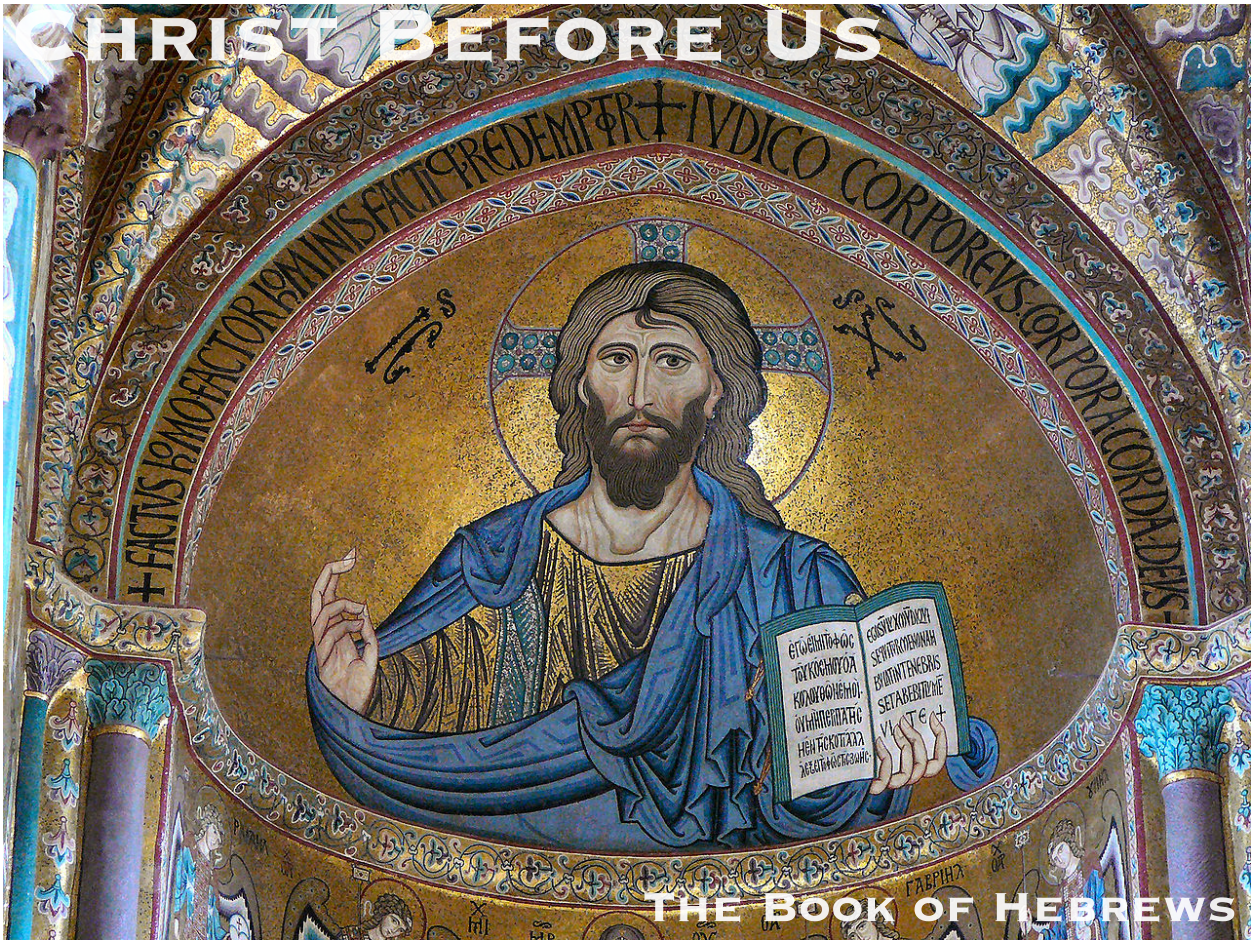

Christ Before Us

The Book of Hebrews

Sermons by

Bernard Bell

Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino
Cupertino, California
www.pbcc.org

Sermons preached at PBCC 2022–

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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 περιπατήσῃ ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ, ἀλλ᾽ ἕξει 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 infinite probability drive.

Scripture presents the eternal Son as the sustainer of the universe. Here in Hebrews. Also in the Colossian Christ hymn, "in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). And Ephesians tells us of God's purpose in Christ "to bring unity to all things… under Christ" (Eph 1:10). The Son is front and center in God's administration of his cosmos: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. The Son sustains all things by his powerful word.

The fifth statement is this:

After he had provided purification for sins.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, the seventh statement (v. 4):

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

He became superior to the angels, implying that previously he

was not. Yet surely he had been superior in the beginning. Why had he become inferior? We can trace the Son's path this way. As the one through whom all things were created, including the angels which are created heavenly beings, the eternal Son was always superior to the angels. But he gave up his status and became lower than them as a human being, incarnate as Jesus. When we first read the name Jesus, we learn that he "was made lower than the angels for a little while" (2:9). At his ascension he became superior again. But he did not put off his humanity. It is as God incarnate in flesh that he has become superior to the angels within history. The exalted Son is the exalted Jesus Christ. A human being has entered into God's very presence.

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

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

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

Is it the name *Jesus*? The Philippians 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 Philippians 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.

2022.08.21

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.[1]

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 worshiping 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*.[2]

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 sal-

vation 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 Hebrews. 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, persevering 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 siblings. 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.

1. 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 worshiping 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 plunder, 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)*

2023.04.23

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 with 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)*

2023.07.09

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 presence 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 Re(e)d 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 that 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 anxious fears. They did not know God or his ways.

Bid My Anxious Fears Subside (3:7-19)

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 Hebrews urged his generation, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not

harden you 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 cooool 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 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 worshiping 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)

2023.08.06

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 faithful?

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

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

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

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

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

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

> **In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (1:1-2a)**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. 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.

2023.08.27

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.

1. 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 baptism*s* 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.[1]

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

2023.09.03

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 briers 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)*

2024.02.18

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 halfway 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.[1]

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.[2]

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.

2024.02.25

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 pur-**

pose 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)*

2024.03.03

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).

1. Melchizedek (7:1-3)

First the preacher describes Melchizedek and his order:

> **[1] 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, [2] 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." [3] 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:

4 Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! 5 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. 6 This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. 8 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. 9 One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, 10 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 incorporated 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.

2024.03.10

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

Hebrews 7:11-19

#18, 2024.07.07

We are now in the so-called dog days of summer. Most of the country is sweltering under a heat wave. Here in the Bay Area we are used to living in the Goldilocks zone: not too hot, not too cold, but just right. But even here we have sweltered this past week.

Since it is summer, most teachers are enjoying a well-earned break from school. But I think in a couple of states teachers and administrators are scrambling because of some recent decisions. Two weeks ago the Louisiana Legislature mandated that there be a poster of the Ten Commandments in every public classroom in the state, from kindergarten to university. Ten days ago the Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Education decreed that the Bible, including the Ten Commandments, be incorporated into school curricula, effective immediately.

Given the separation of church and state, do the Ten Commandments belong on the walls of public classrooms? As on so many matters today, the country is polarized on this.

But why do I bring up this topic in a sermon on Hebrews? What do the Ten Commandments have to do with Hebrews? For the four Sundays of July we return to our series on Hebrews, entitled *Christ Before Us*.

The Book of Hebrews is rarely preached. It is long: 13 chapters. It is complex, especially the central six chapters about Jesus our great high priest (4:14–10:25). The preacher has a daunting task in trying to get his readers to understand this topic that he considers so important. He writes,

> **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)**

Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, "it is hard to get it across to you since you've picked up this bad habit of not listening."

