just as God rested from his works. What are these works? For God it is his works of creation. He continues to be active in the world, but in a state of unending rest. He invites us to enter that rest. When we receive the good news of Jesus we begin our entrance into God's rest in Christ. But we have not finished that entrance. We are still engaged in our works. These works are not anything we do to try to earn our salvation. That is entirely by grace as we respond in faith to hearing God's voice, hearing the good news of Jesus that has been proclaimed to us. By grace, through faith, and as gift, we already are God's people. Our works are the works we do while faithfully following Jesus. They include our own work of following Jesus, and our work of helping others to follow Jesus. For example, Paul praised the Thessalonian Christians for "your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 1:3). At the end of our earthly pilgrimage we will enter into God's presence, into his rest, and the works of our pilgrimage will be complete.

The preacher closes this section with a final exhortation, which, as usual, comes with a warning:

**Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. (4:11)**

This exhortation and warning forms an *inclusio* with the exhortation and warning in v. 1. They bookend this section.

Making every effort to enter rest seems contradictory. Striving seems opposed to resting. But it is not so when we correctly see the preacher's view of the Christian life. We have already started entering into rest. But we need to be diligent to keep moving forward in our entering. How do we do so? It is quite simple. The preacher lays out two things to do: follow Jesus, and encourage one another to follow Jesus.

If we keep our gaze on Jesus, looking to him as our example, we

will not be led astray by the example of the wilderness generation that responded to God's voice with unbelief and disobedience.

Repeatedly the preacher urges us to look to Jesus: we see Jesus (2:9), fix your thoughts on Jesus (3:1), fixing our eyes on Jesus (12:2), consider him (12:3). In the hymn *Jesus, I am Resting, Resting*, there's a lovely line: "Thou hast bid me gaze upon thee, as thy beauty fills my soul." We gaze on Jesus. But if we take our gaze off of him then we are in danger of drifting away, of coming short, of falling.

One night the disciples were on a boat on the Sea of Galilee during a storm. Just before dawn Jesus came towards them, walking on the water. He bid Peter, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and started to walk on the water towards Jesus. As long as he looked at Jesus he was fine. But when he saw the wind his anxious fears arose and he was the one who subsided. He began to sink (Matt 14:22-33). Jesus bids us gaze upon him and come to him.

Again this is why I have called this series *Christ Before Us*. The preacher constantly places Christ before us to be the object of our gaze. But also, Christ has gone before us as our pioneer and forerunner. He has faithfully completed his journey and has entered fully into God's rest, into God's presence. From there, at God's side, he bids us come to him.

As we follow Jesus there will be many trials and temptations. Anxious fears will try to arise. But, like Peter, the answer is to look to Jesus. This is part of why we gather on Sundays: to renew and refresh our gaze on Jesus, because our gaze has been pulled elsewhere during the week, because our anxious fears have risen up.

We don't walk this path alone. The preacher urges us to help one another: "encourage one another daily" (3:13), "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—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (10:24-25). We do this also by gathering on Sunday mornings. We can also do this during the week in connection groups. Later this month there will be two Connection Sundays where we can learn about such groups where we can gather to encourage one another.

The preacher is confident, despite all his warnings, that if his dear brothers and sisters keep paying attention to Jesus and keep encouraging one another they will successfully complete the journey and will enter fully into God's rest.

It is popular to say that we rest in the finished work of Christ. It is true that he cried out on the cross, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). But in the theology of Hebrews, Christ's work is not finished. As our great high priest he exercises an ongoing ministry on our behalf. He is able to help us in our trials and weaknesses. We do go through trials and weaknesses. We bring to him all our anxious fears that they may subside under his loving gaze.

Just a few verses later the preacher is going to say this:

**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)**

During our earthly pilgrimage our rest comes not from never having anxious fears, never being in a time of need, but from looking to Jesus. We do not yet have access physically to God's presence. That lies at the end of our journey of faith, when we shall fully enter into God's rest, into his presence. But meanwhile we do have access to his presence through Jesus the Son of God, our great high priest who has fully entered into God's rest and presence. We are his and he knows us. Through him we receive mercy and find grace, because we continue to be in a time of need. We are in need of bidding our anxious fears subside.

Given these warnings throughout Hebrews, wherein then lies our assurance of salvation? My assurance comes not from the fact that I have begun the journey, that I have started to enter into God's rest. The Hebrews in Egypt started out well, bowing down and worshipping the Lord in response to the good news proclaimed by Moses. But it didn't last; they didn't complete the journey. My assurance comes not from looking backwards, but from looking forwards and upwards. My assurance comes from looking to the one who has already completed the journey into God's rest: Jesus Christ, my faithful high priest, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. My own history is too weak to give me assurance. But through Jesus I approach God's throne of grace with confidence, there to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need throughout the days of my earthly pilgrimage. He is my assurance, not me.

At the end of chapter 12 we will be given a brief glimpse of the end of our pilgrimage:

**But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (12:22-24)**

The myriad angels are already in joyful assembly. We will join them for there remains a *sabbatismos*, a celebratory life lived in God's rest.

I close with a prayer of John Henry Newman:

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done; then Lord, in thy mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 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)*



# UNTO WHOM ALL HEARTS BE OPEN

Hebrews 4:12-13

#10, 2023.08.13

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 faith-

ful?

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 familiar 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

2023.08.13

# FINDING TIMELY HELP

Hebrews 4:14-16

#11, 2023.08.20

PBCC is a low church. Perhaps you're familiar with this language of low church and high church. We don't have liturgy or elaborate ritual like a high church. No bells and smells. No priests in fancy robes. We don't even ordain. Like other Protestants we affirm the priesthood of all believers, yet we don't call ourselves priests. And we are suspicious of church leaders who do. Didn't priesthood get left behind with the Old Covenant? Priesthood seems strange to many of us.

We also affirm that Christ fulfills all three covenant offices that were previously filled by different people in Israel under that Old Covenant: the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Each was a mediator between God and his people. Each was of the people, but didn't necessarily represent the people. The prophet and the king represented God to the people; the priest represented the people to God. Hebrews presents Jesus in all three roles.

The prophet represented God to the people. His role was to proclaim God's word, to say, "Thus says the Lord!" The people didn't always want to hear that word. Hebrews begins with God's prophetic 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. (Heb 1:1-2a NIV)**

Over a long period of time God spoke to his people through many different prophets. But now he has spoken a greater word. He spoke this word not just through his Son, but even as his Son. Jesus himself is the word which God has spoken to us.

That first sentence continues with a seven-fold description of the Son. The sixth statement is: "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:3). Later we read that he is "now crowned with glory and honor" (2:9). God has installed the risen Jesus as king. Not just any king, but the highest king, King of kings. As our Scripture reading (Phil 2:6-11) affirmed, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name," so that ultimately everyone will bow and confess that he is Lord. The king was supposed to represent God in ruling his people. Ideally he led the people in righteousness and justice.

Jesus was God's prophet and his word incarnate. The risen Jesus is exalted and enthroned as king. This identity of Jesus as both prophet and king is affirmed not only in Hebrews but throughout the NT. However, the presentation of Jesus in the third office, as priest, is unique to Hebrews. It is by far the most important of the three offices in this book. Yet I think that most of us understand little about how Jesus serves as high priest. In part this is because Hebrews is a difficult book that is rarely preached. We have our favorite verses, to be sure, but much of the book is unfamiliar. It is also because most of us are unfamiliar with the world of priests and how they function. The institution of the priesthood for ancient Israel is given in Leviticus and Numbers, territory into which we rarely venture. So

even if we do read into the central section of Hebrews we don't understand the background context of Old Covenant priesthood against which the priesthood of Jesus is to be understood.

We get a first hint of Jesus as priest already in the fifth statement of the same opening sentence: "he provided purification for sins" (1:3). This is the role of a priest.

Today we come to a major transition in the Book of Hebrews. The preacher has already briefly mentioned Jesus as high priest (2:17; 3:1), but now he turns his full attention to this topic. His presentation of Jesus as high priest covers six chapters (4:14-10:25), so we will be in this material for a considerable time. There are two aspects to Jesus's high-priestly ministry. There is a one-time ministry whereby he has provided purification for sins once and for all on our behalf. And there is an ongoing ministry of intercession on our behalf before the Father in heaven. Notice that two-fold use of "on our behalf." The prophet and the king acted on God's behalf. The priest acts on the people's behalf, representing the people before God.

Our text today is the preacher's introduction to this major section on Jesus as high priest:

**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. (Heb 4:14-16)**

The central section on Jesus as high priest is clearly demarcated by this introduction and by a very similar conclusion (10:19-23).

In this introduction the preacher twice states that we have a high priest, and twice gives an exhortation based upon this fact: let us hold firmly our confession, and let us draw near to God.

Though this is the introduction to the next six chapters, *therefore* and *since* anchor us in the previous chapters. They refer back to chapter 2 where Jesus is first described as high priest:

**For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, 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. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (2:16-18)**

There are numerous connections between this passage and our text, 4:14-16.

*Therefore* also refers back to the previous paragraph that we looked at last week (4:12-13). God's word lays us open to his penetrating gaze. So we need an advocate, a mediator to act and speak on our

behalf. We have one in our great high priest.

A priest serves as a human mediator between the human and the divine realms. The interface between the human and the divine is dangerous territory. It is dangerous to be too close to God. This was especially so for ancient Israel, because God wanted to dwell with his people: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” But how can a holy God dwell with a sinful people? Won’t the holiness of God consume the sinful people? Won’t the sinful people contaminate the holy God? It seems a recipe for disaster. Yet this is what God wanted to do: dwell in the midst of his people. The infinite Creator with his finite creatures. This is God’s ultimate goal, that he and his people dwell together. That he draw his people into his eternal glory.

For ancient Israel the interface between the divine and the human was the tabernacle. Israel was living in tents as they journeyed from Egypt to the land of Canaan, from the land of slavery to the land of promise. So God instructed Moses to have the people make a tent so that he could dwell and travel with his people. This tent or tabernacle also served to transfer the divine presence from Mt Sinai to Mt Zion, its final resting place.

The tabernacle was a tent surrounded by a courtyard. The tent was divided into two chambers: the outer Holy Place and the inner Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies. In this inner chamber was the ark of the covenant symbolizing God’s presence. The two-chambered tent and the courtyard formed a three-tiered structure of holiness.

The tabernacle was set in the midst of the Israelite camp. Moving outwards from the courtyard was first the priests, then the Levites, then the other tribes of Israel, three per side. Beyond them, outside the camp, were those who were unclean. Far beyond the camp were the other nations, notably Egypt, from whose land they had come, and Canaan, into whose land they would enter. It was highly-structured space. The holiness of the space increased from the nations on the far periphery inwards to the Most Holy Place in the middle.

In the tabernacle God embraced his people by placing his presence in their midst. But the tabernacle was also about exclusion. The three zones of the tabernacle itself were demarcated by curtains. These served as barriers to entry. They excluded most and admitted only a few. The people were told to draw near to God, but they could only come so far before their path was blocked by a barrier.

Israelites could bring their sacrifices to the courtyard entrance, protected by a curtain. They could go no further. They could not pass through the curtain. They would kill the animal then hand it over to the priests, who were able to pass through, taking the carcass inside the courtyard to the altar of burnt offering. Priests could pass through the second curtain into the tent only if they had priestly business inside. And only the high priest could pass through the innermost curtain into the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place, and then only once a year. He had to take burning incense with him so the smoke veiled his sight; so that he couldn’t see any further in.

So the tabernacle was about both exclusion and embrace. God and his people dwelt together but it was an arrangement full of danger. Priests mediated between the people outside the tabernacle and God’s presence in the inner chamber.

The supreme act of mediation occurred once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would pass through the inner curtain into the Most Holy Place. He took

with him the blood from two animals, one for his own sin, the other for the sin of the people. This blood of purification he would sprinkle on the cover of the ark of the covenant, usually known as the atonement cover or mercy seat. Then he would return outside. This language and imagery of the Day of Atonement permeates these central chapters of Hebrews.

Jesus as high priest is our mediator. He has “ascended into heaven” (NIV). Literally, he has “passed through the heavens.” Each year the high priest passed through the inner curtain into the Most Holy Place, and then came back out. But with Jesus it is as if the horizontal spatial structure of the tabernacle has been turned vertical. Jesus passed through the curtain of the heavens into the true sanctuary. He is now exalted above the heavens (7:26). He has entered into God’s rest, into God’s very presence. The preacher will return to this entrance several times.

Who is this high priest? He is Jesus the Son of God. Jesus, the Son incarnate as a human being, as one of us. Risen and exalted, he remains Jesus; he did not put off his humanity when he entered God’s presence. He took his humanity into God’s presence. He is the Son of God, present with God from the beginning, agent of God’s creation. He is on the side of the Creator not the creation. In Jesus the Son of God, the human and the divine meet. He is the perfect mediator. He is the perfect high priest. He is one of us but now in God’s presence. He is there for us. Having entered once, he is still there. There he sat down at God’s right hand, indicating finality.

Since we have such a high priest, the preacher’s exhortation is, “Let us hold firmly our confession.” NIV has interpreted this confession as “the faith we profess.” What is it? This confession is first mentioned in 3:1, where Jesus is described as the apostle and high priest of our confession. As *apostle* he is the one sent from God into our world to become human like us. He has now returned to God as one of us to be *high priest*. This is the truth we hold on to. It is bedrock reality for us: that the Son was sent into our world to be one of us, Jesus the man; and that this Jesus is now in God’s presence as one of us.

Verse 15 explains the importance of holding this confession because of the sort of high priest that we have. He is described first negatively, what he is not, and then positively, what he is. The negative statement is actually a double negative, making it a positive statement. Our high priest is able to *empathize* with our weaknesses. Most translations state that Jesus *sympathizes* with us. The original NIV was the same. But NIV now has *empathizes*. Sympathy and empathy are not the same, though they are easily confused. I’m no psychologist, but I think of them as sympathy feels *for* someone else in their suffering, whereas empathy feels *with* that person. It takes someone who has been through what we’re going through to empathize with us. Many more can sympathize. I think the NIV is right to make this change. That Jesus our high priest is able to empathize with us, not just sympathize, is made clear in the second statement: he “has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” Jesus was just like us: “in every way, just as we are.” This is an echo of an earlier verse: he had to *be made like* his brothers and sisters *in every way* (2:17). Made just like us in every way. His full humanity extended to being tempted in every way, just like us. This is why he can have empathy with us in our temptation. Not just pity. Not just sympathy. Not just compassion. But deep empathy: he

understands. He knows what temptation is like. He has been there. Just like us.

People point out that Jesus wasn't actually tempted in every way just like us. He was never a woman, never married, never had kids, never on social media. He never worked in the pressure cooker of Silicon Valley, or many other situations we face today. On the other hand he faced unique temptations because of the power at his disposal. Temptations that we will never face. I have never been tempted to command stones to become bread, to jump off the pinnacle of the temple to be caught by angels, or to aspire to world rule. These were real temptations that Jesus faced. He faced them because of his unique position as the Son of God. These were things he could actually grasp at if he wanted to. "If you are the Son of God..." said Satan twice. He was indeed the Son of God. He could take advantage of these things. But would he? Would he use that status to his own advantage? Would he act in a self-referential manner? Would he act for himself?

To understand this statement that Jesus has been tempted in all ways just like us, it is helpful to remember the context. We first read, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (2:18). What is this temptation? The nature of temptation is identified in 3:7-4:11. The Israelites that God brought out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses were tested or tempted in the wilderness. They had heard God's voice, but would they remain faithful to that voice? "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (3:7, 15; 4:7). They did not heed God's voice; they did harden their hearts. They gave in to temptation and failed the test. They were unfaithful and disobedient.

Every temptation or test comes down to this. Will we keep hearing God's voice? "If you are the Son of God..." said Satan. Would Jesus listen to Satan? Especially as he was in great need, after fasting forty days and nights. He himself suffered when he was tempted. He suffered in the wilderness. He suffered in the garden of Gethsemane, what we call the Agony in the Garden, agony meaning struggle. This marked the beginning of his Passion, what we call the final 18 hours of his life from Gethsemane until his burial in the tomb. Passion sounds a benign or even positive word. But in its original context it means *suffering*. Jesus suffered when he was tempted.

Because he suffered when being tempted in every way just like us, he is able to do more than sympathize with us. He empathizes with us. He has been where we are—just like us. He is able to help.

The one way in which Jesus was not like us is that he was without sin. Some ask how he can really be like us if he did not sin. In resisting temptation and not sinning, he was being truly human. In resisting temptation and being faithful to the end he was restoring true humanity to the world. A disobedient human is a broken human. If he had given in to temptation there would have been no resurrection. When Jesus died sinless, Death held one on whom it had no claim. If he had sinned, Death would have had a claim. The resurrection was God's vindication of him and a defeat of death—because he was sinless. If Jesus had given in to temptation there would be no exaltation and enthronement. He would not be the perfect high priest because his own sins would need atoning for. He would have been just one more unfaithful, disobedient, sinful, rebellious human being. Just like Israel. Alas, just like us.

But we have as high priest "one who has been tempted in every

way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." Thanks be to God!

In v. 16 the preacher gives his second exhortation. It is introduced by *therefore*, based upon having such a high priest. "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence." We have seen that for Old Covenant Israel God's presence with his people was as much about exclusion as about embrace. The various categories of people could draw near, but only so far before they found their way blocked. Access was limited. If you were impure, unclean, diseased, or damaged you could not draw near at all; you were beyond the camp. The tabernacle was simultaneously a place of exclusion and embrace. It was a fearsome thing to get too close to God. When the high priest entered the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement he had bells on the hem of his robe so the people outside would know that he was still alive in the presence of the awesome God. When Isaiah "saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne," he was undone. "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips...and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isa 6:1, 5). It was a dangerous thing to get too close to God.

But now, under the New Covenant, we are invited to draw near, to approach God. We can do so because we have a mediator between us and God, an advocate for us before God. Jesus has already entered into God's presence, his rest. We will enter into that rest at the end of our earthly journey. We are in the process of entering. We have started that entrance, but we are not there yet. Meanwhile, we are invited to draw near in faith. How near can we draw? Through the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. Through the curtain at the entrance to the tent. Through the curtain into the Most Holy Place. Into the very presence of God through Christ Jesus. We draw near.

We approach with bold confidence. We encountered this word translated *boldness* or *confidence* in 3:6. It is a key word in Hebrews. Yes, it means confidence, but especially in the presence of someone of high rank. Because of our high priest, we draw near to God with the confidence that we can be there, that we belong there. The confidence that God welcomes us, that he is pleased to see us there. As I said a few weeks ago, it's a confidence that many Christians lack. We don't feel that God is pleased to see us. This is one reason why understanding the high-priestly ministry of Jesus is so important. It assures us that we are welcome in God's presence. This assurance is why Charles Wesley could write, "Bold I approach the eternal throne."

Perhaps some of you are familiar with a famous series of photos from sixty years ago. They show President Kennedy working at his desk, the Resolute Desk, in the Oval Office while his son John Jr plays there in his presence. Young John Jr had this bold confidence to draw near and enter his father's presence, even into the Oval Office, the epicenter of executive power. This is the confidence that we can have, drawing near in Christ Jesus to the true center of executive power.

With this sort of bold confidence we approach the throne of grace. Seated there is one who does not confer shame upon us, which is what we might instinctively feel. He does not give a look that tells us we shouldn't really be there. He confers grace, favor, and honor on us, because we are in Christ. Because the risen Lord Jesus is there for us. We are his brothers and sisters. Jesus is not ashamed to own us as such, and so God is not ashamed to own us as such, his beloved sons and daughters.

There is a purpose to this drawing near: “so that we may receive mercy and find grace.” This is what God delights to do, to show mercy and grace. He revealed himself to Moses as “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exod 34:6-7). Jesus is “a merciful and faithful high priest” (2:17).

The purpose of this dual gift of mercy and grace is to provide timely help. Ever since the earliest English translations, before KJV, this phrase has been translated as “to help in time of need.” Literally it is well-timed help. Help that is provided at just the right time. Timely help. The right sort of help for the right time. What time is that and what sort of help is needed? We are told at the end of chapter 2. Because Jesus suffered when tempted, just like us, “he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). So, it is help to resist temptation. “Have we trials and tribulations?” we sang. Yes, we do, all the time. Timely help is help when we are being tempted, so that we can overcome. It is help to keep us following Jesus. Help to endure and persevere. Help to remain faithful as we continue our earthly pilgrimage. We are always in need of such help. And God in Christ is eager to give us this help, because he wants us to be faithful. He wants us to faithfully finish the journey so that we do enter fully into his presence—because he wants to dwell with his people.

In his conclusion at the end of the high-priestly section, the preacher repeats his main points. “[S]ince we have confidence to enter...and since we have a great priest...let us draw near... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess” (10:19-23). Notice the repetition of key terms: having a great high priest, let us draw near, confidence, and holding on to our confession. The preacher wants his brothers and sisters, and us also, to know how fully welcome we are in God’s presence through Jesus our high priest. Let us boldly draw near.

He immediately continues:

**And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together,...but encouraging one another (10:24-25)**

Hebrews is full of exhortations. One can summarize these

exhortations into two. Firstly, look to Jesus, see him there; come to Jesus, draw near. Secondly, encourage one another and meet together; we are in this journey together as we walk this life of faith

Today is the first of our two Connection Sundays. The focus today is connections here within the church family. There are many ways for us to meet together to encourage one another.

Some of the earliest artistic depictions of Jesus were as the Good Shepherd caring for his sheep, even carrying one on his shoulders. But when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, it became increasingly common to portray Jesus as a king, and to place his image high up in the dome of a church or cathedral. This type of image is usually known as Christ Pantocrator, Christ Ruler of All.

Such is the image I am using for this series. It is a beautiful late Byzantine mosaic of Christ Pantocrator in the cathedral in Cefalù, Sicily. But Christ became so exalted that he was far off. He ceased to be a mediator. He ceased to be one of us. He ceased to be approachable. There was a need for a mediator to the mediator. To some extent, Mary was exalted in order to fill this role. Petitions were directed to her so that she might petition her son. Also a human priesthood developed to mediate.

This is a far cry from Hebrews with its presentation of Jesus the Son of God. The eternal Son became just like us in every way, including temptation, save without sin. Now exalted through the heavens to God’s right hand, he is not far off. We are bid to draw near, to approach. He is approachable. And when we draw near we find one who not only sympathizes with us, but who empathizes with us. As the hymn says, “Jesus knows our every weakness.” Therefore he is able to empathize with our weaknesses and provide timely help, just the right help at just the right time. Timely help so that we keep following him faithfully. We need this help all the time because we face temptation all the time. Jesus our high priest is able to help. So let us look to him together as we walk this life of faith together.

2023.08.20



# HE WAS HEARD

Hebrews 5:1-10

#12, 2023.08.27

“I cried to the LORD, and he heard my voice.” We read these words many times in Scripture, especially in the Psalms. We heard them in our call to worship, Psalm 18, attributed to David:

**In my distress I called to the LORD;  
I cried to my God for help.  
From his temple he heard my voice;  
my cry came before him, into his ears...  
He brought me out into a spacious place;  
he rescued me because he delighted in me.  
The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness;  
according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded  
me...  
To the faithful you show yourself faithful.**

(Ps 18:6, 19-20, 25a NIV)

This is the sort of psalm we like to read. The psalmist has remained faithful to the Lord throughout all his adversities. He has cried out to the Lord in faith. The Lord has heard, and rewarded the psalmist's faithfulness by delivering him. To the faithful he has shown himself faithful.

Jonah borrowed extensively from this psalm when he cried out to the Lord from the belly of the fish:

**In my distress I called to the LORD,  
and he answered me.  
From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,  
and you listened to my cry. (Jonah 2:2)**

Jonah was heard and the Lord delivered him from the fish. To the faithful... But Jonah wasn't faithful: he was running away from God. Nevertheless, despite his unfaithfulness, the Lord heard his cry and delivered him.

Women also cried out to the Lord in their distress: Hagar, Hannah, Elizabeth. They too were heard. God answered their cries.

But God doesn't always save people from death, even those who have been faithful to him. Take Abel for example. The Lord said to Cain after he had killed his brother, “Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground” (Gen 4:10). It's a bit late by then! Why had God not saved faithful Abel from death? Abel alive never cried out. In fact, Abel alive never speaks. He was born, kept flocks, brought an offering which the Lord accepted, and was killed by his brother. That is the sum total of his life. We are told the meaning of Cain's name, but not Abel's. The story itself gives the meaning of his name. Abel is the same word translated in Ecclesiastes as vanity, futility, or meaninglessness. It means a puff of wind, something that is next to nothingness. Here one moment, gone the next. Alive Abel didn't speak, but dead his blood spoke, as indeed Hebrews states (12: 24). The cry of Abel's spilt blood was heard by God. His was the first death in the Bible. He was the first martyr, the first person killed while and for being faithful. His was the first innocent blood to be shed. Blood that cried out to be heard, blood that cried out for

justice. But what could God do? To the faithful he proves himself faithful. But how could he be faithful to Abel's shed blood?

Turning to the other end of the Bible, at the opening of the fifth seal in Revelation, John saw the martyrs under the altar. They cried out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10). They were told to rest awhile, to chill until the full number of martyrs had been killed. Some comfort that! More martyrs, more innocent blood. God heard but what could he do? How could he be faithful to the innocent shed blood of the martyrs?

The Book of Hebrews is awash in blood. The word *blood* is mentioned far more frequently than in any other NT book. It is awash in blood because the ministry of priests is awash in blood. Priesthood is central to Hebrews, especially the ministry of the risen and exalted Jesus as our high priest. Last week we covered the introduction to the great central section of the Book of Hebrews (4:14–10:25), about Jesus as our great high priest. The invitation to draw near to God with bold confidence suggests the superiority of the high-priestly ministry of Jesus.

The preacher next shows this superiority by comparing the two high-priesthoods of old and new covenants (5:1-10). The passage is in two main sections: the high priesthood of Aaron and his descendants under the old covenant (5:1-4), and the high priesthood of Christ under the new covenant (5:5-10).

## I. Levitical High Priest (5:1-4)

The preacher first describes the high priesthood under the old covenant:

**Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. (Heb 5:1-4)**

Verse 1 briefly describes the office of high priest. He was of the people, but appointed by God. He represented the people before God. He mediated the interface between God and his people by offering sacrifices for sins, so that a sinful people could live with a holy God in their midst.

After this brief summary, the ministry of the high priest is detailed in vv. 2-3. “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray.” Israel was a sinful people, but the Lord provided a sacrificial system whereby sins could be dealt with. This provision applied to unintentional sins, to straying from God's law unknowingly. There was no provision for high-handed sins; the penalty for these was generally death. The only remedy was God's mercy and

forgiveness. So David cried out after his high-handed sins were found out:

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions. (Ps 51:1)

Such forgiveness was beyond the remit of the high priest. He mediated cleansing for unintentional sins. He thus dealt gently with the people. Literally he moderated his passion, his anger, at their unintentional failings. Why was he able to do this? Because he himself was subject to the same weakness—literally, he was clothed in weakness. The high priest wore resplendent garments. When I preached a series on the Tabernacle (Exod 25–40; 2016–19) we had up here on the stage a mannequin dressed in a beautiful set of high-priestly garments made by Robin Haney. But in reality the high priest was clothed in weakness, the same weakness as the people—the weakness of being prone to sin.

Therefore he had “to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.” This he did on the Day of Atonement, when he passed through the inner curtain into the Most Holy Place. He took with him the blood of two animals, one for his own sins, the other for the sins of the people. The effectiveness of the high priest was limited because he was sinful like the people and had to offer sacrifices for his own sin.

Finally, the high priest did not appoint himself to office (4). Instead he was called by God, just as Aaron. When Israel was at Mt Sinai, God designated Aaron and his four sons to be the priests as a hereditary office, with the the high-priesthood passing from Aaron through the eldest son.

In summary, the office of high priest was established by God to interface on behalf of the people with God by offering sacrifices for sins. But the high priest was limited in his efficacy, being sinful himself. Nevertheless, Aaron was called by God to this office, this calling passing to his descendants. The high-priesthood was a gift from God, but it was limited in its scope.

## 2. Christ as High Priest (5:5–10)

Beginning with “In the same way,” the preacher now describes Christ as high priest. He works his way through the points made about “every high priest” but in reverse order. Verses 5–6 are the counterpart to v. 4:

In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

“You are my Son;  
today I have become your Father.”

And he says in another place,

“You are a priest forever,  
in the order of Melchizedek.” (5:5–6)

Aaron did not take the honor of high-priesthood on himself, but was called by God. Likewise, Jesus did not take the glory on himself—honor and glory here serving as a word pair. He too was called by God, and the preacher goes back into Israel’s Scriptures to show how.

He quotes two psalms, each beginning, “You are...” He takes these as addressing Christ. The first is Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” He has already used this verse in chapter 1. There he quoted seven passages to show the superiority of the Son to angels. The first is Psalm 2:7. The last is Psalm 110:1, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” These two verses are also used elsewhere in the NT to understand the status of the risen and exalted Jesus as the true Davidic king.

Now the preacher reaches further into Psalm 110, quoting v. 4: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” He draws the connection between *You are my Son*, and *You are a priest forever*. Indeed he is *the* priest, the high priest. His priesthood is connected to, indeed based upon, his status as enthroned Son. The book’s opening sentence had already connected priesthood and enthronement as Son: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (1:3).

But how is this possible since Jesus is not of the tribe of Levi, from which came Aaron and his priestly line? There is a more ancient order of priesthood than the Levitical priesthood in Aaron: the order of Melchizedek. This Melchizedek, whom we read about in Genesis 14, was both king and priest. Furthermore, he was associated with Abraham—Father Abraham, with whom God made the covenant to start calling out for himself a people. We will hear much more about Melchizedek in chapter 7.

In vv. 7–9 the preacher contrasts Christ’s high-priestly ministry with that of “every high priest” in vv. 2–3. He addresses the same issues, but in reverse order. Every high priest offers sacrifices for the sins of both himself and the people (3). Christ also presented an offering:

During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (5:7)

Christ’s offering was not sacrificial blood for sins. He offered “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears.” Since he offered them “to the one who could save him from death,” it is easy to assume he was asking to be spared from death. That he was like the psalmist or Jonah: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he heard me,” and was delivered.

Many connect these prayers and petitions to the Garden of Gethsemane. We heard Matthew’s account as our Scripture reading (Matt 26:36–46). We call this the Agony in the Garden, agony meaning struggle. We see Jesus three times going aside to pray to his Father, as he struggles to submit his will to the Father’s will. Was he heard? The text is silent. The Father is silent. But Jesus heard that silence and correctly understood it to mean that there was no change of plan.