I face an even more daunting task today. It's hot. It's summer. It's a long holiday weekend. And I'm following on the heels of Eugene and Hae-Rin and their engaging series on *Jonah Beneath the Surface*. So I have my work cut out to try to keep you awake and listening.

We are moving deeper and deeper into the central portion of the book, this exposition of the high-priesthood of Jesus. I have said a number of times that it is best to consider the Book of Hebrews as a written sermon or homily. This is why I keep referring to the author as the Preacher. In particular he shows how the risen, exalted, and enthroned Jesus fulfills this verse from the Psalter, which we heard as part of our Scripture reading:

> **"You are a priest forever,**
> **in the order of Melchizedek." (Ps 110:4)**

The preacher has already cited this verse several times (5:6, 10; 6:20). Jesus "was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek" (5:10). "He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (6:20).

Who is this Melchizedek? In our last passage, 7:1-10 (March 10), the preacher recapped the brief reference to Melchizedek in Genesis 14 (7:1-3), then invited us to consider how much greater Melchizedek was than Levi, from whose line came the priests in Israel (7:4-10).

Now in the rest of chapter 7 he moves on to contrast the two orders of priesthood: the Levitical priesthood in the order of Aaron, and the order of Melchizedek to which Jesus is appointed. What was wrong with the former order? Why did it need replacing with a different order? The preacher's exposition is so dense that I will cover it in two weeks. Today we will consider the need for a new order (7:11-19). Next Sunday we will see how Jesus completely fulfills this new order (7:20-28).

So, today, why was there a need for a new order of priesthood?

1. Need for Change (7:11-12)

The preacher writes of the need for change:

> **11 If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? 12 For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. (Heb 7:11-12 NIV)**

The preacher begins with an "if…then" question: *If* perfection came through the Levitical priesthood, *then* why is there a need for a different priest from a different order? The "if" clause is posed in such a way that it is clearly an unreal condition, contrary-to-fact. Could perfection be attained through the Levitical priesthood? No, it could not! Hence the need for a new order of priesthood. Not just a new priest born into Aaron's line, but an entire new order.

But the problem is even more serious. It was not just the priesthood that failed to bring perfection. The preacher adds a parenthetical comment to the *if* clause: the law established the priesthood. The Levitical priesthood and the law were tied together. They depended on each other. By *law* he means the Torah or Mosaic Law, the entire set of instructions that God gave Israel at Mt Sinai.

Therefore, v. 12, since the priesthood has to be changed, the Law has to be changed as well. What was wrong with the Law? Could it not bring perfection either? If not, then why did God give Israel the Law?

God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. He saved them through the waters of the Re(e)d Sea, which he simultaneously used in judgment on Pharaoh who had held the Hebrews captive. God brought the people through the wilderness to Mt Sinai to meet with him, because his demand to Pharaoh was "Let my people go, so that they may worship me." Here at Mt Sinai he entered into covenant with this people: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He laid out how his people were to live in his presence. He gave them the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. The people responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey" (Exod 24:7). Then the covenant was sealed with blood.

The Ten Commandments themselves are in the form of a covenant treaty document, requiring loyalty to the Lord in response to the grace he had shown in bringing them out of Egypt to be his people. So God's people had the Ten Commandments. What good did that do them? Moses went up Mt Sinai, to receive instructions about how God was going to dwell with his people, and to receive two hard copies of the Ten Commandments. Meanwhile, down below at the foot of the mountain, the people quickly broke the Ten Commandments by worshiping the golden calf. Having the Ten Commandments didn't guarantee that the people were actually going to keep them and be faithful, despite their stated intent. The commandments themselves didn't have that power.

Thanks to intercession by Moses, and God's own character, God forgave the people, for he is

> **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 34:6b-7a**)

It was precisely this character of God that made Jonah so upset in Nineveh, as we saw last week. Jonah preached a minimalist message of judgment: "You're all going to burn!" The people of Nineveh repented, God changed his mind and forgave, and Jonah found this highly offensive. But this character of God is a bedrock truth, repeated again and again in Israel's Scriptures.

At Sinai God graciously made a new set of tablets, and he allowed the tabernacle to be constructed. Moses then assembled all the pieces of the tabernacle, in language reminiscent of Genesis 1. It was a new creation, an intrusion of heaven onto earth. God filled the tabernacle with his presence, dwelling in the midst of his people.

But how could a holy God dwell in the midst of his people who had shown themselves unable to keep his commandments? Who were unable to remain loyal to him? God provided a means. He set aside the tribe of Levi to minister in the tabernacle. Within the tribe of Levi, he set aside Aaron and his descendants as priests to mediate a sacrificial system to purify and cleanse the camp from sin.

The Law and the Levitical priesthood were a great gift from God. The Law was the gift of order, showing Israel how to live in God's presence. The priesthood kept open the way to God in the midst of his people. No other nation had these gifts.

The tabernacle expressed both exclusion and embrace. By putting his presence in the midst of his people, God embraced them. But that tabernacle included a set of barriers that excluded, that limited access. The curtain at the entrance to the courtyard excluded those not from the tribe of Levi. The curtain at the entrance to the tent excluded all except priests on duty inside. The veil within the tent excluded everyone except the high priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement. God was in the midst of his people, but his people could only draw so near to him, largely dependent upon their genealogy. The Levitical priesthood could not perfect access to God. And the Law could not perfect God's people to be faithful and obedient.

Nevertheless, this was all a great gift. Some in Israel were able to recognize this, notably the psalmists. Psalms 19 and 119 extol the beauty of God's law. Psalm 84 proclaims, "How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!" Even the birds draw near, nesting in the temple courtyard.

The Law and the priesthood were clearly a package together. But the Protestant reformers divided the Law into three separate packages: moral, civil, and ceremonial. The latter two no longer apply. But the former does: the moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments. This is God's eternal moral law. This is natural law incumbent not just on Israelites or on Christians, but on all humanity. This is the thinking behind putting the Ten Commandments in court rooms and classrooms.

I realize that this is a highly controversial point in evangelical circles. Many Christians hold that the moral law, as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, still applies to Christians, indeed to all people. Hence it belongs on classroom walls.

This three-fold division of the Law would have made no sense to an ancient Israelite or a first-century Jew. The Levitical priesthood and the Law were inextricably bound together as a package.

At the time of Jesus certain Jewish groups were trying to attain perfection. They were trying to live in such a way that God would see a people prepared, ready for him to send the Messiah. The Pharisees, most of whom were not Levitical priests, sought to live at the same purity level as the priests all the time. Furthermore they added another layer of commandments around the Law to protect them from breaking the Law. The Essenes went further: they retreated to the wilderness down by the Dead Sea, there to live very strict lives far from contamination.

But perfection did not come through the Levitical priesthood nor through the associated Law. Though a great gift, they were lacking. There was indeed a need for a different priest to arise, not from the order of Aaron, but from a different order, the order of Melchizedek.

Because of the tight connection between priesthood and Law, a change in one requires a change in the other: when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. You can't separate them as the Reformers did.

2. Jesus Unqualified for Old Order (7:13-14)

A change is required also because Jesus is not from the tribe of Levi. He is not qualified to serve as a priest.

> **13 He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. 14 For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.** (7:13-14)

Jesus, the different priest, whom God has appointed to a different order, is from a different tribe. Everyone knows that our Lord arose in the tribe of Judah. As Matthew opens his gospel—indeed, the very first verse of the NT:

> **This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham.** (**Matt 1:1**)

As son of David Jesus was born into the tribe of Judah. There is nothing in the Mosaic Law about anyone from the tribe of Judah serving as a priest. How then can Jesus be a priest?