The silence told him that it was indeed the Father’s plan that he drink the cup. We see this acceptance in the progression of his prayers. His first prayer: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me” (26:39). Silence. His second prayer: “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it” (26:42). Silence. But heard in that silence was his Father’s will. And so he ended his first prayer, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” And he

ended his second prayer, “may your will be done.”

Jesus spoke and he was heard. The Father spoke silence and he was heard. Jesus did not interpret the Father’s silence as silent treatment, but as a call to continue in faithful perseverance in obedient submission to his Father’s will.

Does God really hear our prayers? We may offer up our “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears,” but to no avail. We hear silence. When the prophets of Baal got no response to their fervent prayers, Elijah mocked them: “Shout louder!...Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened” (1 Kgs 18:27).

Do we feel that God is too busy to hear and respond to our prayers? Or that we are not important enough? Or not worthy of his attention? Or that we have done something wrong and he is giving us the silent treatment? Or that we haven’t prayed with enough faith? There are so many reasons that we can think our prayers are not working, that they are met with silence. We become discouraged, disillusioned, angry, let down. We may give up.

Was Jesus heard? Yes, he was. How did God reply? With silence. How did Jesus hear this silence? As a call to continued faithfulness, persevering in obedience. He carried on, confident that God saw him, even if he heard no tangible answer from him. This is what we are called to do in this life of faith, during the days of our earthly pilgrimage.

The three prayers of Jesus were enough. He heard his Father’s will in his silence. He woke his disciples and said, “Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (Matt 26:45-46).

God did not save him. Jesus allowed himself to be betrayed and handed over. He allowed himself to be put on trial and condemned. He allowed himself to be crucified, the most shameful and painful death ever conceived. Through all this mistreatment Jesus was silent. “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth...as a sheep before its shearers is silent” (Isa 53:7). God heard this silence and himself stayed silent.

Finally Jesus broke his silence: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). To the malefactor on the cross next to him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). He spoke to his mother and to the beloved disciple, entrusting the one into the care of the other. He spoke tender words of caring love.

The end drew nigh. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). We call this the cry of dereliction, and refer to Jesus as the derelict on the cross. Forsaken by all, even by God. We so easily assume that this means that God turned his face away. But I don’t think that is right. Jesus was quoting Psalm 22:1. But I am sure that Jesus had the entire psalm in mind, including v. 24:

**For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help. (Ps 22:24)**

Psalm 22 is yet another psalm in this category of “I cried to the Lord, and he heard my voice.” Still God did not save him from death. But I am sure that the Father was looking with deep love as

Jesus said his last words. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Here he quotes Psalm 31:5, yet another psalm of “I cried to the Lord, and he heard my voice.” Then the final, climactic, triumphal cry, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Jesus handed over his spirit.

God did not save him from death. But Jesus had “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.” Why had God not done so? Furthermore, we next read that “he was heard.” In all the psalms of distress that means deliverance. But God had not delivered. It was Jesus who had delivered, as he handed over his spirit. How do we make sense of this verse?

Jesus was heard! “He was heard because of his reverent submission” (NIV), his devout behavior (NAS2020). The idea here is godly fear, what we used to call the fear of the Lord. This doesn’t mean that we are terrified of God, but that we live in reverence to God. We orient our lives onto God in devotion to him and in submission to his will.

Right to the very end this is how Jesus lived his life, oriented onto God his Father. The language of “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears” is stock language that is used elsewhere of those who cried out in distress and the Lord heard their voice. It is used of the righteous sufferers, of godly saints who remained loyal to God in the face of suffering, even when facing martyrdom. God did not necessarily hear their cries to be saved from death. But he heard their reverent submission in the face of death. The same was true for Jesus.

We are called to this same reverent submission to God. It doesn’t necessarily mean doing great things for God. It does mean being faithful and obedient. The Lord, “unto whom all hearts be open,” knows our hearts. He sees the heart that is oriented onto him in loving and loyal devotion, the heart that has within it the fear of the Lord. He hears those who are devoted to him, however weak they may be.

When Jesus died on the cross, he was the first human who had been completely faithful and obedient all the way to death. “It is finished!” he cried. A cry of triumph! He had remained faithful to the end. He had shown reverent devotion to God all the way to the end.

The old order of high priests offered up sacrifices for their sins and the sins of the people (3). But Jesus offered up himself as a life fully devoted to God. And he was heard.

He was laid in the tomb on Friday. Saturday was a day of silence, the most in-between of all days. On Sunday came the answer: resurrection! Jesus offered himself “to the one who could save him from death.” But this last phrase is better translated “out of death”; the preposition is quite clear. This is what God did. Innocent blood had cried out to be heard. It had cried out for justice. True restorative justice was given in resurrection.

In his resurrection lay justice also for Abel’s spilt blood that had been crying out since the beginning of the Bible. And justice is provided proleptically, in advance, for the martyrs under the altar at the other end of the Bible. John sees that they have been given a judgment (Rev 20:4). This is not the authority to judge, but a judicial ruling. The judge rules in their favor: “They came to life.” This was possible because Jesus, the supreme martyr, was dead but is now alive.

At his exaltation Jesus took his own blood into the true sanctuary, where he provided purification for sins. There his “sprinkled blood ... speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:24). We will hear a lot more about this as we move further into Hebrews.

So that is the first contrast between the Old Covenant priest, and Jesus our great high priest. The former priest had to offer up sacrifices for his own sin. Jesus has offered up his own self as the perfectly-devoted one.

The second contrast between the two high-priesthoods is given in v. 8:

**Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered. (5:8)**

The Son was schooled in obedience. This doesn't mean that he was disobedient and had to be taught how to be obedient. No, he was always obedient, because he always lived in reverent submission to his Father. But he had to work out that obedience in all the circumstances of life. It is relatively easy to be obedient when life is going well and it is to our short-term advantage. But Jesus was schooled in obedience by suffering.

There is a wordplay in Greek that cannot be translated into English: he learned (*emathen*) from what he suffered (*epathen*). This was a familiar saying in the ancient Greek world: *emathein epathein*, *To learn is to suffer*, and vice versa. Perhaps the nearest we have to this is “No pain, no gain.” But here in Silicon Valley and elsewhere there is wide acceptance that one learns from failure not from success. A few years ago we watched SpaceX repeatedly trying to land its booster rockets back on land. Failure after failure. Until at last they started succeeding. Now it is routine. SpaceX is no longer learning from landing boosters. It has moved on to attempting much greater things. We learn when we are tested. We learn through suffering.

High priests of the old order were clothed in weakness as they kept sinning, even if unintentionally (2b). But Jesus our great high priest learned obedience. He “has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (4:15). He is tried and tested, and proven to be without the weakness of sin.

The third contrast with the old order is given in v. 9:

**and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. (5:9)**

Learning through suffering, Jesus was made perfect. But wasn't Jesus perfect all the time? Was there a time when he was not perfect? Here there is confusion over what we mean by perfect and not perfect. Grammatically, a perfect form of a verb views action as complete; an imperfect form as incomplete. Jesus was brought to the point of completion through suffering. He finished complete because he was obedient all the way. There was never a time when he was sinful or disobedient. But he needed to be tested in all respects to be perfected.

Having reached the *telos*, the goal, Jesus is now the source of eternal salvation. He is therefore far more effective than the old high priest, who was only able to “deal gently” with his fellow Israelites,

because he was as encumbered by sin as they were. They were in the same boat together. He could only provide temporary cleansing. But Jesus provides eternal salvation.

Who can access this salvation? Those who are obedient to him. Jesus was obedient to his Father, an obedience that was tried and tested. An obedience that flowed from a life of reverent, submissive devotion to his Father in all things. Now it is our turn to obey, to live our lives in reverent, submissive devotion. But herein lies our true freedom—freedom to be who God has created human beings to be, to worship and serve him in loving, loyal, obedient faithfulness.

So, in vv. 7-9 we have three strong contrasts between the two orders of high-priesthood, showing the great superiority of Jesus. The old high priest offered repeated sacrifices for sins, both his and the people's; Jesus has offered his own obedient, devoted self. The old was clothed in the weakness of sinfulness; Jesus has learned obedience through suffering and is proven faithful. The old could do no more than deal gently with fellow sinners; Jesus is the source of eternal salvation.

The preacher concludes with a final comparison between the two orders:

**and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (5:10)**

The old high-priesthood was appointed by God. It was inadequate but it was a divine gift. Likewise, Jesus has been designated by God to the office of high priest, but in the more ancient order of Melchizedek, the king-priest. We have such a great high priest! The preacher will go on to describe the person and ministry of this great high priest in much more detail in the coming chapters.

As many of you know, there is a wordplay between hearing and obedience. Any of us who have spent much time in the Scriptures knows this. But even in the secular world this is understood. Truly hearing a command implies executing the command. Hearing and obedience go together.

He was heard. Jesus was heard because of his reverent submission. Because of his obedience which he had mastered through all his sufferings, notably the temptation in the wilderness at the start of his ministry and his Passion (suffering) at the end, running all the way from the Agony in the Garden to his death on the cross. Jesus was obedient because he heard His Master's Voice. We now hear the voice of Jesus and obey him, finding in him the source of eternal salvation. We look to Jesus, who says, “Come, follow me.” We follow the voice of our Pioneer and Forerunner. He has already entered into God's presence. We follow him until we too enter that presence. We follow him in faithful, persevering obedience. This is not a set of rules but a life of devotion to our Lord Jesus with whom we have been united in relationship.

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Do we hear his voice? Then let us follow him.

# BACK TO SCHOOL

Hebrews 5:11–6:3

#13, 2023.09.03

It is Labor Day weekend, the traditional end of summer. But the end of summer has been moving earlier and earlier into August. Many students have been back at school for some weeks now. Students have done various things over the summer. Some have taken extra classes, and so have stayed in learning mode. Others may have gotten a little out of practice in paying attention in class.

We spend a significant portion of our lives in school. I am sure for young folk it may seem like forever. It can indeed seem never-ending: preschool, pre-K, kindergarten, elementary, middle and high school, college, grad school. That's twenty years at least! Parents and teachers have high expectations that their charges will progress from learning the ABCs all the way to advanced topics. Therefore parents feel under pressure to pick the right preschool so their kids end up in the right grad school.

It was very different for my parents. My father walked two miles to a one-room schoolhouse in the next village. He left at 14, as far as the school went, and started work. My mother left school the week she turned 15, and likewise went to work. No preschool, pre-K, or kindergarten. No high school or beyond.

The Christian life is also a school in which we are expected to advance from infancy to maturity, from milk to solid food. Yet this is a surprise to some Christians who think that after you have said the prayer and made a decision for Christ, that is it. They don't see their Christian life as life-long growth and development. But we should grow and develop in our maturity throughout our Christian life. This certainly is the expectation of the author of Hebrews.

In our study of Hebrews we have moved into the central section of the letter, about Jesus as our great High Priest (4:14–10:25). Last week's passage (5:1–10) contrasted the old order of high-priesthood established in Aaron and the new order of high-priesthood established uniquely in Jesus after the order of Melchizedek. The preacher has much more to say about this, but first he takes a break to issue some exhortations and warnings (5:11–6:12). We have seen that this is a characteristic feature of Hebrews: exposition about Jesus is interleaved with exhortations and warnings to the readers. The preacher will return in chapter 7 to a detailed exposition of Jesus as high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The lengthy break can be divided into several sections. Today we look at just the first section (5:11–6:3), then will return to the rest in February. This first section in turn has two parts: 5:11–14 and 6:1–3.

## I. Milk or Solid Food? (5:11–14)

For this first paragraph here is Eugene Peterson's rendition from *The Message*:

**I have a lot more to say about this, but it is hard to get it across to you since you've picked up this bad habit of not listening. By this time you ought to be teachers yourselves, yet here I find you need someone to sit down with you and go over the basics on**

**God again, starting from square one—baby's milk, when you should have been on solid food long ago! Milk is for beginners, inexperienced in God's ways; solid food is for the mature, who have some practice in telling right from wrong. (Heb 5:11–14 *The Message*)**

Now as we work our way through the text I will, as usual, follow the NIV.

**We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. (5:11 NIV)**

*We have much to say about this:* the preacher wants to expound the high-priesthood of Jesus in considerable detail. He has much to say, but he faces two impediments: the topic and his hearers. Firstly, the topic itself is difficult to explain. If any of you have tried to study this letter in depth or teach it, this may amaze or amuse you, because the letter so far has been hard to understand and explain. Is he really saying that the hardest is yet to come?

The second and greater impediment is the preacher's audience. They "no longer try to understand." Literally, they have become sluggish or lazy in hearing. Eugene Peterson puts it so well: "you've picked up this bad habit of not listening." I am sure some teachers have been thinking this of some of their students returning after the summer break.

Again and again we have seen that hearing is a major theme in this letter. Specifically, hearing means to pay attention to what God has said: the living word of the living God. God spoke in the past through the prophets, and that word still speaks as the Scriptures—Israel's Scriptures, our Old Testament. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." But we have seen that the wilderness generation did not listen, and they did harden their hearts. They failed to enter God's rest; they did not enter the Promised Land. Their example hangs over this letter. God has now spoken more fully in his Son, to whom we all should pay attention. The preacher does not want his current hearers to be like those who died in the wilderness. They failed to complete their journey. The preacher is determined to keep his brothers and sisters moving towards their destination, moving towards that goal of entering into God's presence, where Jesus already is. So he tries to shake them out of their stupor by shaming them:

**In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! (5:12)**

He shames them by comparing them to babies. None of us likes that! They have been Christians for a considerable time. They should by now have mastered the basic material about Christ and already be teaching others. But they have regressed. They have gone back to the milk stage. They are just infants. Instead of teaching others, they themselves need a teacher. They need to go back to the beginning

and go over the ABCs again. They need to go back to preschool.

The metaphor here of milk and solid food is a familiar one, used elsewhere in Scripture to contrast immature and mature Christians. The preacher contrasts the two diets:

**Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (5:13-14)**

These two verses present four contrasts. The life-stage: infant vs. mature. The diet: milk vs. solid food. The learning method. And the capability or skill acquired. We expect milk-drinking infants to have limited capability. But we don't expect them to stay in that state. We rejoice in their expanding capabilities. We delight when they take their first step. We capture it on video, even if it is immediately followed by an abrupt sitting-down. But we expect that they will develop to taking two steps, then three... But we would be very concerned if, having learnt to walk, they went back to a single step then sat down. Teachers may now be faced with students who have regressed over the summer. The preacher is concerned that his hearers have regressed in their capabilities.

So what are the capabilities that he is looking for in his hearers? His observations about the milk-drinking infants and the solid-food-eating mature adults should be taken in parallel, the one being the negative counterpart of the other.

The milk-drinking infant "is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness." We don't expect an infant to be acquainted with astrophysics. We don't expect a new believer to be acquainted with sophisticated theology. We don't expect young children to have a finely-tuned sense of right and wrong, of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They have to learn that it is not alright to hit Annie, or take Jonny's toy. They have to learn that it is good to share.

Robert Fulghum's book *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (1986) became a surprise best-seller. Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Don't take things that aren't yours. And more.

As young children grow up we expect them to attempt these simple rules. Don't take things that aren't yours. Initially they may fail more often than succeed, but with practice they will learn how to share their toys and not take the toys of others without asking. They will thus become acquainted with the rules of good behavior not just mentally but, more importantly, experientially. They will not just know the rule, but actually do it. Parents hope that they will come to do it automatically, instinctively, without thinking, because it has become ingrained in them. It has become part of their being.

The milk-drinking Christian can initially be excused for not being acquainted with certain teaching. But we expect them to progress and become acquainted by doing. The preacher expects experiential acquaintance with the teaching about righteousness. What is this righteousness? This is not abstract systematic theology. It is not righteousness as the word is used in Romans, for example. It is not Christ's righteousness imputed to us. Its meaning is clarified by the companion verse (14).

The mature have moved on to solid food. They "by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil." So, the message about righteousness is the discernment of good from evil,

or, more generally, of the good thing from the bad thing. This can apply at a basic level: it is a good thing to share your toys; it is a bad thing to hit your brother. It can apply at an advanced level in all the moral choices which we face as Christians. How do we develop this skill of moral discernment? It takes practice.

Whether or not Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000-hour rule is true, it takes practice to learn anything. Often prolonged practice. Repetitive practice builds up muscle memory, whether for a sport or playing a musical instrument or some other skill. We train our bodies until they instinctively behave a certain way. A few years ago I watched Shawn and Ryan Hinn throwing a baseball back and forth to each other. I marveled at their skill, at how effortlessly, accurately, and far they threw the ball. A lot of muscle memory remained from their days playing college ball. I am sure some of our youth spend many hours practicing a skill, training themselves by constant use until it becomes habitual.

Similarly, developing moral character takes practice. We develop moral muscle memory by repeatedly doing the right thing. But if we repeatedly do the wrong thing we become inured, we become insensitive to right and wrong.

The milk-drinking infant is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness, has not even started such learning. Though the preacher is speaking in generalities here, it is clear from his rhetoric that he expects his hearers to have moved beyond this stage. They have been Christians long enough that they should have advanced.

Teaching about righteousness is equated with discernment of good and evil, of right and wrong. It is about making the right moral choices. It is about living righteously, the way that God intends us to live. The way he intends us to live, first, as human beings created in his image. Then, more particularly, how he intends us to live as followers of Jesus.

The mature are those "who by constant use have trained themselves." More literally, this is "by constant use have faculties trained." *Faculty* has a wide range of meaning. The meaning here is of our senses. We have the faculty of hearing, of seeing, of tasting. It then means our capacity to discern. We taste whether something is sweet or sour or salty. We discern the sounds we hear as a recognizable language. Sadly, Covid has impacted some people's faculties: loss of taste, loss of hearing, including some in our own body. This capacity for discernment extends to the ability to make moral decisions, to discern whether something is good, beautiful, and true, or whether it is bad, evil, and wrong. Indeed, from the Greek word for faculty we get our English word *aesthetic*, meaning the sense of what is beautiful and good.

Our faculties need training. We are born with them untrained. It is a wonder to watch young children develop their faculties—the faculty of language, for example. They start by imitating what they hear. Sue and I know children who are being raised bilingual and trilingual. We have watched them grow up. We have observed them learn to differentiate the various languages. At first, they get the languages mixed up in a single sentence. But over time, with practice, they learn to sort them out, to differentiate them. The human brain is amazing. Its neuroplasticity makes it responsive to training.

Our moral faculties need training. The mature person has faculties that are trained. The word translated *trained* here is the word

from which we get gymnasium. I am sure that some of our youth are doing serious training workouts in the gym. Others of us are just trying to hang on to a modest level of fitness. I log my bike rides on Strava and track my deteriorating times as I age.

Life is a gymnasium in which our faculties get a work out. This training is gained through constant use. The goal of such training and practice is so we can discern and make the right moral choices. Through this we become mature.

Our faculty of moral decision-making develops through training and constant use. How do we gain this training? We are trained by being tested by the circumstances of life. This includes trials and temptations. We have already seen in Hebrews that testing and tempting are the opposite sides of the same coin. They are an expected part of life. Even Jesus was tested. He was tested or tempted in every way, just like us, but without sin (4:15). He suffered when he was tempted (2:18). He learned obedience from what he suffered (5:8). Through testing we become mature.

The milk-drinking infant's lack of acquaintance with moral decision-making is due to a lack of testing. Our moral character requires testing in order to develop. Adam and Eve lived in blissful innocence in the garden. They knew what was good and true and beautiful. They didn't know anything else. They had a perfect aesthetic. The liberating innocence that Eve had is beautifully imagined by C. S. Lewis in *Perelandra*, the second book of his sci-fi trilogy. They knew what was good, including that the fruit of one tree was off-limits. Eve "saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye" (Gen 3:6). In this she was correct, because this was true of all the trees that God had planted in his garden (2:9). But God had spoken, and his word said that they should not eat of this one tree. They did not need to eat of it. They did not need the knowledge of good and evil. They had God's word to simply keep. And they had an abundance of trees from which to eat fruit.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart." But Eve listened to a different voice, and she chose to do what was not good. The Bible traces humanity's confusion over good and evil, right and wrong, noble and base to this primeval act of disobedience, the failure to hear God's word.

Ever since, humanity has been in need of developing the ability to distinguish good and evil. God gave Israel his Law, which was a great gift. It told them what was good and evil, right and wrong. The other nations did not have this gift. Under the new covenant God has put his Spirit in us to sanctify us. We are already sanctified, set aside as holy, when we come to Christ and are in him. But there is also an ongoing lifelong process of sanctification as God's Spirit transforms our character to make us more and more like Jesus. This includes restoring the ability to differentiate right from wrong, good from evil, and the resolve to choose and do the right. As we grow into maturity we develop faculties trained by constant use to distinguish good from bad. We develop the habits to persevere in what is good, hearing the living word of the living God. We persevere in faithfulness.

### Moving on to Maturity (6:1-3)

In the second paragraph the preacher pivots from a description of those who are mature to exhort his hearers to themselves move on to such maturity:

**Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so. (6:1-3 NIV)**

The preacher gives a two-fold exhortation, and, as usual, he includes himself: let *us*. Let us move beyond the basics about Christ and let us be taken forward to maturity. Eugene Peterson colorfully renders this as "let's leave the preschool fingerpainting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art" (*Message*). Parents are proud to put their pre-schooler's finger-painting on the fridge, but we expect to see great works of art in a museum—though in some museums one does wonder! Here at PBCC we are pleased to feature the work of both children and adults in our Art in the Auditorium.

There is nothing wrong with the elementary teaching about Christ. It is good and beautiful and true. But it comes time to move on from preschool to kindergarten and far beyond. The use of the passive in "let us be taken forward" suggests that it is God who moves us on towards maturity as we hear his voice and follow in obedient faithfulness.

We move on from the foundation that has already been laid. We don't need to lay it again. A foundation is essential for any building or other project. It needs to be strong and well-set so it can properly support what is built on top of it. But there comes a time to move upwards from the foundation to the structure itself. The preacher lists six items that form this foundation, which we can equate with the elementary teachings about Christ, the ABCs. They are given as three pairs, referring to three stages of the Christian life.

The first pair is "repentance from dead works and faith in God." Repentance and faith. This two-fold call lies at the heart of the gospel. We hear the good news of what God has done in Christ. In response we turn *from* and we turn *to*. In repentance we turn *from* our existing ways, our works and deeds that lead to death. In faith we turn *towards* God, hearing and accepting his good news and placing our faith in Jesus, giving him our allegiance and loyalty. Repentance and faith: this is the very start.

The second pair is "baptisms and laying on of hands." There is debate about the first item here. Why is it baptisms plural? Many translations, including NIV, interpret this to mean cleansing rites for ritual purification. These were of major concern to Jews. Alternatively it can be understood as Christian baptism. We read many times of Jesus or the apostles laying hands on people for various reasons. The apostles did so to invoke the Holy Spirit or to initiate or confirm someone for particular service. It seems to me best to understand these two terms as initiation rites. These are rites of passage which mark the transition from outside to inside the household of faith. In the Orthodox church baptism is followed immediately by chrismation, anointing with oil to seal the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is viewed as a continuation of the apostolic practice of laying on of hands. So these two practices mark our incorporation into the family of God in Christ Jesus.

The third pair is "resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment." We believe that Jesus, whom God raised from the dead in the middle of time, is the firstborn of all his followers who will be raised from the dead at the end of this age. Also at the end of this age God will

sit in final judgment. These two events, together with the return of Christ, usher in the new age, the final age in which all evil has been dealt with and removed, when God and his people dwell together. We affirm these two items in the creed: “from where he shall come to judge the living and the dead...I believe in the resurrection of the dead.”

These six items are vital truths; they are fundamental; they are foundational truths. But we move on to learn more. And as we learn more we are taken forward to maturity. This is a lifelong process.

It might seem that the preacher is harsh on his audience, that he has little confidence in them. He has shamed them by calling them infants who have reverted to drinking milk. But it is better to take these verses as a serious wake-up call. He is actually confident that his beloved hearers can rise to the challenge: “God permitting, we will do so” (3). We *will* move on to more difficult topics and, doing so, be carried forward to maturity.

In 6:9-12, after a severe warning, he will express more fully his confidence in them: “we are convinced of better things in your case” (9). And he will tell why he feels the need to shake them up: “We do not want you to become lazy,” where *lazy* is the same word used in 5:11 of *sluggish* hearing. He has accused them of being lazy in hearing, then says he did this so that they not become lazy. He has hit them hard because he is confident that they will respond to his challenge. That they will show him that they really are moving on towards maturity, that they really are listening. He stirs them up to faithful perseverance. To not be like the wilderness generation that stopped listening and hardened its heart. This is the mark of a good teacher. He motivates them to advance: let us move on. He doesn’t ridicule them so as to plunge them into discouragement or anger or resentment. He has shamed them in order to motivate them to move forward.

Our Scripture reading (Eph 4:11-16) includes the same metaphors of infant and mature. This passage that has been of great significance in the self-understanding of the PBC churches, both in Palo Alto and here in Cupertino. Among the gifts that Christ has given the church, his body, are pastors and teachers. Their role is to equip his people for works of service. The word translated equip here is to get something or someone ready for service in its intended purpose. For example, it is used for the disciples mending their nets by the Sea of Galilee so they can go back out fishing that night. We all have different gifts, given by the Spirit. We all have a part to play in ministry. When we are each playing our part the body will be built up. Indeed, as it is rooted in Christ, the body builds itself up in love. As we grow in faith and knowledge of Jesus we become mature, and are no longer infants.

The preacher wanted his audience to go back to school. He feared they had regressed in their transition from infancy to maturity. This schooling was not simply to give them head knowledge. It was to shape their character.

As followers of Jesus we are in a lifelong school. One of our PBCC family values is Devotion to the Word. Devotion to the Scriptures which are God’s word. What God spoke in the past though the prophets was written down in Israel’s Scriptures, our Old Testament.

What God spoke more fully in his Son has been written down in our New Testament. Together they form God’s word which still speaks: the living word of the living God. We seek to hear this word.

We have many opportunities here at PBCC to pay attention to this word. Women’s and men’s Bible studies will soon start up again. We have a long history of people being raised up in these groups, starting as students and maturing into teachers and leaders. The purpose of these groups is not just to learn more about the Bible, not just to build community. They do serve these purposes well. But they also should be growing us into maturity. They should develop our character.

It has been my privilege for over thirty years here at PBCC to be involved in a teaching ministry. I have seen over and over again the transforming effect of sitting as a group around the Scriptures in a slow, unhurried manner. Not looking for quick nuggets or slogans. But slow and steady transformation. This is the shaping of character. This is spiritual formation, which has become a popular concept but is embedded in the New Testament. We are formed into Christ-likeness. And our faculties become trained through constant use to live life wisely and well as we become like Jesus.

Capacity for spiritual formation has no necessary correlation to educational level. You don’t have to have gone all the way to grad school to be able to be shaped by the Scriptures. My father in Thailand, for example, ran a Bible School for lepers, then developed a training program for rural farmers and fishermen. At most they had a rudimentary four years at the village school. Many were functionally illiterate, but when they came to know Jesus they were powerfully motivated to learn to read so they could read their one book, the Bible. They were devoted to this, and their lives were transformed. They moved from infancy to maturity.

Above all in Hebrews, the preacher wants his hearers to persevere in the faith. He wants them to remain faithful to Jesus whom they follow. He urges them to look to Jesus, and he urges them to encourage one another because they don’t make this journey alone. Yes, they face trials and temptations. Yes, they are suffering. So did Jesus. He learned obedience through what he suffered. With trained faculties they can remain faithful, and choose the good, the beautiful, and the true. They can persevere faithfully in following Jesus all the way to the end.

I close with another Collect from the Prayer Book:

Blessed Lord, who hast 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 thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

1. Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.



# KEEP FAITHFUL AND CARRY ON

Hebrews 6:4-8

#14, 2024.02.18

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. This is a forty-day season in remembrance of the forty days that Jesus fasted in the wilderness. At the end of the forty days, when he was hungry, Satan tempted or tested him three times. Each time Jesus resisted the temptation and he passed the test. How did he do so? He remained faithful by remembering what God had spoken. He repulsed Satan each time by faithfully quoting what God had spoken in the Book of Deuteronomy. He remained faithful to God and his word, where previously both Adam and Israel had failed to do so. They were unfaithful and disobedient. Today, if *you* hear his voice, do not harden *your* heart! Don't be like them. Follow the example of Jesus. Keep faithful and carry on.

Tuesday was a day of wild partying: Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Carnival in Rio. It was a day of excess and consumption. In England, by contrast, the usual Shrove Tuesday pancake races were held. The next day was Valentine's Day, a celebration of love. But it was also Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent.

All over the world people gathered for Ash Wednesday services. Worshipers came forward to have ashes smeared on their foreheads in the form of a cross, to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. People recited Psalm 51:

**Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions. (Ps 51:1 NIV)**

Church choirs sang Allegri's beautiful setting of this psalm, the *Miserere*: Have mercy. Congregants recited the Collect for Ash Wednesday:

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made, and you forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins . . . , may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

At Lent we remember that we are "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love," as the hymn says. Despite us being dust, God desires relationship with us. This is why David could write Psalm 51. Convicted of his grievous sins, he sought the Lord, looking for mercy and forgiveness. Like David, we believe God's promise through Jeremiah: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer 29:13). God wants to be found by us. He delights to show mercy. But what if we stop looking for him? What if we turn our back on him? What if we stop being faithful?

We return today to the Book of Hebrews after a break of nearly six months. We come to the most controversial sentence in the entire book, indeed perhaps the most controversial sentence in the entire NT.

Anyone who preaches or teaches Hebrews will inevitably be asked

two main questions. First, who wrote the Book of Hebrews? That is the easy question with an easy answer: we don't know, but it wasn't Paul. Perhaps it was Apollos, or someone like him.

The second question is much more difficult: "What about Hebrews 6:4?" Some ask out of genuine curiosity. Some ask because they want to pigeon hole you, to know which theological box to put you in. Some of you have asked me this question, so I know that there are some here who have been anticipating today's sermon for a while. You're wondering how I will handle this difficult text; where I will land. But many of you, I'm sure, don't know what I'm talking about. What is the big deal deal with Hebrews 6, you wonder.

What is this sentence that is so controversial? Here it is, though NIV breaks it into two:

**It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (Heb 6:4-6 NIV)**

Here be dragons! This is the third of five so-called "warning passages" in Hebrews. It is by far the most difficult and the most controversial. It raises a host of questions. Is it possible for someone to lose their salvation? Are the people described in vv. 4-5 really "saved" or not? Is there really no way back? Many people bring to this text their theological framework. On one side, Calvinists say that since it is impossible to lose your salvation, the people in vv. 4-5 were not really "saved"; they only seemed to be so. On the other side, Arminians say that they were "saved," because it is possible to lose your salvation. At stake are the doctrines of eternal security and perseverance of the saints. I am not interested in approaching the text this way, from either side. So I may already disappoint some of you.