3. A Different Qualification (7:15-17)

Jesus has a different qualification for priesthood:

> **15 And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like**

Melchizedek appears, [16] one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. [17] For it is declared:

"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek." (7:15-17)

It was already abundantly clear that Jesus arose in the non-priestly tribe of Judah and therefore cannot serve as a Levitical priest. But it is still even more abundantly obvious that he can be a different sort of priest if he meets the qualifications of being in the likeness of Melchizedek, and, therefore, not dependent on the tribal structure of Israel, not dependent on genealogy.

The Levitical priest took office "on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry." They took office according to genealogy. They were born into office through their direct descent from Aaron.

But the different priest arises and takes office in a different way. What qualifies him for office is "the power of an indestructible life." Now when did our Lord acquire this indestructible life? Did he already have it when he died on the cross?

The eternal Son, who has indestructible life, took on our humanity, being made for a little while lower than the angels. He shared in our humanity; he was made like us, fully human in every way (2:14, 17). He was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (4:15). He "suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (2:9). Some argue that Jesus already had indestructible life when he died on the cross. That makes him like a wobble toy: push him over and he pops right back up again. It reduces the agony in the garden where Jesus faced the reality of the death that soon awaited him.

But Jesus really died. Yes, he was in full control of the situation. He gave up his spirit, breathing his last. He committed himself into the hands of his Father. He knew that he had been faithfully obedient to his Father to the very end, to death itself. He would have known that Death had no claim on him. But he entered Death. There he remained, dead, through the rest of Friday, all day Saturday, and into Sunday morning. This can makes us uncomfortable. So much so that many give Jesus a busy day on Holy Saturday. But his death is part of the scandal of the incarnation: that the eternal Son should so humble himself and become like us, even unto death. It is part of the scandal of the cross: that the eternal Son, incarnate as a human being like us, should be put to death in the most shameful, violent, humiliating, degrading manner possible.

As I consider Jesus dead in the grave, an image I have in mind is of a massive Burmese python in the Florida Everglades that has swallowed a large alligator. It has got the big prize. It is going to feast for a month or more! But can the python hold on to the alligator it has swallowed? No: the python bursts. It cannot contain the alligator. It has swallowed too much.

Death had swallowed too much. On the third day Death burst asunder. As Peter said in his Pentecost Day sermon,

God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:24)

Death had him but could not hold him. God reclothed the risen Lord in a resurrection body that is the archetype for all future resurrection bodies of those who faithfully follow Jesus. Jesus had passed through Death, out the other side, never to face Death again.

Risen, he now in his ongoing humanity has the power of an indestructible life. It is this that qualifies him to be a different priest in the likeness of Melchizedek. This is testified in the Scriptures, which continue to speak:

"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek." (7:17)

Yet again the preacher quotes Ps 110:4, the verse that lies behind so much of his exposition of Jesus as high priest. Jesus is qualified to be a priest, even high priest.

4. Summary (7:18-19)

The final two verses summarize the argument of the section:

[18] The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless [19] (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. (7:18-19)

The preacher summarizes the old and the new with parallel and contrasting statements. On the one hand (v. 18) is the setting aside of the former commandment because it was weak and useless. The preacher adds another parenthetical comment by way of explanation: the law made nothing perfect. The reference to law and perfection echoes v. 11, perfection could not come through the Levitical priesthood and its associated Law.

The Law could not make perfect because it could not supply the engine to generate obedience. It could not provide deliverance from sin and death. Nor could the Levitical priesthood with its sacrifices provide perfection in terms of full and complete access to God. The Levitical priesthood did provide a way for managing sin and impurity, but this was temporary. The priests themselves were subject to sin and death. They kept having to offer sacrifices: the daily burnt offering morning and evening every single day, and the blood brought into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement every single year. And both the priests and the high priest kept dying, generation after generation after generation. Nevertheless, let me emphasize again that both the Law and the priesthood were a gracious gift from God to his people.

On the other hand (v. 19b), the setting aside of the former commandment enables the introduction of a better hope. Not a better commandment: the Law perfects nothing. But Hope. This hope isn't just a wishful feeling that it will all work out in the end. It is a concrete, objective fact. Through this hope we draw near to God. This hope is Jesus himself who has entered into the very presence of God in the heavenly tabernacle, of which the earthly one was a copy.

In his wonderful opening sentence the preacher states,

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (1:3)

He sat down: one aspect of his ministry was complete. But Jesus also has an ongoing ministry. There, seated at the Father's right hand, he intercedes for us as our faithful and merciful high priest, through whom we draw near to God. Drawing near to God. This is what it is all about. God has made us for himself. He has made us for his Presence. He enters into covenant with us: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.

These central six chapters about Jesus our great high priest are

bracketed, beginning and end, by an invitation to draw near to God:

> **Therefore, since we have a great 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: 14-16)**
>
> **Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus…and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God (10:19-22)**

Here in the middle, with the putting aside of the old, and the entrance of the new, we have "a better hope…through which we draw near to God" (7:19).

Dare we draw near to God? Is this our heart's desire? Or do we want to keep our distance? Perhaps we doubt that God would really want us in his presence. Perhaps the thought of drawing near to him is terrifying. Perhaps we don't see his face as a friendly face that invites us to draw near. Perhaps we see someone else's face imposed on his. Now we have "a better hope…through which we draw near to God." God bids us come.

The preacher mentioned this hope at the end of the previous chapter:

> **we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us…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. (6:18-20)**

Jesus is our hope. He is our anchor, firmly set in God's presence. We are attached to that anchor, as by a rope. We encourage one another to hold on to that rope, to hold on to Jesus, who has gone before us. In every high and stormy gale, our anchor holds within the veil.

Eight weeks ago, 39 of us were on the island of Malta, at the statue of Paul commemorating the traditional site of his shipwreck. Luke gives a detailed account of the shipwreck (Acts 27). After being driven by a violent storm across the open sea for two weeks, the ship was rapidly approaching land in the middle of the night. The crew dropped four anchors from the stern, hoping they would hold till morning in the high and stormy gale. These were emergency anchors. They would have been massive lead anchors, each weighing a ton or more. Several of these large Roman lead anchor stocks have been found on the nearby sea floor.

There at St Paul's statue we gathered for a group photo, and then we sang *On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand*: "In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil…When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay." Jesus is our better hope, through whom we approach God.

God has made us for his presence. In the beginning, in an act of generosity and love, he created a world beyond himself. Into this world he put a human being to represent himself. And he ordered this human being, as male and female, to fill the world with people, all in God's image. Because of disobedience God expelled the first humans from his presence. But he restored his presence, in a limited manner, to his people Israel. He put his presence in their midst, that they might draw near, but only so near. This limited access was possible because of a system of sin management, both the Law and the Levitical priesthood.

But God has so much higher aspirations for us than that we be a people of law-keepers, with a human priesthood for managing our law-breaking. Perfection could not be attained that way by the Law and the Levitical priesthood.

The Law could not transform the human heart. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared that a change of heart was what was really required. Six times he quoted a commandment, then intensified it to the heart level. For example,

> **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt 5:27-28)**

Transformation of our heart requires a new covenant, a better covenant. A covenant whereby God puts his laws not on stone tablets, not on a poster on the wall, but in our minds and writes them on our hearts. A covenant in which he forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more.