What I do want to do is see how this troubling sentence reads on its own, and then how it fits within the flow of the whole book, and particularly within the flow of the surrounding verses. This will be more faithful to the author's intention and, I think, be more beneficial for us. This sentence flows out of the previous paragraph. Unfortunately NIV, uniquely among the major translations, and to me inexplicably, omits a "for" with which the sentence begins (and another one at v. 7). The section 5:11-6:12 forms a tight unit. I had originally intended that we hear these 16 verses as three consecutive sermons. But changes to the preaching schedule mean that there has been a nearly-six month gap since the first sermon (5:11-6:3). I will seek to bridge that gap later in this sermon.

The sentence properly begins, "For it is impossible." But before the preacher tells us what is impossible, he describes at length those for whom this is impossible. He gives five descriptions of these people. The first four are positive. These certainly seem to describe

recipients of God's grace. I hope that they describe us.

The first description is *"those who have once been enlightened."* Light and darkness is a frequent metaphor pair in Scripture. We take light for granted, but this metaphor would have been especially meaningful in societies living without electric light. Indeed, the early church had a hymn, sung at the lighting of lamps in the evening: *Phos hilaron*, "Joyous light." God, who dwells in infinite light has shone his light on us.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

**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)**

To the Ephesians he wrote,

**I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Eph 1:18-19)**

God has already enlightened us, but Paul prays for yet more enlightenment. In both cases enlightenment leads to knowledge of God, and in particular, of what God has done in Christ. It is God himself who enlightens us, through his Spirit. When he does so it is like we pass from darkness to light, from night to day, from old to new, from death to life. This is exactly what it felt like for me 46 years ago, just after I turned 18. My physical sight had not changed, but now I could see. Now God was real to me, and I was filled with a passion to know him more. Now I could see Jesus, who is the radiance of God's glory and the Light of the world. It really felt like I passed from darkness to light. This enlightenment is the first stage of the Christian journey. It takes a divine act so that we can see and know.

Secondly, these people are those *"who have tasted the heavenly gift."* The gift comes from heaven, from God. Out of his generosity and love, he gives us numerous gifts. The gift of paying attention to us, and showing us favor. The gift of looking on us with kindness and love. The gift of showing us mercy and grace: withholding what we deserve, and giving us what we don't deserve. It is a heavenly gift not simply because that is where God is. But also it is a gift of heaven itself. God gives us a foretaste of heaven, of the realm where he is in all his glory.

God gifts us because he wants a relationship with us. He initiates. A gift expects a response. We respond to his initiative by receiving his gift. We don't simply sample it, nibbling at the edges. "Tasted" here implies fully experiencing the gift. Our reception and embrace of his gift confirm the relationship. A relationship requires nurturing and two-way communication. It requires reciprocity. We cannot possibly give on the same level as God. It is an unbalanced reciprocity. But we can give. We respond in gratitude and praise. David prayed, "Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise" (Ps 51:15). We respond in loyalty and service. We respond in faithfulness and obedience. God gives himself to us. We respond by giving ourselves to God. He is our benefactor, our patron. We sing his praises.

Thirdly, these people are those *"who have shared in the Holy Spirit."* The verb here is actually passive: those "who have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit." Again, God is the implicit subject here:

he makes us partakers. The preacher has already used this word "partakers" twice in chapter 3. We are "partakers of the heavenly calling" (3:1) and have become "partakers of Christ" (3:14). We actually participate in Christ. We participate in his death and resurrection, symbolized in baptism. We die to our old self and live to our new self. We participate in Christ's new resurrection life in the age to come, experienced right now in this age. This participation is through the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence in us.

Fourthly, these people are those *"who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age."* Again the word "tasted" does not mean merely sampled, nibbled around the edges, but fully experienced. We have experienced the goodness of God's word, or, better, God's good word. In Israel's Scriptures, with which the preacher is thoroughly familiar, God's good words are his promises of blessing, contrasted with his calamitous words warning of curses for infidelity and disobedience. We have already begun to experience the fulfillment of God's promises. How so? We are already experiencing the power of the coming age right now in this present age. Christ was resurrected into the new age. When we participate in Christ we too enter into the life of the new age, experienced now. This is what eternal life means: not that we live forever, though that will be true when death is fully defeated. But that we already live right now the life of the coming age. Christ's church is a colony of the future living now in the present. And it is a colony of heaven living here on earth.

These four descriptions certainly seem to describe those who have begun to follow Jesus. People will continue to debate whether these people were genuinely "saved" or not. In the context of Hebrews, it seems clear to me that these people had embarked well on their pilgrimage. I hope these phrases describe all of us, who have begun our journey of following Christ—our pilgrimage. If they don't I invite you to learn more. There are opportunities to do so. We've just heard that next Sunday afternoon a new round of Discovery Bible Studies will commence. A little later there will be another round of Discovery Dinners on Sunday evenings. These are opportunities to learn more about Jesus and what it means to follow him.

These four wonderful positive descriptions are followed by a troubling fifth one: *"and who have fallen away."* How can this be? How is it possible for those who have received and experienced all these good gifts to fall away? This falling away may be a deliberate act of apostasy, a decisive rejection of God and of Christ. Or it may be a gradual drifting away, imperceptible at first, but unmistakable at last. I'm reminded of the proverb: "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest..." (Prov 24:33).

God has initiated relationship with us, in Christ and through his Spirit. But relationship requires reciprocity and cultivation. This is true for married couples. It is true for parents and children. And it is true for us and God. Inattention makes the affections grow cold. The relationship can fizzle out through neglect, just as easily as through outright rejection.

Some Christians might wrongly wonder if this is happening to them. Many Christians go through periods of discouragement, even spiritual depression. Hearts and minds do not have the joy they once had. But still you keep trying to look to Jesus, and you long for better days. You pray with David, again in Psalm 51:

**renew a steadfast spirit within me.**

**Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Ps 51:10-12)**

If this is your prayer, you have nothing to fear. This sentence in Hebrews is not addressed to you. God will not cast away one who looks to him, however weak the gaze, however faint the heart. He sees you. He knows your heart, your mind, your desires. He knows that you love him, however low you feel.

But what about those who cast *God* away from *their* presence? This is what those who have fallen away have done.

Now we finally learn what is impossible for them. It is impossible to renew them unto repentance. In falling away from the path, whether by outright apostasy or gradually losing interest, they have denied the reality of God's transforming presence in their lives in Christ and through his Spirit. They have rejected his gifts and his promises. They have scorned his gift of relationship. They have given up on God, and cast him away.

The preacher spells out the implications of their actions: they have rejected Christ.

**To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (6:6b)**

In rejecting God's gift they are putting Christ back on the cross, as nothing more than just another rebel killed by Rome. Crucifixion was done in public, in the most visible locations, so that all could see the pain, the horror, the shame. It was the most degrading, dehumanizing, disgraceful manner of execution. It robbed the victim of every shred of dignity and honor. It expressed the total power of the executioner and the total powerlessness of the victim. In rejecting God and Christ, those who have fallen away place themselves among the executioners and the scoffing onlookers.

Yet this was God's beloved on the cross. Jesus, in his faithful obedience to his Father, submitted himself to his Father's will. That will was to submit himself to the absolute worst that a sinful, rebellious humanity could throw at him. That rebellion included his own people; indeed, they cried the loudest for his crucifixion. Jesus absorbed it all: the rejection, the pain, the shame, the cruelty. But he remained faithful to the end, crying out, "It is finished!" He had been faithful. He had submitted to his Father. He had submitted to the cross. He had even submitted to death. But he had not submitted to evil. He did not give in to disobedience and unbelief. He did not fall away. Therein lay death's undoing, for Death had no claim on him. So God vindicated him in resurrection. Then he invited all to come to him, and be baptized in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Those who did so were filled with the Holy Spirit, God's empowering presence. They began living life in the new age ushered in by the resurrection of Jesus and his entrance into the Father's presence, taking with him the offering of his own blood which purifies from sin.

God loved the world in this way: that he sent his One-and-Only, his Best-Beloved, into this sinful, disobedient world, so that everyone who gives their allegiance to this Jesus, our risen and ascended Lord, might have now the life of the age to come. This is his great gift to us. He initiates a relationship with us in Christ, through the enabling presence of his Spirit. This gift of relationship requires

appropriate reciprocity. We give back our praise and we give back our faithful obedience.

But to fall away from following Jesus is to reject all of this, and go back to Jesus on the cross as just another human being.

The preacher now gives an illustration of right and wrong reciprocity. Again, NIV omits the initial *for* which signals this as an illustration.

**[For] Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. (Heb 6:7-8)**

In this illustration there is one land which drinks the abundant rain from the heavens. It is sufficiently watered with the right amount of rain at the right time of year. But the land yields two different crops. Part A produces herbage, vegetation for grazing animals. This is evaluated as suitable for use. In return the land receives God's further blessing. Part B of the land produces thorns and thistles. This is evaluated as worthless. In return, a curse is imminent, and the end will be burning.

This is an evocative illustration for those familiar with Israel's Scriptures. Thorns and thistles are what the cursed ground produces after Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden (Gen 3:18). In the Song of the Vineyard, the Lord planted Israel as a vineyard on which he lavished great care. He looked for grapes, but the vineyard yielded thorns. Therefore the Lord ruined the vineyard and abandoned it to briars and thorns (Isa 5:1-7).

In this illustration of the two crops, reciprocity is expected. The land receives blessing from heaven and is expected to respond appropriately. Appropriate response brings further blessing. Inappropriate response brings curse and an end that is ultimately judgment. The implication is clear. God blesses us with his gifts, notably the gifts of relationship and of reconciliation. These gifts require our appropriate response of praise, of faithful obedience, of loyalty.

The preacher does not want his readers to repeat the experience of the wilderness generation, which he has described in detail in chapters 3-4. God brought them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea. He delivered them from the tyranny of Pharaoh who had enslaved them. The passage through the Red Sea is the great OT instance of salvation. God simultaneously saved his people and destroyed the enemy. But God's people did not immediately arrive at their destination. They had a two-fold destination. First, Mount Sinai to meet with God, for Moses had challenged Pharaoh in God's name, "Let my people go so that they may worship me." The second destination was the land flowing with milk and honey, the land of promise. The journey from Egypt to Sinai to Canaan required faith in God's promise and provision. The people grumbled and rebelled all the way. Finally, after the twelve spies brought back their report of the Land, the people rejected God and Moses. They requested new leadership that would take them back to Egypt, which they redefined as the land flowing with milk and honey. They wanted to go back to their old way of life. They sought to cast God out of their presence, out of their lives. They said their lives were better before God intervened with his grace. This is what "falling away" means

here in Hebrews.

Why do we have such trouble with this sentence (Heb 6:4-6)? Perhaps we have the wrong idea of salvation. I fear that too often salvation is viewed as transactional. You say the prayer, you profess faith in Jesus. In return you get your ticket to heaven. The transaction has been completed. Debate about this controversial sentence is often transactional: has the transaction actually been made or not? Are the people of vv. 4-5, described in those four ways, really saved or not? Had the transaction been made?

But this is not how relationships work. Business relationships may be transactional; there may be a *quid pro quo*. But personal relationships are not transactional. This does not mean that they are not reciprocal. God invites us into relationship with himself. He has gone to great cost to make relationship possible. He offers us the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and abundant life. He has demonstrated his great love for us in this: that he has sent his Best-Beloved into this dark world. The world rejected that gift in the most heinous way possible. But God invites us to come to this once-crucified, now risen and exalted Jesus, and find forgiveness and shalom. Acceptance of this gift is not the end, as if the transaction be complete. It is the beginning of a journey. There is a beginning and there is an end, a goal towards which we progress.

In the previous paragraph the preacher exhorts his readers:

**let us move beyond the elementary (beginning) teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity (6:1).**

Literally, let us leave behind the beginning. It is not that the beginning is bad, but it is only the beginning. The beginning is good because it is all about Jesus, but there is much more ahead. Therefore, “let us press on” (NASB), or “let us be taken forward” (NIV). It is God through his Spirit who wants to take us forward towards the goal. The goal is maturity, which means to have achieved the intended final state, to have arrived at the goal. It means to complete the journey. A few verses earlier Jesus is described as having attained that state; he was “made perfect” (5:9). He was faithful and completed the journey.

An unhealthy focus on getting people “saved” can lead to a focus on whether people are simply in or out. The preacher is more concerned with whether we are moving forward or not. If we are not moving forward then we are in danger of drifting away until we have completely fallen away.

How do we ensure that we are moving forward and avoid falling away? The author describes this Book of Hebrews as a “word of exhortation” or encouragement (13:22). It is essentially a written sermon. This is why I keep referring to the author as the preacher. As exhortation and encouragement, he repeatedly offers his readers two remedies. First, he keeps pointing us to Jesus. He puts Jesus before us for our consideration. He also shows that Jesus has gone before us as our forerunner (6:20). Jesus faithfully finished the course set

before him. He attained the goal (5:9). We follow him. This is why I have called this series *Christ Before Us* with both these aspects in mind. Christ before our gaze to consider, and Christ before us in the journey of faith.

Secondly, the preacher urges us to meet together to encourage one another. We do not make this journey alone. We are fellow pilgrims, encouraging one another to persevere. There is also a great cloud of witnesses who have already gone before us and finished the course. They are watching us and cheering us on. This is chapter 11.

One of the ways we meet together is by gathering on Sunday mornings, as we are doing now. Why do we do so? In our worship guide are these words:

We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. Our desire is to praise God and receive afresh his Spirit in us, to affirm that we are family reconciled one to another, and to be empowered to reach out to the world.

We refresh our memory. We reset our gaze on the triune God. He has acted decisively in Christ, and continues to be at work through his Spirit. We respond to his initiative by returning our praise. We refresh our bonds with one another, our fellow pilgrims.

David prayed, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love” (Ps 51:1). And God did. Though David was guilty of high-handed, deliberate sin of the worst kind, he had a heart after God. So God was pleased to show him mercy, and to restore him.

How much more do we have access to God’s mercy. We have a faithful and merciful high priest in God’s very presence. Within the larger flow of Hebrews, this exhortation and warning (5:11–6:12) is bracketed between two invitations to draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, there to receive mercy and find grace in our time of need (4:14-16; 10:19-22).

As we make our pilgrimage there will be times of discouragement, times of suffering, times when we might be tempted to give up. But we have in God’s presence at the throne of grace our great High Priest. We can go to him. He is merciful and faithful.

We have a merciful God who delights to show us love and kindness. May God, through his Spirit in us, keep us faithful as we carry on.

*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)*

# WELL DONE! CARRY ON

Hebrews 6:9-12

#15, 2024.02.25

Each weekday evening Sue and I watch the PBS Newshour. Every few weeks the program closes with “Brief but Spectacular,” a short five-minute segment featuring someone talking about their passion. Last Monday’s speaker was a high-school teacher. She started with why she loves being a teacher. Everyone can name their favorite school teacher and in doing so they usually smile. She loves being in a profession that puts a smile on someone’s face. A good teacher leaves lifelong memories.

I still remember the names of all five of my teachers during my four years at mission boarding school in Malaysia. I can still see their faces in my mind’s eye. I think of them with fondness. But that is not the case for the two half-year stints either side at school in Edinburgh when I was 5 and 10. I remember neither names nor faces of those teachers. Indeed I remember very little at all of those times.

What makes for a good teacher? A good teacher is excited about both their subject and their students. A good teacher believes in their students, and in their capacity to learn the subject. A good teacher inspires, challenges, encourages. A good teacher draws out the best in their students, inspiring them to aim higher. I hope that we all had some good teachers whom we still remember, and that the thought of them brings a smile to our face. We have some wonderful teachers here at PBCC as part of our church family.

The writer of Hebrews calls his work a “word of exhortation” or encouragement (13:22). It is essentially a written sermon, so I have been referring to him as the preacher. But he shows the characteristics of a good teacher. This is especially so in the section we have been working through, 5:11–6:12, on which this is the third and final sermon. Throughout the book, the preacher alternates between exposition and exhortation. Exposition of the superiority of Christ and his work: he is better. Exhortation to his readers to remain faithful and continue their spiritual pilgrimage to the end. 5:11–6:12 is one of the longer sections of exhortation.

The preacher identifies with his readers, the teacher with his students. Throughout he refers to himself in the plural *we* to enhance the rhetorical effect. Sometimes *we* refers just to himself. Sometimes he includes his readers in the *we*; at other times he addresses them as *you* plural. Only at the very end does *I* appear (13:19, 22-23). It is clear throughout that the preacher cares deeply about his readers. He has high aspirations for them. But this does not prevent him from challenging them with some harsh words.

He is excited about his material but is concerned about the abilities of his readers. He began this exhortation segment thus:

**We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. (Heb 5:11 NIV)**

What is he so excited about that he has so much to say? In the previous paragraph (5:7-10) he has described how Jesus remained faithful and obedient through suffering all the way to death. He was made perfect, that is he attained the final goal set for him. He

finished his course. He completed the mission for which God sent him into the world: to be the one true human who remained true to the very end. Thus perfected or completed, he became the fount of salvation, and “was designated by God to be high priest” (5:10). It is this high-priesthood of Jesus that the preacher wants to expound.

The high-priesthood of Jesus is in general a much-neglected topic. More attention is paid to his two other offices as king and as prophet. But his high-priesthood is the major theme of Hebrews. Indeed, it is only in Hebrews that this part of Jesus’s identity and ministry is presented.

After his current exhortation the preacher will reiterate that “Jesus has become a high priest forever” (6:20). And finally, more than half-way through his sermon, he will get to his main point:

**Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest. (8:1)**

We won’t get to his main point until July, in what should be our 19th sermon on Hebrews! He then gives a lengthy exposition of the high-priestly ministry of Jesus. Meanwhile he is preparing a foundation and clearing the way. Part of this means preparing his readers with an exhortation prior to the next round of exposition.

We looked at the first part of this exhortation (5:11–6:3) six months ago. He seems disappointed in his readers. They are slow of hearing: “you no longer try to understand” (5:11 NIV), or “you’ve picked up this bad habit of not listening” (Message). Literally it is “you have become lazy of hearing.” How many teachers have thought that of their students!

His readers have failed to make progress:

**though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. (5:12)**

The phrase “elementary truths” could be translated the “basic principles of the beginning,” or “the ABCs of the beginning.” They are not even at the beginning, but need to start again at the beginning of the beginning! They can’t stomach a meaty diet, because they have gone back to the milk stage. They have regressed to infancy. All because they have stopped listening.

But still the preacher wants them to progress from milk to solid food, from infancy to maturity or completion. He has the same framework as any good teacher: to take students forward from the beginning to the end, all the way to the final goal. And so he says, “leaving behind the beginning, let us be taken forward to maturity” or to completion (6:1). Despite his seeming exasperation at their poor attention, he is determined to get them moving forward all the way to the finish line. Again, just like any good teacher.

It is in this context that we had last week’s severe warning (6:4-8), which begins with “for.” Let us keep moving forward *for* if we don’t you are at risk of drifting away, or even falling away completely. He

wants to keep the forward momentum going.

So we come to today's text (6:9-12), the third section of this unit. It is in two parts. First the preacher expresses his confidence in his readers (9-10), and then his further aspiration for them (11-12). He is pleased with their progress, but wants them to go further. Just like any good teacher.

First, he expresses his confidence:

**Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. (Heb 6:9-10)**

Despite the severe warning in vv. 4-8, and the seeming disappointment in his readers expressed in the paragraph before that, he does actually think well of his readers. He addresses them as beloved, "dear friends" (NIV), the only time he does so in the entire book. How a teacher addresses their students is of great importance: it conveys whether or not the teacher has goodwill towards the students. This preacher realizes that, after his harsh words, he needs to reassure them of his kind intentions. Even though he has spoken like this, with the most severe warning in the entire NT, they remain his beloved readers. He has goodwill towards them. He is *for* them.

Likewise, how a parent addresses their children is of great importance. There will be times when discipline or warning is necessary. But afterwards, children need to be assured that they remain their parents' beloved. So parents, continue to assure them so.

The Father beamed with pleasure on Jesus and said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I well pleased." He did so when Jesus was baptized. He did so again at his transfiguration. I think he continued to think the same as Jesus was on the cross, though there no pronouncement from heaven. I think he looked down with pleasure and satisfaction as his beloved Son remained loyal to the very end, even to death. Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" He had reached the goal, finished the race, arrived at journey's end. I think the Father was profoundly satisfied in the faithfulness of his beloved Son. Now we are the Father's beloved, adopted into his family.

The preacher is convinced of better things for his beloved when it comes to salvation. In Hebrews salvation is not so much about getting "saved" at the beginning of our spiritual journey; it is about faithfully reaching the end. As I said last week, salvation is not transactional; it is relational. Throughout our earthly pilgrimage we are in relationship with God in Christ his Beloved and through his Spirit. And we are in relationship with one another as the Beloved Community. The preacher knows his beloved readers and their lives; he is reassured by their behavior.

They are the beneficiaries of God's love and favor. And they have reciprocated this love back to God. The preacher has evidence of this reciprocation. Their work is evidence of their love. They have shown this love for God by how they have treated the saints, their fellow believers in God's household. They have helped and are continuing to help their fellow Christians. The Greek verb translated "help" here is *diakoneo*, from which comes our English word *deacon*. They are engaged in acts of service, of ministry. Their vertical love for God is expressed horizontally in their love for others in the household of faith. And that love manifests in tangible acts of service, of help.

Their love is more than simple verbal expression. It is love expressed in concrete action.

Last week I talked about reciprocity. Here we need to expand our model of reciprocity. God has initiated relationship with us in Christ and through his Spirit. True relationship requires reciprocity. We love God in return, but God desires that we show reciprocity to him by loving and serving others. The early Christians referred to one another as brothers and sisters. They belonged to a new family. Family love is perhaps the strongest love: we will do anything for our close family members, whether children, parents, or siblings. The bonds between early Christians were of similar strength.

Alas, many families today are dysfunctional, filled with drama and relational breakdown. Sometimes this is the result of harsh parenting, or fragile mental health, or oppressive expectations. There are many reasons why families fail to be safe places, where family members do not feel secure.

At the age of five my mother went to live with her grandmother when her mother had a mental breakdown, and was institutionalized. I don't know if I ever met her mother, my maternal grandmother. I never heard my mother talk about her. But she talked often about her grannie. She had a secure home where she was loved. And she talked often about her two youth workers. I grew up knowing their names: Miss Smith and Kathy Brown. It was clear that they had a lifelong impact on my mother. Like good teachers.

The Christian family is a beautiful thing. Paul in his epistles is quick to address the various people who helped him as *beloved*. We form the Beloved Community. My mother always started her prayers, "Our loving heavenly Father." Hearing this so often helped shape my view of God as Father who loves us. Filled with his love for us, we love him back by loving others in the Beloved Community. I am grateful to those who have loved me by pulling me into their families in various places I have lived around the world. I am grateful to those of you who offer this love to others.

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). The early church became known for its love for one another. The non-Christian world found this very odd. Why would you love people this way with whom you did not share family connection? It was beyond their comprehension.

Thirty years ago a prominent sociology professor wrote a book, published by a major university press, about the sociology of the early church, *The Rise of Christianity*. At the time of writing Rodney Stark was an agnostic, but came to faith afterwards. He wrote of the early church:

The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs... Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to "all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.<sup>1</sup>

In the fourth century the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate

tried to revive paganism to compete with Christianity.

[He] agreed that Christians “devoted themselves to philanthropy” and urged pagan priests to compete. Julian soon found that the means for reform were lacking. Paganism had failed to develop the kind of voluntary system of good works that Christians had been constructing for more than three centuries; moreover, paganism lacked the religious ideas that would have made such organized efforts plausible.<sup>2</sup>

Paganism lacked a sufficient engine to drive such loving behavior to those beyond immediate family. But among Christians there was the engine: the Holy Spirit coupled with the understanding that fellow believers are kin, close kin, brothers and sisters.

The preacher knows of the acts of service of his readers in the past and in the present. He knows that this is the outworking of their love for God, and that they are doing so unto God’s name, that is, for God’s name’s sake. God’s name is exalted and honored by their love expressed in acts of service towards their new family. Seeing this, the preacher is confident of their standing and their future. You can sense him beaming with pride and pleasure, like a teacher delighting in evident transformation in her students.

He writes that God will not be unjust. God sees their behavior, he knows what is motivating it. He will not forget or ignore it. It is a great comfort to know that God sees what others may not see. Your service to others may be unseen, done in secret. But God sees. You may feel under-appreciated. But God sees and appreciates.

So the preacher is confident about his readers, and pleased about their love for God and for Christian neighbor. But he also wants to spur them on for the future. He next expresses his further aspiration for them:

**We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. (6:11-12)**

“We want” is a little weak for a verb that means intense desire. A good teacher doesn’t simply want something for her students. A good teacher has passion: “we passionately want” (NET) is more like it! The preacher has a deep passion for his readers that they keep doing what they have been doing.

He wants them to show the same diligence. Perhaps this also is the wrong word. “Diligence” conveys the sense of duty. What the preacher is calling for is “eagerness” (NET), an earnest looking for opportunities to fulfill a responsibility. Eagerness is about joy not duty. Eagerness sees an opportunity rather than an obligation. Eagerness is delighted to serve, not burdened. Many of you have shown great eagerness to lovingly serve, both within the household of faith and beyond. You have served at Grace Village, where the renovation of a third unit is well underway. It looks like there might be a fourth. Many of you have volunteered to serve when we host Rotating Safe Car Parks. You have helped with Abrahamic Alliance projects serving the poor and unhoused. You have been eager to participate in acts of service and love. Thank you so much.

Ramadan begins in two weeks. Come on Wednesday March 3 and hear Fouad Masri of Crescent Project share with us how to love our Muslim neighbors, especially at Ramadan.

The preacher deeply desires that his readers continue their eager

service. He qualifies this call with three forward-looking clauses. There is a forward horizon in the future to their present acts of service.

The first forward-looking element is “so that what you hope for may be fully realized.” Our hope, which is as yet unrealized, will become reality. Meanwhile we have full assurance of our hope. We hold on to the conviction that God will fulfill his promises. Eager service to the saints is thus an eschatological activity. It is action that has a foot in the future, because the church is an eschatological community. It is a colony of the future living now in the present, as well as a colony of heaven living here on earth. This is a striking way of thinking about our loving service to one another as our reciprocation of love to God. It is actualizing our hope, bringing the future into the present.

The second forward-looking element is “to the very end.” Again we have this word “end” which the preacher has used throughout this exhortation. Several times now he has expressed his desire that the readers keep moving forward from the *beginning* to the *end*, where the end is the goal, the terminus. The Christian life is a journey from beginning to end; it is a pilgrimage. We continue in loving service to others all the way to journey’s end. Journey’s end is also the realization of our hopes, the day when God’s promises are fulfilled.

The third forward-looking element is a purpose or result clause: so that you do not be or become *lazy*. *Lazy* is the the same word the preacher used at the beginning of his exhortation (5:11), where he despaired of his readers’ ability to understand because they had become lazy of hearing. The “diligence” or eagerness he is urging upon them is the opposite of laziness.

Instead of being lazy he wants his readers to be imitators of those who are ahead of them, those who are already entering into the realization of hope, those who are inheriting the promises.

Jesus told his disciples, “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). Western individuality prizes originality and authenticity. Ancient education valued conformity to an acknowledged master. Paul received a rabbinic training at the feet of Gamaliel, where he absorbed all that he could so as to become just like his master. No doubt he would have become a rabbi himself, a rabbi after the pattern of Gamaliel. But a new master encountered him, one whom he spent the rest of his life seeking to imitate. He sought to conform his life to Jesus. In turn he became a model for others. He told the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1 NASB). A truly authentic human is one who is conformed to Christ, for he is the true human.

The preacher calls his readers to imitate those who are inheriting the promises. Entrance into the inheritance and fulfillment of the promises lies at the end, the end of the spiritual pilgrimage. In Hebrews this is salvation. We do not immediately attain the promises when we start the journey.

The journey itself may be difficult. There may be suffering and hardships. There may be temptations to give up or we may lose focus and drift away. The preacher says that inheritance of the promises is “through faith and patience.” When the going is smooth it is easy to be faithful. It is another matter when the going is tough. That is when faithfulness is really called for. We remain loyal to Jesus even when it is difficult and we might doubt. We persevere. We can put

the two words together: throughout the days of our earthly pilgrimage we show *faithful perseverance* and *persevering faithfulness*.

Who are these people that are inheriting the promises? A prominent example is Abraham. God's promise to Abraham is the topic of the next paragraph (6:13-20) which we will look at next week. Later the preacher gives a long list of these people, chapter 11, often called the Hall of Faith. He brackets that chapter with a call for endurance or perseverance:

**You need to *persevere* so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. (10:36)**

**Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, . . .let us run with *perseverance* the race marked out for us. (12:1)**

The faithful saints of chapter 11 are a great cloud of witnesses, a stadium full of spectators. They have finished the course, and are now watching us run the race and are cheering us on. I attended a memorial service yesterday at PBC in Palo Alto. These familiar words were read, written by Paul at the end of his life:

**I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Tim 4:7-8)**

How do we nurture such faithful perseverance and persevering faithfulness? The preacher continues in Hebrews 12:

**fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:2)**

Christ before us. Christ before us as the object of our gaze and devotion. And Christ before us as the one who has gone before us and finished the course. He has entered into God's presence. And we meet together regularly to encourage one another to keep moving forward in this journey to the finish line.

Last week we noted that the severe warning (6:4-8) has implications for the doctrines of eternal security and perseverance of the saints. The preacher is determined that his readers persevere all the way to the end. In this current exhortation he has taken his readers on a roller-coaster: initial doubt about their capacity for learning, a challenge to move forward with him, an extreme warning of the consequences of not doing so, ending with confidence and passionate desire for them to continue their current progress. He loves them dearly and believes them capable of faithful perseverance. The saints will persevere.

Well done, Beloved Community! Let us carry on together.

*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

1. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 86.

2. Stark, *Rise*, 189.



# OUR ANCHOR WITHIN THE VEIL

Hebrews 6:13-20

#16, 2024.03.03

It was a dark and stormy night. We've had a few of these lately! The Tahoe area has them this weekend. When the storms hit we hope that our roofs are secure and won't leak. We hope that trees won't be uprooted, but stay firmly anchored in the ground. High winds and downed trees have caused multiple widespread power outages for most of us over the past year or two. In every high and stormy gale we hope to stay safe and secure, even if by candlelight.