So if states are going to put up the Ten Commandments on classroom walls, then perhaps they should also put up a poster of Jesus's six statements, "You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you." This condemns us all; none of us can attain perfection. The Ten Commandments cannot perfect our hearts. But then there needs to be one more poster, a poster with the good news:

> **if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Cor 5:17)**

If we are in Christ, participating in his death and resurrection, then we are part of the new creation. God has put his Spirit in us to completely renovate our hearts and minds. God has great aspirations for us: that we become like Jesus, his Beloved Son. That together we form the Beloved Community as a transformed humanity, becoming like Jesus, and thus being made ready for God's presence. We have a better hope, by which we draw near to God.

MADE PERFECT FOREVER

Hebrews 7:20-28

#19, 2024.07.14

The 2024 Paris Olympics start in twelve days' time. Over ten thousand athletes will compete. Some have dreams of winning; others will be pleased just to be there to participate. In points-based events, gymnasts and divers will seek a perfect score. Athletes in timed events will seek their own version of a perfect race. Some will win a medal; for some only a gold medal will do. Some will set records, be it world, Olympic, national, or personal. All will have tried to time their years of preparation to arrive in Paris in peak form, in perfect condition.

A hundred years ago the 1924 Olympics were also held in Paris. They are most notable now for the participation of Eric Liddell. He has been remembered this past week for the hundredth anniversary of two notable events. Last Sunday, July 7, for a race which he did not run. Last Friday, July 12, for a race which he did run and unexpectedly won. The Scottish athlete from Edinburgh was selected to compete for Britain in the 100 m race. It was his best event and he was one of the favorites. But when he learnt, several months ahead, that the heats would be on a Sunday, he withdrew. As a devout Christian he believed Sunday to be a day of Sabbath rest. Instead he trained for the 400 m race, despite being a sprinter. In the final he was placed in the outside lane, meaning he ran blind, unable to see any of his competitors. He ran the race as a sprint, thought at the time be impossible. He won by nearly a second, setting a new record. His running style was anything but perfect but it worked.

Eric Liddell came to wider public attention through the movie *Chariots of Fire* (1981) with its well-known film score by Vangelis. But he has always been well-known in Edinburgh and Scotland.

Famous though Liddell was at the time, he gave up his fame and went back to China, the land of his birth, to join his parents as a missionary. There he died in a Japanese internment camp in 1945, shortly before the end of World War 2. His dying words were "Complete surrender." He surrendered himself completely to God in death, as he had been doing in life for so many years. Thereby lay the path to perfection. He successfully completed the course of life, faithful to the end to the God whom he served. For him that was worth far more than winning a gold medal, setting a world record, and becoming a national hero.

What is the path to perfection? And what even is perfection?

Last Sunday, in Hebrews 7:11-19, we saw that perfection cannot be attained through the Levitical priesthood (7:11), and that the law perfected nothing (7:19). The former commandment was weak and ineffective (7:18). Its setting aside has cleared the way for the entrance of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. This hope is Jesus himself.

The preacher showed the need for change: the inadequacy of both the priesthood and the law to make perfect. In the next section (7:20-28) he shows the superiority of Jesus the new priest. He is exactly the priest that we need. He has been made perfect forever. In this lies our hope of perfection.

The preacher continues to show the differences between the former Levitical priesthood and the better priesthood of Jesus. Four times he contrasts the two priesthoods.

1. With or without an Oath (7:20-22)

First, the priesthoods came into effect in different manners:

> **[20] And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, [21] but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:**
>
> **"The Lord has sworn**
> **and will not change his mind:**
> **'You are a priest forever.' "**
>
> **[22] Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. (Heb 7:20-22 NIV)**

The others, that is the Levitical priests descended from Aaron, became priests without an oath. God did not swear an oath in designating Aaron and his four sons as the first priests. Aaron's descendants took office as priests without any oath. Instead they became priests through their genealogy, through their descent from Aaron. They inherited the office. But he, that is Jesus, became a priest with an oath.

Today many who take public office, whether elected or appointed, do so with an oath. Most notably, the inauguration of the President includes the oath of office administered by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The new president places his hand on a Bible, representing a superior authority, and says, "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

But in the case of Jesus, he himself did not swear the oath on taking office. The oath was sworn by God in appointing him to the office: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.' " Yet again the preacher quotes Psalm 110:4, but now for the first time he includes the first part of that verse: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind."

What is the significance of God's oath? Previously in chapter 6 the preacher has shown that God backed up his promise to Abraham with an oath confirming that promise. "God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised… so that…we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged" (6:17). When God swore that oath confirming his promise to Abraham, he had an eye on *us*. And on all others who, through union with Christ, have become children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:25). God's confirming oath strengthens *our* confidence in the reliability of God's word. We are thereby greatly encouraged to persevere in our journey of faith, in our journey following Jesus to the end.

The elements of the old covenant have been put aside because they were weak and ineffective: both the law and the Levitical priest-

hood. But the promise to Abraham still stands. The rest of the Bible is the account of how God fulfills his promise to Abraham (Gen 12: 2-3). God bound himself with an oath to do so. We can have confidence in his word and in his promise. He will be faithful.

God made a second oath, designating a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. None of the Levitical priests were in that order; they were all in the order of Aaron. But the preacher is showing emphatically, again and again here in chapter 7, that Jesus is this priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

God's sworn oath to Abraham confirmed his promise to him—guaranteeing it, as it were. In similar manner, God's designation by oath that Jesus is priest forever confirms, establishes, and guarantees. Jesus himself is the guarantor of a better covenant. The passing away of the former arrangement of priesthood and law allowed the introduction of a better hope, which is Jesus himself. He guarantees the covenant. In the archaic language of KJV, he is the *surety*.

Charles Wesley's hymn *Arise, My Soul, Arise* draws on today's passage. It includes the line "Before the throne my surety stands."

This is the first reference in Hebrews to covenant. Not only were the Levitical priesthood and the Law weak and ineffective, and have now been put aside. But even the covenant made at Sinai, the Mosaic covenant, needs replacing. A new covenant is needed. A better covenant. A covenant that is effective. Because Jesus's priesthood is affirmed with God's oath, he is the guarantor of this new, better covenant. He guarantees that it does actually works, that it is able to make perfect forever, that it does actually achieve the goals that God intends for the covenant.

2. Dying and Living Priesthoods (7:23-25)

Next the preacher draws a second contrast between the many dying priests of the Levitical priesthood and the one new living priest who is Jesus:

> **23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; 24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. 25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.** (7:23-25)

The former priesthood was a dying priesthood. The preacher has stated this several times now in this chapter. The priests kept dying, generation after generation. Death prevented them from remaining in office. The result was many, many priests, all of whom died. In this case, there being many priests was not a good thing; it indicated failure. The two great enemies were death and sin. The former priesthood was weak and ineffective in dealing with both. As a result that priesthood could not bring the perfection of full access to God's presence.

The priesthood of Jesus is different and better (24). He "lives forever." But the preacher doesn't use the regular word "live" here. He uses a wordplay to contrast the two orders of priests. The former priests didn't remain or abide in office, but Jesus does remain; he abides. The preacher uses the verb that is such a favorite of John's, in both his gospel and his first letter. Jesus abides in office; he abides in God's presence. Death cannot touch him, for he has the power of an indestructible life. Therefore he remains a secure guarantor of the new, better covenant. Because he remains, he has a permanent, unchangeable priesthood.

With *therefore*, v. 25 presents the consequences of Jesus remaining in this permanent, unchangeable priesthood. Jesus does two things: he *saves* and he *intercedes*.

Firstly, "Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him."

Jesus is *able*. The former priesthood was weak, ineffective, and unable. But Jesus has power. He is effective. He is able.

He is able to *save*. What is salvation? We are saved *from* something and saved *for* something. On the one side salvation means delivering us from the two great enemies of sin and death. On the other side it means ushering us into the full presence of God. The God who desires to dwell with his people. The God who has created people for his presence. The Levitical priesthood was only able to manage sin; it could not deliver from sin. It could not transform people's hearts and minds. And it could not usher God's people fully into his presence.

Jesus is able to save *completely*, to the uttermost (KJV). English versions translate this term as either *completely* or *forever*. Both are true. Complete salvation implies forever. And if it is forever it must be complete. In both senses it is perfect. The goal has been attained. Humanity has been brought to the state that God intended all along. Mission accomplished: made perfect forever. The Levitical priests kept having to offer sacrifices over and over again, day after day, year after year, generation after generation. They were never complete; they were never forever.

Salvation means *coming to God*. He is our Maker; he knows what he has made us for. He has made us for his presence. Therefore the end goal is to be in his presence. This is perfection, the attainment of our purpose. We have to come to him. We cannot go to anyone or anything else. Perfection lies nowhere else than God's presence, for which we are made. Under the Levitical system the people brought their offerings to the temple courtyard but they couldn't come any closer to God. The priests could get a little closer, and the high priest a little closer still but only once a year. But God was still at a distance.

Salvation means coming *through him*, that is, through Jesus. He is the only mediator whom God has appointed. He is the mediator of the new, better covenant. He is the mediator between God and humanity. He can play this role because he unites in himself both God and humanity. The Levitical priests, through whom the people brought their offerings, were weak, unable, and had only restricted access to God's presence.

So, Jesus is able to save completely and forever those who come to God through him. He can do this because he always lives to intercede for us.

He is *always living*, having defeated the enemy of death by dying, by entering into the enemy's territory and bursting it asunder. The order of constantly-dying priests has passed away, replaced by a high priest who has the power of an indestructible life. It is this that qualifies him to be high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Always living, he *intercedes* for us. In another line from Wesley's hymn, "He ever lives above for me to intercede." What does it mean to intercede? It means putting yourself in between two parties as a mediator. Jesus enters into the space where he is between us and

God. He alone can be the perfect mediator there. As the eternal Son he is in perfect communion with God the Father; they are one. As a human being he is one with us, having shared in our humanity. How does he intercede? How does he mediate the new covenant?

I like this recent translation: "he always lives to speak with God for them" (CEB). Jesus our high priest, seated at God's right hand, speaks to his Father for *us*. He represents us to God. He is our advocate. He tells his Father, "These are my brothers and sisters," for "he is not ashamed to call [us] brothers and sisters" (2:11). What a wonderful thought, that Jesus continually speaks to God for us. He is seen and heard. As a result we are seen and heard.

3. How Great a High Priest (7:26)

Next the preacher summarizes just how great a high priest we have:

> **Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.** (7:26)

Jesus is holy, blameless, and pure. He is *holy*, but this is not the usual word for holy. The Levitical priests were holy if they went through their purification rites. But this word identifies those who are faithful to God, loyal to his covenant. Those who are devoted to him and live lives oriented onto him. Jesus is *blameless*, literally without evil. He is free from sin and its associated guilt. And Jesus is *pure*, literally without stain, impurity or uncleanness.

Next he is *set apart from sinners*. This did not apply when he was on earth. He mingled with sinners. The Pharisees took offense at the company he kept. They tried to live at the same purity level as the priests, though most were not priests. They tried to avoid sinners, and those who were ceremonially unclean. But Jesus mixed with the unclean, with lepers, with sinners, even the dead. In the Pharisees' mindset, he should have contracted unholiness and impurity from them, but he didn't. Their uncleanness was not contagious. Instead it was his holiness that was contagious. For example, when the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touched the hem of Jesus's garment, it wasn't her uncleanness that entered him and contaminated him. Instead he sensed that power had gone out from him. He was contagious not her. Power went out from Jesus to her and she was healed.

But now Jesus is set apart from sinners because of the next clause: he is *exalted above the heavens*. He has entered God's presence in the space that is pure holiness. But he does not forget us. In his intercession he carries us into that space. There he speaks to God about us.

It is fitting that we have such a high priest, that God appoint such a high priest for us. For it to be fitting it must meet our real needs—not necessarily our perceived needs. So what are our real needs? Deliverance from the enemies of sin and death, and full admittance to God's presence. He has made us for life, and he has made us for his presence. Just this sort of high priest meets these needs. The Levitical priesthood and the law did not meet these needs.

4. Different Sacrifices (7:27)

The recognition of how fully sufficient our high priest is leads into the third contrast between the two priesthoods. They offered different sacrifices:

> **Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.** (7:27)

The offerings of the two orders of high priests are very different. The other priests, that is the Levitical priests, offered animal sacrifices; Jesus offered himself. The other priests offered sacrifices every single day. This probably refers to the *tamid* offering: a lamb was wholly consumed on the altar morning and evening every single day, year after year. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to offer the blood of a bull for his own sins, before he could offer the blood of a goat for the people's sins. Jesus, being without sin, being holy, blameless, and pure, did not have to offer for his own sins. Therefore he could offer his own pure, sinless self for the sins of the people.

5. Made perfect forever (28)

The preacher closes this section with an explanatory sentence (*for*) in the form of a fourth contrast between the two priesthoods:

> **For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.** (7:28)

The reference to law echoes the beginning and end of the previous section (7:11-19), which had exposed the weakness of the Levitical system. The reference to the oath echoes the beginning (v. 20) of this section.

The law appoints high priests (plural). The word of the oath appoints a singular high priest; only one is needed. The law appoints men—all the priests were male descendants of Aaron. These men had inherent weakness in that they were beset by the twin enemies of sin and death—again an echo of the previous section: the law and the priesthood were weak and useless (18).

But the Son whom God's oath appointed as high priest has been made perfect forever. In his superb opening sentence (1:1-4) the preacher identifies the eternal Son as "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (1:3). There is a very close identity between the Son and God. The Son is perfect from eternity past. But at God's behest this Son, God's Beloved, entered into our human history. He shared in our humanity. Our Scripture reading was a selection of verses from chapter 2, showing how the eternal Son became human like us. He was

> **made like [us], 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)

The eternal Son did not need perfecting. But the Son incarnate as the human Jesus did.

> **it was fitting that God…should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.** (2:10)

This does not mean that Jesus was previously weak, useless, and sinful. To perfect something means to bring it to its intended goal and purpose. When something is perfected, it is complete and finished. It fulfills its design. The path to perfection for Jesus was to

live out a full human life, complete with suffering, but faithful and obedient to the very end, to death, even death on a cross, even death in the most humiliating, shameful, degrading, violent, painful manner ever known. When Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" he had reached that end-point in his humanity. When he committed himself to his Father, gave up his spirit, and died, his path to perfection was complete. Yes, he was dead. But he died as the one, true, faithful human being. He died as the only one who had ever lived the life that God intended humans to live. He lived a life of total surrender to his Father and his Father's will. He lived a life of complete devotion and loyalty to his Father. At the end it was to his Father that he committed his spirit.

He shared in our humanity even in death:

> **he shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil (2:14).**

He entered death, and on the third day Death was burst asunder. God raised him in the power of an indestructible life.

Jesus has been made perfect forever. He is now able to be our high priest after the order of Melchizedek. He is our better hope. He is the guarantor and mediator of a new, better covenant. Such a high priest truly meets our need. If we faithfully follow him to the end, hearing God's voice, keeping our eye on Jesus, Christ before us, we will reach journey's end. We will be made perfect forever, for it is God's intention to bring "many sons and daughters to glory" (2:10), into his very presence where Jesus our forerunner has already entered.