The apostle Paul endured many dark and stormy nights and days. His high and stormy gale lasted two full weeks. He was being taken under military escort from Judea to Rome, there to appeal to Caesar. His ship was struck by a ferocious storm and driven helplessly across the high seas. Luke gives a vivid, detailed, and lengthy description of the storm and the resultant shipwreck (Acts 27).

In the middle of the fourteenth night the sailors sensed they were nearing land. Now there was a new danger, that they would be dashed to pieces against the rocks. So they dropped not just one but four anchors from the stern of the ship, and they longed for daylight.

Earlier this year I worked through Luke's fascinating account in close detail. This was not just idle curiosity on my part. In May, 42 of us will follow in Paul's footsteps for the final part of his journey to Rome, beginning on the island of Malta. There we will visit the traditional site of the shipwreck.

Paul was on a ship bringing grain from Egypt to Rome. These were the largest ships of the day. I learnt that each ship carried several massive anchors for emergency use. These had a cross-beam of lead that could weigh several tons. So great was the emergency facing Paul's ship that the sailors lowered four of these heavy anchors, hoping to keep the ship from the rocks. Several of these lead beams have been found near the site.

So, anchors have been much on my mind for the past two months.

One the earliest Christian symbols is the anchor. Many depictions of anchors have been found in the catacombs on the outskirts of Rome. Sometimes the anchor is combined with other Christian symbols such as fish or a cross.

The anchor is an obvious symbol of safety and security. In Christian use it is a symbol of hope. The image is used in the well-known hymn that begins "My hope is built on nothing less..." "In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil." This imagery comes from today's passage, Hebrews 6:13-20. The preacher of Hebrews connects the anchor motif to Jesus's ministry as high priest, which is the main point of his written sermon.

Earlier the preacher wrote that Jesus "was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek" (5:10). Rather than immediately give an exposition of this high-priesthood of Jesus, he switched to exhortation (5:11-6:12), which we've covered in my last three sermons. He ended that exhortation with a call "to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been

promised" (6:12).

Who are these people who through faithful perseverance and persevering faithfulness inherit the promises? Exhibit A is Abraham. The preacher uses the example of Abraham to begin a transition back to where he left off in 5:10, back to Jesus as high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

## 1. Abraham (13-15)

Divine promise and fulfillment were exemplified in Abraham:

**When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. (Heb 6:13-15 NIV)**

God's promise to Abraham is of fundamental importance in the Biblical narrative, in the whole history of redemption. It kicks off the storyline into which we are incorporated when we come to Christ. Why is this promise to Abraham so important?

When God created the first humans, he commanded and enabled them to fill the world with people. He placed them in his sanctuary, the Garden of Eden, there to live in his presence. But due to human disobedience God expelled them from the garden. They filled the earth with evil and violence. So God wiped the earth clean with the Flood, and started again, this time with Noah and his three sons: "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth." They did: the sons of Shem, Ham, and Japheth spread out across the earth, by their clans and languages, in their lands and nations—70 nations in all. But people resisted scattering, and gathered together to build a tower to heaven, the Tower of Babel.

So a second time, God began over again. He couldn't wipe the earth clean again with a Flood, for he had made a covenant never to do so again. He did something different. He took one person from that wicked society and called him to leave everything behind. He made him a promise:

**The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.**

**"I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;**

**I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.**

**I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;**

**and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3)**

The rest of the Bible is the fulfillment of this promise. Yet the likelihood of fulfillment seemed remote. Abram and his wife were both old: Abram was 75, Sarai 65. She was barren; she had no child. The

raw material God had to work with, this old couple, was *not* promising. Nevertheless God made a promise. He committed himself to transform Abram into a new people in the midst of the existing 70 peoples, and through him to restore blessing to a world that was in rebellion against him.

Abram obeyed God and journeyed to Canaan, where God made another promise to give his descendants that land. This of course assumed that the promise of descendants would be fulfilled.

“And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.” But it was not an easy wait. It was a long wait, full of ups and downs.

Some years later, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Gen 15:1-6), God told him, “I am your very great reward.” But Abram reminded God, “what can you give me since I remain childless? ... You have given me no children.” God invited him to look up and count the stars: “So shall your offspring be.” He repeated the promise.

Abram responded in faith: he “believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6). Abram took God at his word. He accepted that the Lord was reliable and trustworthy, that he would do what he said he would do, that he would fulfill the promise. However unlikely this seemed. Even though he could see no way it would happen. God equated this response of faith with righteousness. It was the right response within the relationship between the Lord and Abram. The Lord’s righteousness lay in doing what he said he would do. It meant being faithful to his word and to his character. Abram’s righteousness lay in completely trusting that God would do what he said he would do.

Ten years after arriving in the land, when she was 75 and Abram 85, Sarai lost patience in waiting. She gave Abram her maidservant Hagar who bore him a son. At last, aged 86, he was Father Abram. But Ishmael was not the son of promise. Nevertheless, the Lord would bless Ishmael and his descendants. From them came the Arab peoples. Muslims trace themselves back through Ishmael to Abraham; thus Islam is one of the Abrahamic faiths. Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, begins next Sunday. Muslims will be particularly sensitive to spiritual matters. I invite you to come on Wednesday evening to hear from Fouad Masri, founder of Crescent Project, how to love our Muslim neighbors. Not all Arabs are Muslims. There are many Arab Christians. There are many Palestinian Christians. These have been grafted into Abraham’s line through Isaac by faith.

Thirteen years later, when Abram was 99, the Lord repeated his promise, and this time made a covenant that he would be God to him and his offspring forever. This covenant was sealed by circumcision of all males. He changed Abram’s name to Abraham, “father of a multitude.” He also changed Sarai’s name to Sarah, “princess.” He announced that the promised son would be born the next year. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (18:14).

Finally, “Sarah...bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him” (21:2). “And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.” He was 100. He had been waiting for 25 years. His waiting was over. Or was it?

Some years later God tested Abraham. What a test it was! The Lord gave him a new command, one with similar features to the original call:

“Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go

to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” (Gen 22:2)

How could this be? Surrender the fulfilled promise back to the Lord? Give back the long-awaited gift? But Isaac was only the first part of the promise. He was the promised son, but if he died there would be no great nation from him. But Abraham did so; he was faithful and obedient, as he had been at the beginning.

Most of you know the rest of the story. Christians call it the Sacrifice of Isaac. Jews call it the Akedah, the Binding. The account is full of pathos, of wrenching emotion that pulls on the heart strings. We read this almost-unbearable conversation between son and father:

“Father?”

“Yes, my son?”

“The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

And the two of them went on together. (Gen 22:7-8)

God would provide. How, he did not know. But Abraham was faithful and obedient. And God did provide, but not until the very last moment, when Abraham had knife in hand. God stopped him: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (22:12).

Abraham called the place *Yhwh Yireh*, “The LORD Will Provide.” Or Jehovah Jireh, as many of us grew up knowing the name. Then the Lord repeated the promise, this time swearing an oath:

“I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore...and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” (Gen 22:16-18)

The preacher quotes from the Greek translation: “I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.” The promise was not just for a son but for a numerous people.

It had been perhaps 35 years since God first called Abraham. His faith had wavered at times. Now it was unshakeable. Abraham trusted God to the extreme. He considered God to be utterly reliable. And so he became the paragon of faithfulness, the model for God’s people to imitate. After waiting patiently, he had received what was promised.

The apostle Paul also presents Abraham as the exemplar of faith. He believed in “the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not... being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised” (Rom 4:17, 21).

## 2. Oaths (16-18)

The next paragraph (6:16-20) is a single, complex sentence in the original, far beyond the tolerance of English readers! We’ll break it into two sections.

First the preacher elaborates on the theme of oaths:

People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the

**oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. (6:16-18)**

In an ideal world people's every word would be trustworthy and reliable. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "do not swear an oath at all" (Matt 5:34). Instead our word should be straightforward and true. In the parallel passage at the end of Matthew he chastised the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical use of oaths, by which they tried to weasel out of their verbal commitments (Matt 23:16-22).

We don't live in an ideal world where every word is reliable and true. And so in certain situations people are required to take an oath and then give sworn testimony. "Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? So help me God!" Usually the person taking the oath is required to place a hand on the Bible or some other sacred book that is considered to be a superior authority. An oath confirms what is said, so that there can be no dispute. False testimony under oath is perjury, often a more serious offense than the original case.

The OT contains numerous oaths. Even God took an oath. His word is always reliable and true. He doesn't need to bind himself by an oath to ensure he speaks truth. He is truth. It is impossible for him to lie. It is impossible for him to be false. He is not devious with his words. He does not mislead. He does not overpromise and underdeliver.

Satan, the adversary, is the complete opposite, as Jesus told the Jewish leaders. He likened them to the devil, who is "not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan's native language is falsehood, deception, lies, subterfuge. His speech flows from his character.

God's native language is truth and integrity. His speech also flows from his character. He needs no oath to bind himself to truth. Why then did he bind himself with an oath? He did so for *us*. He did so for two reasons.

His first reason for the oath is to demonstrate very clearly, beyond a shadow of doubt, as if in a court of law, the unchanging nature of his purpose. He demonstrates this to *us*, to all who are inheriting the promise. His purpose is to incorporate a vast people into this promise. His purpose is that the children of Abraham, born according to promise, fill the world, as the stars fill the sky and the sand fills the seashore. He bound himself with an oath so that all who are inheriting the promise will have unshakeable confidence in God, that what he said he will do, he will do. He wants us to have the same faith as Abraham.

The second reason for the oath attached to the promise is so that we have strong encouragement and comfort. We have fled for refuge from the coming storm, from judgment at the end of this age. In the OT, when the Israelites entered the land under Joshua, God designated six cities of refuge to which people might flee. In the psalter God is often described as our refuge, a stronghold in time of trouble.

Earlier, in his first warning passage, the preacher warned, "How shall we escape [from just punishment] if we ignore so great a salvation?" (2:3). How shall we flee if we leave it too late? We flee *from* that coming judgment. We flee *towards* safety and salvation. When we flee to Christ for refuge we become heirs of promise: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29).

In our flight we grab hold of the hope that is laid out before us, as if grabbing a rope that stretches into the future. And our confidence in God's irrevocable purpose gives us strong encouragement to keep holding on to that rope, to keep holding on to hope. We need regular encouragement because the storms will hit. When they do we will be tempted to doubt the reliability of God and of his purpose. Tempted to doubt that he will do what he said he will do. Tempted to lose hope. Tempted to let go of the rope.

What is our refuge? What rope do we hold on to when the storms hit? It is hope that marks the path forward all the way to the fulfillment of the promise.

### 3. Hope (19-20)

Finally the preacher elaborates on this theme of hope:

**We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. (6:19-20)**

Hope serves as an anchor for our very being. It is firm and secure, well dug in. It will not give way; it will not come loose. This anchor enters within the veil, it passes through the curtain into the space beyond. This veil divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and later the temple. The tabernacle was God's dwelling place in the midst of his people. But access was restricted. A screen at the entrance of the courtyard excluded the people. A screen at the entrance to the tent excluded priests except those with duties inside. The veil excluded everyone, except once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went through the veil. There within the veil he sprinkled blood on the lid of the ark of the covenant to cleanse himself, the people, and the camp from sin and impurity, so that God could continue to dwell among his people. The sacred geography of the tabernacle was one of both embrace and exclusion.

But now our hope enters into the inner sanctum, into God's very presence. There it is firmly anchored and will not move. An anchor only works if something is attached to it, usually a ship or a boat attached by a rope or a chain. We are at the other end of that rope. We are firmly tethered to that anchor that is set within the veil.

Jesus our forerunner has already entered into that space. He remained faithful through every high and stormy gale throughout his life, and especially through his last dark night when he was betrayed, arrested, forsaken, tried, and sentenced. He was faithful, and is now the paradigm of faithful endurance.

God himself provided the Lamb. He did not withhold his Son, his one and only, whom he loved, Jesus. But gave him up for us all. Vindicated in resurrection and ascension, Jesus has passed through the veil into God's presence. His admission into that space is as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Here the preacher has

brought us back to his main point: Jesus as high priest. In due course we will learn that he has taken with him into the inner sanctum his own blood to sprinkle for purification from sin.

Our anchor there inside the veil is hope: the sure and certain hope that if we keep holding on to the rope Jesus will pull us towards the anchor. He will pull us to himself. For the anchor is Jesus.

What is your anchor? Is it set in this world? Or is it Jesus within the veil? There are many things in this world that we can anchor ourselves to. It could be to health, or wealth, or prosperity. It could be to family, especially children and their success. It could be to work with financial success or promotion. It could be to our own significance. There are so many things that may be good in and of themselves, but are inadequate as anchors. In high and stormy gales they do not hold. They fail and give way.

Abraham's faith gave way on several occasions. Fearful for his life, he passed his wife Sarah off as his sister—not once but twice. He heeded his wife's plan to bear a surrogate son through Hagar. But by the end of his spiritual odyssey of 35 years or so he had an unshakeable faith in God and in his word. His faith was firmly anchored in God.

I know some of you are weathering high and stormy gales. Some are in serious ill health, or facing alarming medical news. Some have major family issues. Your security has been rocked. Our hope which is Jesus is the only anchor strong enough to hold us through the fiercest storms.

Another symbol used by the early church was the boat or ship. The main space of a traditional church building is called the nave

because it is like an upturned ship (Lat. *navis*). The whole church is in the boat together. Jesus himself is not in the boat; he is within the veil. In the imagery of Hebrews he is the anchor to which the boat is securely tethered. As we make our pilgrimage through life, we will be beset by storms and tempests. We are not alone. We are all together in the boat as the body of Christ. We care for one another. We love one another. We encourage one another to remain faithful. We encourage one another to not lose hope. God's Spirit is present with us in the boat. And our boat is firmly anchored to Jesus, who is within the veil, where he serves as our merciful and faithful high priest.

**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. (4:16)**

Though the boat may be tossed around by the storms it will be secure. As long as we hold on to the rope, anchored to our hope, anchored to Jesus. He will bring us safely home. In every high and stormy gale, our anchor holds within the veil.

*So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast... May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thess 2:15-17)*

# THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

Hebrews 7:1-10

#17, 2024.03.10

We have made it through the most difficult and awkward part of the service. The offering used to be straightforward. After the Scripture reading the offering plate would be passed. At the same time a song was sung, usually chosen so as to transition from the reading to the sermon. But the Covid pandemic changed all that. We no longer pass the plate. Who carries cash or writes checks anymore? Most giving is done online and automatically with regular scheduled transfers. Does this make giving any less intentional? Yet we still talk about “ways to give.” Some refer to this giving as tithes and offerings, or as an act of worship. What to do with this now-brief moment in the service is a frequent topic of discussion at staff level.

Should we still refer to giving as tithing? Is this an appropriate word for Christians to use? Certain churches most certainly promote tithing and the blessings of tithing. Frequently they cite Malachi 3:

**Bring the full tithe into the storehouse... And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. (Mal 3:10 NIV)**

“Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!” is the motto. But this sounds transactional, quid pro quo. And it is driven from the human side, as if our tithing prompts God to reciprocate with appropriate blessing. But this seems the wrong way round. It is God who takes the initiative with us. We respond out of gratitude to the favor that he has already shown to us. We are the ones who reciprocate to him. He is not in our debt.