What is perfection and how do we attain it? Perfection is to be the human beings that God has always intended us to be. He made us for his presence, so perfection means to be made ready for his presence. Jesus lived his earthly life devoted to God. He was faithful and obedient to the end, victorious over sin. Risen, he is victorious over death. Made perfect forever, he is in God's presence. There he speaks for us, and is available to us as our merciful and faithful high priest. Through him we can "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (4:16). We faithfully follow him to journey's end. We don't do so alone, but together. We encourage one another as we journey together. When we reach journey's end and Jesus returns, then we shall be made perfect forever.

The preacher writes this homily to people he knows and loves dearly. He encourages them to keep going, to walk the path together, holding on to Jesus and upholding one another, remaining faithful to the end: to be made perfect forever.

> *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)*

THE ONGOING MINISTRY OF JESUS

Hebrews 8:1-6

#20, 2024.07.21

PBCC is not a liturgical church. We don't follow an order of service that is printed in a service book. Some of you have formerly been in liturgical churches. Anglicans and Episcopalians use the *Book of Common Prayer* or one its recent derivatives. All over the world they are using the same liturgy, in communion together, albeit in different languages. Similarly, Roman Catholics use the Missal and are no longer restricted to using Latin. Mainline Presbyterians use the *Book of Common Worship*. Most of these liturgies have deep roots in the past. In such liturgical churches the liturgist leads the congregation in the liturgy, following a liturgical calendar. Many use the same set of Scripture readings each Sunday, the most common being the Revised Common Lectionary which follows a three-year cycle.

This is not our practice. Yet in some ways we are liturgical because we do follow an established order. We have our own liturgy, one with very recent roots. We do follow the same order each week and each month. The first Sunday of the month we have communion; the third Sunday we have a partner moment. Very occasionally we make a significant change such as moving the announcements from the middle to the beginning.

The Orthodox and Greek Catholic Churches call their Eucharist liturgy the Divine Liturgy. They do so because they see their worship as being in communion not only with all other such churches around the world, but also with the worship going on in heaven by the departed saints and the angels. What they do on earth is seen as mirroring what is happening in heaven. This is reflected in architecture. Some of you have been with me to Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul; some of you have been there on your own. The vast interior space of that building was designed to correspond on the earthly level to heaven above. And the worship in that space was in parallel with the worship in heaven above.

The Book of Revelation shows the worship in heaven. God and Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain, are at the center, receiving the worship of a vast assembly. This worship is led by the four cherubim, God's throne attendants. The twenty-four elders join in, followed by a vast angelic choir, then a multitude beyond counting of human beings from every nation, language, tribe, and tongue, who have faithfully completed their life on earth. God and the Lamb at the center receive this worship, this heavenly liturgy.

The risen, ascended, and enthroned Jesus is worshiped. Yet in other respects Jesus is also himself the chief worshiper. He presides over a liturgy. As we will see today this is the perspective of the Book of Hebrews. In the previous two Sundays we have covered 7:11-28 in which the preacher has shown the inadequacy of the law, the priesthood, and even the covenant that God gave Israel. These were all good and gracious gifts. But ultimately they could only be temporary because they were weak and ineffective. They didn't work; they couldn't work. Something better is needed. Jesus fits the bill because he has been made perfect forever. God has appointed him as high priest in a new order of priesthood. He is the only priest that is necessary.

The beginning of chapter 8 marks a major transition in the book, turning from Jesus's appointment as the better high priest (5:1-10; 7:11-18) to his better ministry as high priest (8:3–10:18). The first two verses form a transition between these two major sections. They look back and they look ahead. Our text for today is 8:1-6, beginning with these transitional verses, 1-2.

1. Jesus the Minister (8:1-2)

> **[1]Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, [2]and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. (Heb 8:1-2 NIV)**

At last we get the preacher's main point, more than half-way into his written sermon! At the end of the previous chapter he has written, "it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest" (7:26 ESV), or "Such a high priest truly meets our need" (NIV). The Levitical priests did not meet these needs. The preacher now emphatically affirms, "We do have such a high priest." He wants us to be in no doubt of how completely Jesus satisfies what we need in a high priest.

He makes two points about this high priest, drawing on the two verses in Psalm 110 that are so important for understanding Hebrews. This high priest has two roles; he has a dual identity.

First, Jesus has "sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." This is a near-verbatim repetition of a line in his magnificent opening sentence: "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (1:3). There he is referring to the Son. Here he is referring to Jesus the high priest. In both cases he is alluding to Psalm 110:

> **The LORD says to my lord:**
>
> **"Sit at my right hand**
> **until I make your enemies**
> **a footstool for your feet." (Ps 110:1)**

He quotes this explicitly at 1:13 in showing the superiority of the Son to the angels. And this verse is quoted or alluded to in many other places in the NT. Indeed, this verse is quoted more frequently in the NT than any other verse. Sitting at the right hand of God's throne in heaven implies that the Son participates in God's rule, and that God is bringing all things under his rule. He is bringing everything together in Christ. The risen and exalted Son is the King. Jesus, made perfect forever, is the human being who is granted the rule over God's creation that God intended for Adam in the beginning.

The fact that the Son who is the exalted Jesus has sat down implies that his work is done. It is finished. It is now God who is at work subjecting all things to him, uniting all things in him.

In verse 2 the preacher says something quite different about this

high priest: he is a minister in the sanctuary, implying that he is a priest, indeed the high priest. This ministry as priest is in fulfillment of Psalm 110:4,

> **The Lord has sworn**
> **and will not change his mind:**
> **"You are a priest forever,**
> **in the order of Melchizedek." (Ps 110:4)**

So Jesus is simultaneously King and Priest. As the eternal Son, who took on full humanity, becoming a little lower than the angels, he has been enthroned far above the angels as King. As Jesus, the human who has been made perfect forever, he is actively at work as a minister in the heavenly sanctuary.

Jesus our high priest is a minister in the sanctuary. The Greek word the preacher uses for *minister* is *leitourgos*, from which comes our English word *liturgy*. Literally it means work (*ergon*) of or for the people (*laos*). In the Greco-Roman world it referred to one who performed public service at his own expense whether in civic society or in a religious cult. He, and they usually were men, was a benefactor, giving for the benefit of the people. In Israel's Scriptures it is used of the ministry of the priests on behalf of the people unto God in the tabernacle and the temple. It is an interesting term to use of Jesus. NIV translates the noun with the verb *serves*; other translations better use the noun *minister*.

The realm in which Jesus is acting as a minister is the sanctuary, that is the true tent. The reference clearly implies the tabernacle, which was a tent. Moses erected the original tabernacle at the foot of Mt Sinai, following God's instructions given him atop Mt Sinai. But this true tent is pitched not by Moses, not by a human being, but by God. As we will subsequently find out, this true tent is in heaven, in God's presence. Jesus's liturgical activity is not on earth, but ongoing in heaven. There Jesus is both seated as enthroned Son and actively at work as minister in the sanctuary. He is both Son and Priest.

2. The Ministry of Jesus (8:3-6)

Next the preacher differentiates the ministry of Jesus from the service of the former Levitical priests.

> **3 Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. 4 If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. 5 They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." 6 But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. (8:3-6)**

The long central section about priesthood began with a job description:

> **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. (5:1)**

Three things are stated here about the high priest. He is a) one of the people, b) represents the people before God, and c) presents offerings to God to deal with sin. He mediates between the people and God. In beginning this second section about the ministry of Jesus our high priest, he repeats the third aspect, what the high priest does: "Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices" (8:3). This was true for the Levitical high priests. The Law, that is Torah, the Mosaic Law given at Mt Sinai, gave instructions about the many different gifts and sacrifices to be brought by the people through the priests to God. The liturgy of sacrifices followed a liturgical calendar.

It is true also for Jesus as high priest: "it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer." But he can't offer the same gifts and sacrifices as the former priests did. He doesn't qualify as a priest under their Levitical system. It is as if there is a non-compete clause. He is of a different tribe, appointed to a different order of priesthood, by an oath not without one, not under the law, within a different covenant, and he ministers in a different sanctuary. What could he offer? There had to be *something*. *Something* is vague; it is undefined. The preacher has already told us that Jesus offered himself (7:27). But in this section (8:1–10:18) he delays providing an answer until he has first described what the Levitical priests offered. Only then will he identify what Jesus offered: he offered himself (9:14).

These priests serve in the sanctuary, in the tabernacle, following the liturgy prescribed by the Law. Unfortunately NIV described Jesus our high priest *serving* in v. 2, the same English word as here. This implies that Jesus and the priests are similar. But the preacher is careful to distinguish Jesus's current ministry in the true tent, and the Levitical priests' service in the earthly tabernacle. He uses two different words to distinguish these two activities. The term used of Jesus in v. 2 is a more exalted term than that used in v. 5 of the priests. Most English versions do maintain this distinction, rendering Jesus's position in v. 2 as *minister*. Jesus is a *minister*; the Levitical priests and high priests *served*.

The Levitical priests offered the gifts prescribed by the law. Again, as I said several times last week, the Law and the Levitical system of priesthood were gracious gifts from God. This included the sanctuary where they offered their gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the people. This was where God put his presence among his people. But this sanctuary was inferior and temporary. These priests serve in a copy and shadow of the things in heaven. A shadow is not real. You can see it but you can't pick it up and handle it. It is an illusion as it were, created by light illuminating what is real, and thus casting a shadow. The earthly sanctuary where the Levitical priests served, though it was tangible, physical, and in that sense real, was not the ultimate reality. That was in heaven. When Moses was atop Mt Sinai with the Lord, he told him this when he gave him detailed instructions for the tabernacle. The preacher quotes:

> **"See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." (8:5)**

This is a quotation from Exodus 25:40. As we heard in our Scripture reading (Exod 25:1-9, 40), the Lord instructed Moses to receive voluntary, free-will offerings and contributions from the people, "everyone whose heart prompts them to give." Then he told Moses what they were to do with these offerings:

> **"Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly**

like the pattern I will show you." (Exod 25:8-9)

At the end of the initial instructions, the Lord repeated this general principle:

"See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." (Exod 25:40)

So what did the Lord show Moses? What did Moses see? I don't think he necessarily saw a physical tabernacle, or a model of such, in heaven. But God showed him something that adequately represented heavenly reality in a way that could be replicated on earth. The tabernacle was more than just a physical structure, a two-compartment tent surrounded by a courtyard. I mentioned last week that the language used of Moses assembling the component parts into the finished tabernacle (Exodus 40) is similar to the language of the Lord making the cosmos in Genesis 1. This stands to reason since many now recognize that Genesis 1 describes the cosmos that God creates as a temple into which God puts his image: a human being that represents him in the world. The tabernacle did not have an image in it. Instead God's *shekinah* glory, his indwelling presence, his glory cloud, was pictured as enthroned between the cherubim with the ark of the covenant as his footstool. The tabernacle was heaven on earth, where God was present among his people. Yes, it was a physical structure, but it was so much more.

Solomon subsequently built the temple in Jerusalem as a more permanent place for God's presence. He followed the *pattern* (the same word) that David, the man after God's own heart, wrote down for him. Solomon clearly understood that the Most Holy Place was the earthly pole of a vertical axis to heaven.

The tabernacle which Moses erected and in which God put his presence, and the temple which Solomon built and in which God put his presence, were great gifts from God. They were real physical structures, but they were copies and shadows of the real, of the true.

It would be easy here to fall prey to Platonic thinking. The Greek philosopher Plato used the language of shadow and reality, starting with the image of a fire throwing shadows onto the wall of a cave. For him, too, reality was in the non-physical realm, the realm of Ideas. The Ideas were the reality, of which all earthly things were mere shadows. The ideal, then, is to be liberated from the physical world of shadows into the non-physical world of Ideas. So Plato and his followers denigrated the physical world. They believed the soul is trapped in a physical body from which it needs to be freed. This thinking has had a deep influence on the Christian world. It is common to think that when we die we will be freed from this evil world and go to heaven, there to be with Jesus in a non-physical realm. The evil world will be destroyed by God. But for many this sounds unappealing: sitting on a cloud strumming a harp for eternity.

The Biblical view of creation is very positive. In an act of love and generosity God created a physical cosmos, which he repeatedly observed to be good, indeed very good. Yes, evil has entered into the world, bringing with it disorder. But God's ultimate intent is to restore order to the world, indeed to make this world even better than it was. God's intent is to fill the earth with heaven so the two realms are joined together. God will then be fully present with his people. This is the vision of the end of Revelation.

It will be the end of shadows. C. S. Lewis entitled the last chapter of *The Last Battle*, the seventh and last book of his Narnia Chronicles, "Farewell to Shadowlands." The world gave way to a realm that was not non-physical but was even more real and physical as they went "further up and further in." Lewis presents a similar vision of "heaven" in his book *The Great Divorc*e.

Meanwhile, Jesus our high priest is fully present to God, having passed through the heavenlies. He is there as a human being.

The preacher closes the paragraph by showing the superiority of our high priest to the former Levitical priests (v. 6). Jesus has obtained a superior ministry. Again the preacher is careful with his language. This ministry is *leitourgia*. So Jesus the *leitourgos* (2) has obtained a *leitourgia* (6). This time NIV well-translates the word as *ministry*. Jesus the *minister* has a *ministry*. He has this superior ministry insofar as he is the mediator of a better covenant. And this better covenant is established on better promises. Better ministry, better covenant, better promises. Everything about Jesus and his high-priestly ministry is better. This better ministry, better covenant, and better promises will be developed in the next few chapters. Next week we'll look at the better covenant (8:7-13).

Jesus the minister has a ministry in God's presence. He is the mediator between God and his people, an arrangement made possible by a new covenant. He interfaces between God and us. As the eternal Son he is one with God, enthroned at his right hand. As the human Jesus, made perfect forever, and empowered with indestructible life, he represents us to God. He is one of us, he acts for us, and he presents offerings on our behalf—the three features of the high priest identified in 5:1. There are two aspects to this ministry before God and his representation of us. First, he has offered himself as a one-time offering that is efficacious for us forever. It's an offering that works. It brings perfection. It deals with the problems of sin and death. Secondly, he has an ongoing ministry on our behalf, providing access to God. He speaks for us to his Father. He continually offers us and our actions to God.

The Levitical priests engaged in acts of service. But there is no longer such a priesthood. No longer are animals being offered up to the Lord as sacrifices. Instead, the NT affirms that we are all priests in that we all engage in acts of service to the Lord. Jesus gathers up all this service, done in his name, and presents it to his Father.

God placed the first human in the garden. This was a sanctuary, where God walked in the cool of the day, where he interacted with the humans he had made. There in the sanctuary he commissioned the first human to worship him and keep his one commandment. We usually think of that commission as working and keeping the garden. But the text is clear that God had done all the work. It is better to see the human as called to worship the Lord by keeping the one commandment. A life of worship lived out in obedience amid the bounty of God's provision. Now we all as God's people worship or serve the Lord in all that we do. And we do so "in Christ" as his people empowered by his Spirit. What is the service we bring to the Lord?