Last week we saw that God took the initiative with Abram. He made him a promise that he would give him a son who would become a great people. He would turn the barrenness of aged Abram and Sarai into fruitfulness. He would restore blessing to a rebellious world. “And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised” (Heb 6:12).

The book of Hebrews is interested in the relationship between tithing and blessing. But this comes in a surprising context, that of priesthood.

The central topic of the book is the high-priesthood of Jesus. Three times already the preacher has quoted Psalm 110:4, with reference to Jesus: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” He stated this in 5:6, and again in 5:10 that he was so designated by God. But then he took a sidetrack to exhort his readers to pay attention. He has much to say about this topic of priesthood and it is hard to make it clear. Last week’s passage ended with these words: “He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (6:20). He has brought his readers back to this main topic.

Now, at last, we come to the central teaching of Hebrews, the high priesthood of Jesus in the order of Melchizedek (7:1–10:18). We will be in this material for a considerable time.

Who is Melchizedek and what is his priestly order? This is the topic of today’s passage (7:1-10), the first unit of the long exposition

on priesthood. The passage has two sections. First Melchizedek is described (1-3), then his priesthood is compared to the later priesthood of the Levites in Israel (4-10).

## I. Melchizedek (7:1-3)

First the preacher describes Melchizedek and his order:

**<sup>1</sup>This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, <sup>2</sup>and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” <sup>3</sup>Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (Heb 7:1-3)**

This is one long sentence in the original. The subject is given first, “this Melchizedek,” and the verb is given at the very end, “remains a priest forever.” This is the main thought: Melchizedek remains a priest forever. In between subject and verb is a long list of attributes of this mysterious person. Apart from Psalm 110, the only other place Melchizedek is mentioned in Israel’s Scriptures is three verses in Genesis 14, which were part of our Scripture reading (Gen 14:13-24). The preacher draws on these three verses, reading them in the light of Ps 110:4, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

The background to that passage in Gen 14 is that Abram and Lot were both so prosperous that the land of Canaan could not support them both with their households and their flocks and herds. Lot chose to move down to the lush Jordan Valley, to the city of Sodom. He took himself out of the land of promise. Abram stayed in the land of promise, in the hill country. But the five kings of the Jordan Valley were defeated by four kings from Mesopotamia, who took away all their possessions, along with Lot and his possessions. When news reached Abram he immediately took action: he mustered all his retainers—318 of them, indicating his prosperity. Though all 318 were born in his household, one had not yet been born into his house: the promised son. Abram and his men pursued a long way and defeated the four kings. He returned with all the looted possessions plus Lot and his possessions.

When Abram returned, the king of Sodom came out to meet him, and also Melchizedek. The preacher, recounting this event, ignores the king of Sodom and pays attention only to the interaction between Melchizedek and Abram.

In 7:1-2a he gives an even briefer summary of the already brief record in Gen 14. He notes that Melchizedek was the king of Salem and the priest of God Most High. He was both king and priest. Both are roles of mediation but in different ways. The king represents the deity to the people. The priest represents the people in the cult and worship of the deity. A king-priest is a rarity in Scripture. In Israel these offices would be filled by different people from two different

tribes.

Next the preacher summarizes the meeting between Melchizedek and Abram. But he skips over the first detail, that Melchizedek brought out bread and wine. This does not serve the preacher's purpose. But this detail would be significant in subsequent theology and liturgy. From the early church through until today, Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine, together with Abel's offering of a lamb, and Abraham's offering of Isaac, have been seen as types prefiguring Jesus's offering of himself. Furthermore, the Orthodox icon of Righteous Melchizedek depicts him with a bowl or basket of bread.

When Melchizedek met Abram they exchanged gifts. Melchizedek took the initiative and gave Abram the gift of blessing. The preacher does not quote the actual blessing, as it does not serve his immediate purpose. But, for our purpose, it is worth reading:

he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
Creator of heaven and earth.

And praise [blessed] be to God Most High,  
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

(Gen 14:19-20)

Melchizedek's blessing was in two directions. First he blessed Abram, then he blessed God. The nature of the two blessings is different. His blessing on Abram was, as it were, a conferring of divine blessing. Melchizedek was priest of God Most High. In that capacity he was pronouncing the blessing of God Most High on Abram. Turning around, he blessed God Most High, whom he served as priest. Blessing in this direction takes the form of praise, as NIV translates. In this particular instance, God had blessed Abram by delivering the four kings into his hands, and by enabling him to retrieve Lot and all the possessions.

Abram responded to this blessing by giving Melchizedek a tenth of everything, presumably of all the captured booty that he has retrieved. This is the first tithe in Scripture.

Next, the preacher interprets the meanings of Melchizedek's name and title (7:2b). His name means *king of righteousness*. His title *king of Salem* means *king of peace (shalom)*. Righteousness and peace. Messianic expectation included that the coming Prince of Peace would rule with righteousness and justice (Isa 9:6-7). Righteousness and justice will be exemplified by the Lord Jesus.

Thirdly, the preacher “quotes” what Scripture does not say; he reasons from silence (7:3). From the silence of Genesis he derives four statements about Melchizedek.

First, he is without father, mother, or genealogy. This lack of genealogical information is very surprising for the whole book of Genesis is full of genealogies.

Second, he is without beginning of days or end of life. Again we have this pairing of *beginning* and *end* that featured in the prior exhortation. Melchizedek suddenly appears, then just as suddenly disappears after just three verses.

Third, Melchizedek resembles, or, better, was *made like* the Son of God. This likeness consists in having no genealogy and neither beginning nor end.

Fourth, the preacher draws the conclusion in the final clause, which at last contains the main verb: he remains a priest forever. In

reaching this conclusion he has no doubt also drawn on Psalm 110: “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” Throughout his reading of Melchizedek in Gen 14, the preacher has his eye on Ps 110:4, and on Jesus, who is now high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

We must be careful not to reverse the direction of conformity. Jesus was not made like Melchizedek. Melchizedek was made like the Son of God in having no beginning or end. The Son of God became incarnate as Jesus. This Jesus, now exalted at God's right hand, is now priest according to the *order* of Melchizedek, an order of eternal priesthood.

## 2. Greater than Levi (7:4-10)

In 7:4-10 the preacher invites us to consider how great this Melchizedek was. He is greater than the Levitical priesthood:

<sup>4</sup>Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! <sup>5</sup>Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. <sup>6</sup>This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. <sup>7</sup>And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. <sup>8</sup>In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. <sup>9</sup>One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, <sup>10</sup>because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor. (Heb 7:4-10)

How great was Melchizedek? He was so great that Abram gave him a tenth (6:4). Earlier the preacher said Abram gave him a tenth of everything (6:2), accurately quoting Genesis. Here he says Abram gave him a tenth of the plunder, that is of the recovered possessions. The word, used only here in the NT, means the best portion, “the choicest spoils” (NASB). It is the first-fruits that are usually reserved for the deity. In giving this to Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, Abram was tithing to God.

Immediately after Abram had given a tenth to God, the king of Sodom said to him, “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself” (Gen 14:21). These were the people and possessions that the four kings from Mesopotamia had captured and taken away, and which Abram had retrieved. Abram could have become even more prosperous. He could have interpreted this offer as God's blessing. He could have interpreted it as fulfillment of the blessing Melchizedek had just pronounced on him. “Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!”

But Abram declined:

“With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’” (Gen 14:22-23)

He had not pursued the four kings in order to enrich himself. He had gone to rescue his nephew Lot, even though Lot had voluntarily removed himself from the land of promise.

It is immediately after refusing to enrich himself that the Lord appeared to him, and said,

**“Do not be afraid, Abram.  
I am your shield,  
your very great reward.”** (Gen 15:1)

Abram’s mind was firmly set not on riches but on the promise. He reminded God that the promise had not yet been fulfilled. God repeated the promise, Abram believed the Lord, who reckoned to him this response of faith as righteousness, as the right response within the relationship. Right relationship with the Lord was his very great reward. The Lord gave himself to Abram, a gift far better than the world’s riches.

Abram had the right priorities, including in his interaction with Melchizedek. How great was this Melchizedek? So great that Abram acknowledged him as priest of God Most High, and gave him the tithe designated for God. He did not do this to get a blessing. The blessing came first. Abram responded with the tithe.

In v. 4 the preacher has referred to Abram as an individual in this encounter with Melchizedek. But in the last word of v. 4 he refers to him as the patriarch, as the progenitor of a great clan. The promise had not yet been fulfilled when Abram met Melchizedek. But for the rest of this paragraph, the preacher treats Abram as already the patriarch. Though even Isaac had not yet been born, he considers all Israel to be present in Abram’s body when he met Melchizedek. This is a case of corporate identity, of corporate solidarity, that is hard for Western individualists to understand. We don’t think this way.

From Abraham would come Isaac, then Jacob and his twelve sons, from whom would come the tribes of Israel. Of these, one tribe in Israel would be chosen for priesthood, the tribe of Levi. Levi was given no inheritance in the Land. It had no territory; they grew no crops; they herded no sheep or goats. Instead, they looked after the tabernacle. Within the Levites, the Lord set aside Aaron and his descendants to be priests within the tabernacle. The twelve tribes gave their tithe to support the one tribe of Levi. Within this tribe the Levites tithed their tithe to support the priests, Aaron and his line.

In the rest of the paragraph the preacher compares these Levitical priests to Melchizedek, who remains priest forever. The preacher presents two contrasts between these Levitical priests and Melchizedek.

The first contrast is in vv. 5-6. The Levitical priests (5) collected the tithe from their fellow Israelites, their brothers and sisters. They all shared common descent from Abraham. They were all part of the same family. On the other hand, Melchizedek (6) was not a Levite, yet he collected a tithe from Abraham, the head of the line, the patriarch. And he blessed him who had the promise, the promise of that line into which the Levites would be born. The promise that would make Abraham a patriarch. Again we have tithing and blessing.

From this blessing the preacher draws a principle (7): clearly, the lesser is blessed by the greater. Clearly, Melchizedek is superior to Abraham. When, as priest of God Most High, he pronounced Abram blessed by God Most High, he was superior. But when he turned around and declared, “Blessed be God Most High,” he was praising God as an inferior to a superior. Abram was great in that he had the promise. But Melchizedek was greater still: he received the

tithe, and he gave the blessing.

In v. 8 the preacher draws a second contrast between the Levitical priests and Melchizedek. The former received the tithe, but they did so as people who were in the process of dying. The Levitical priests were mortal, mere humans, who died, to be replaced by the next generation, which also died. Death after death after death. Generation after generation after generation. Priests who were dying. They were not priests who remained forever. But of Melchizedek the Scriptures testify that he is living. Genesis 14 testifies, albeit by silence, that he is living. He has neither beginning of days nor end of life.

In vv. 9-10 the preacher adds another implication drawn from Abraham’s status as patriarch. This is a daring one, so he prefaces it with “one might even say.” Abraham was the patriarch, at the head of the line of promise. Therefore, using the principle of corporate solidarity, all the promised line was present in Abram’s body, or in his loins to use the old term. Levi was present in Abram’s loins when Melchizedek met Abram. Therefore Levi participated in the gift of the tithe to Melchizedek. By extension, so did all the priests who came from the line of Levi. With this the preacher has returned to his starting point: when “he met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings” (1).

Melchizedek, this mysterious figure, met Abraham the patriarch, the recipient of the promise. Who was greater in the encounter? Great though Abraham was, Melchizedek was greater. See how great this one was. We are to ponder this. Again, the preacher’s interest is not so much Melchizedek himself, but the *order* of Melchizedek. He is the first one in that order. But God has now designated another, greater than Melchizedek, to be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. So ultimately the preacher wants us to ponder Jesus.

Jesus is now our great high priest. He serves not in an earthly sanctuary, but in the true sanctuary, in heavenly space. He serves in the very presence of God. His service was prefigured by the service of the Levitical priests in the earthly sanctuary. But the shadow has passed; the reality has come. His eternal service was prefigured by Melchizedek, but now Jesus serves as “high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (6:10).

His service is two-fold. His first service is a one-time action. In ancient Israel the annual climax of the ministry of the Levitical high priest was his entrance within the veil. He entered the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies. He entered with the blood of a sacrificial bull and a sacrificial goat. He sprinkled this blood on the gold lid which covered the ark of the covenant, the atonement cover or mercy seat. This blood made atonement for that space, and purified from the defilement caused by the impurity and sins of the people. The high priest had to repeat this every year until he died. His replacement repeated this until he died. And on and on, generation after generation of high priests who died.

Jesus entered within the veil, into the heavenly Holy of Holies, of which the earthly one was a copy. He entered with his own blood, which *once and for all* purifies from sin. This act never needs repeating.

The second aspect of Jesus’s ministry as high priest is ongoing. The eternal Son became incarnate as Jesus, human like us:

fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb 2:17-18)

He is able to help those who are being tempted or tested. We are being tempted or tested all the time. He is there to help us in our time of need, which is all the time. So the preacher invites us to draw near to our merciful and faithful high priest. His central teaching on the high-priesthood of Jesus is bracketed either side by these invitations to draw near:

**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)**

**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. (10:19-22)**

The preacher has invited us to consider just how great Melchizedek was. But what he is really doing is urging us to consider just how great and so much better is Jesus, our merciful and faithful high priest, who serves in the eternal order of Melchizedek.

Our passage is centered on tithes and blessings. What do we do with these concepts today? Is "Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!" a suitable motto for today?

Paul writes to the Ephesians:

**Praise [blessed] be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Eph 1:3)**

God has blessed us in Christ through his Spirit. We have been incorporated into his family, into his people. Jew or Gentile, we have been incorporated into God's promise to Abraham to create a great people, and to restore blessing to the world. We have been incor-

porated into God's purposes. God has given himself to us in Christ and through his Spirit. He is our very great reward. Do we value this gift? Do we even recognize it as a gift? Is God himself enough of a gift for us?

God has shown favor to us. We reciprocate with blessing as praise. We reciprocate with gratitude, with hearts full of joy and gladness.

What about the tithe? God's people no longer contain a tribe that is set apart to the service of God and is dependent on the tithes of their brothers and sisters. But the NT mentions three categories of people who lacked provision, and should be provided for by the saints. The first category were the widows. In a patriarchal society they were in a vulnerable position. The Twelve apostles set aside the Seven for this ministry (Acts 6). This is usually understood as the beginning of the ministry of deacons. Later Paul instructed Timothy about the care of widows in Ephesus (1 Tim 5).

A second group were the poor, those in material need. A major feature of Paul's ministry was taking up a collection from the Gentiles for the poor Jewish Christians in need in Jerusalem and Judea. He called this a *charis*, a grace or favor; and a *koinonia*, a participation or fellowship in one another, those with resources with those in need.

A third group were those who were preaching and teaching. Jesus sent out the seventy-two without provision. They were to benefit from the provision of whomever welcomed them into their house, "for the laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:1-12). Paul labored free of charge, sometimes working as a tentmaker to support himself. But he was grateful for those churches which supported him, notably the church in Philippi.

What we don't do is give so as to put God in obligation to bless by rewarding us with material riches. "Proper tithing to receive the promised blessings!" is not a suitable motto. It is backwards. We give out of gratitude, because God has first blessed us. His greatest blessing is to give us the gift of himself in Christ Jesus. Because in the end it really is all about Jesus. Even this text is not really about Melchizedek. It is about the order of Melchizedek. Ultimately it is about Jesus who fills that order. Just think how great Melchizedek was. Just think how much greater is Jesus, our great high priest in the order of Melchizedek.