First, we worship or serve God in our praise, what we usually think of as "worship." At the end of Hebrews the preacher writes:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. (13:15)

High priests were appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices (5:1). Jesus has offered himself as the one effective offering once and for all. We now bring our offerings of praise. In doing so we are imitating Jesus, of whom it was earlier said:

> **"I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises." (2:12, quoting Ps 22:22)**

In identity with God, Jesus declares God's name, his greatness, to us. In identity with us, whom he is not ashamed to call his brothers and sisters, he praises God as our worship leader. Commenting on this verse, John Calvin wrote, "as soon as God becomes known to us, his boundless praises sound in our hearts and in our ears… Christ leads our songs, and is the chief composer of our hymns."[1] He is our liturgist.

As we bring our praises we are echoing our older brother who sang God's praises. As we sing our praises Jesus presents them to the Father. As we gather to worship we do so in Christ and so our worship is presented to God by him.

Part of our call to worship was from 1 Peter 2:

> **you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ… you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Pet 2:5, 9)**

We declare the greatness of God, offering up our praise of him. Jesus our liturgist gathers up our praises and presents them to God.

Second, we offer our prayers. As we pray "in Jesus's name" he presents our prayers to the Father. There are several aspects to our prayers. First, praise and thanksgiving, which, in sung form we usually think of as worship. We also bring our petitions: we need God's help. A major purpose of Hebrews is to encourage us, since we have such a great high priest who has ascended on high, to approach God's throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace in time of need. Which is all the time: when we're facing temptation, or being tested, or are discouraged, or on the verge of giving up faithfully following Jesus. Our petitions include bringing our confession. We do all this in Jesus's name. When we do so, Jesus our high priest gathers up all our prayers and presents them to his Father.

Third, we offer our lives. We are to live out our entire lives "in Jesus's name," united with him. We have participated in his death and are participating in his life. As symbolized in baptism, we have died to our old selves, and been raised to new life in Christ, his life transfused to us through the Spirit.

The tabernacle where priests brought their offerings was a shadow of heavenly realities. Under the new covenant we do not bring our offerings of praise, prayer, and our entire lives to an altar or structure on earth. The NT says that our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). This is often misunderstood to imply that we shouldn't feel at home in this world anymore. Instead, it implies that we, as those on earth who are in Christ, are living in a colony of heaven. The purpose of a colony is to extend the influence of the home city or country. So, in Christ we live our lives in a piece of heaven on earth. We are to extend the influence of heaven on earth—another affirmation of the goodness of the created world. Jesus our liturgist gathers up all that we do in his name and presents it to his Father. This implies that all that we do is liturgical, that all time is sacred time. There is no ordinary time.

Jesus brings God down to us humans, and he gathers us humans in himself before God. He is our one and only priest, indeed our high priest. He is the minister with an ongoing ministry in God's presence. He is one of us, acting on behalf of us, and presenting offerings, first the offering of his own self once and for all, and then the offering of our lives lived in his name. Everything that we do in Jesus's name he is offering to his Father.

The main point is this: we do have such a high priest. He sat down at God's right hand, where as a minister he continues his ministry in God's presence. Our worship, indeed our entire lives, is "the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father."[2] Our high priest brings us into God's presence.

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1549), transl. John Owen (1853), on 2:12.

2. James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 30.

LEST WE FORGET: THE END OF MEMORY

Hebrews 8:7-13

#21, 2024.07.28

In 2015 I was invited to preach at an Armenian church in San Francisco. The occasion was the hundred-year anniversary of the Armenian genocide. The pastor had heard a sermon I preached here at PBCC the previous year on forgiveness,[1] and asked me to preach a similar message to his congregation. His purpose was to help them move on from the painful memories rekindled by the anniversary. It was an honor to do so. That afternoon I participated in an ecumenical service of all the Armenian churches in San Francisco. Again it was an honor to be there included among the clergy. But as the service progressed I felt uncomfortable. There was a dissonance between morning and afternoon. Here was a service intended to keep alive the memories of 1915. It was completely at odds with what the pastor and I had sought to do in the morning. There was no message of forgiveness and reconciliation. Such events which refresh memories of injustice are more likely to cultivate grievance, bitterness, pain, and victimhood.

We see this in the current war in Gaza. On the one side Israeli Jews remember the Holocaust, and view the Hamas attack on October 7 in light of that event. In Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to Congress last Wednesday he said that the Hamas attack was Israel's 9/11. On the other side, the Palestinians remember the *Nakba* of 1948 and the *Naksa* of 1967. Two sides cultivating very different memories. Both sets of memories are true but there currently is not room for both to be acknowledged at the same time.

What do with do with our memories, both individually and collectively? Not so much our happy memories. It is a joy to revisit those. What do we do with bad memories? With wrongs done against us? With wrongs we have done to others? Trauma studies and trauma therapy are rapidly-growing disciplines as the pervasiveness of trauma is increasingly recognized. Can we ever forget? Should we forget? Can we say "Lest we forget" without being disabled by pain or consumed with anger and a lust for retribution?

And what about God? Surely he remembers everything, including everything that rebellious humanity has done against him. Can he forgive and forget? Can he allow things to drop out of his memory? Are there things that he will no longer bring to mind? As we press deeper into the high-priestly ministry of Jesus as described in the central section of Hebrews, we come face-to-face with God and his memory of us.

Last week's passage (8:1-6) ended with the statement that Jesus has received a better ministry in that he is the mediator of a better covenant established on better promises. Better ministry, better covenant, better promises. Everything about Jesus is better. *Better* is one of the key words in this book. The preacher has already stated that because of God's oath in Psalm 110:4, "You are a priest forever," "Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant" (7:22).

Our passage today (8:7-13) describes this new better covenant. It consists of a brief introduction (7-8a) and conclusion (13) framing a long quotation (8b-12) from Israel's Scriptures, our OT.

1. Introduction (8:7-8a)

> **7 For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. 8 But God found fault with the people and said: (Heb 8:7-8a NIV)**

We begin with another *if…then* sentence (cf. 7:11). As in the previous chapter, the *if* clause is contrary-to-fact. *If* there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant… But there was something wrong. It was not faultless. The covenant here is the Mosaic covenant made at Mt Sinai between the Lord and his people. That covenant was the basis for the law and the priesthood. The entire system of covenant, law, and priesthood was a great gift from the Lord to his people. But the previous chapter has declared it to be weak, useless, and ineffective. It did not have the power to do what needed to be done. It did not deal with the problem of sin and death. It did not provide full access to God's presence. If it had then there would be no need for another covenant.

The first covenant was faulty and God found fault with the people living under that covenant. The problem lay in both the covenant and the people. A second covenant is needed in place of the first, a new one in place of the soon-to-be old. And so God speaks.

2. A New Covenant (8:8b-12)

What God speaks are words which he spoke through the prophet Jeremiah more than six centuries earlier. Incorporated into Israel's Scriptures they continued to speak in the first century to the readers of Hebrews. Incorporated into Christian Scriptures they continue to speak to us today. Hebrews is full of God's living word, announced in the opening sentence: "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).

The preacher now recounts one of the times when God spoke in the past through the prophets. It is a lengthy quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34. This is the longest quotation in the entire NT. It is the only reference in the OT to a new covenant. Surprisingly it is only in Hebrews that this important text is quoted. The preacher's audience and we today hear these words as those to whom God has spoken in these last days through his Son.

The preacher follows the Greek translation of Jeremiah closely but makes a couple of significant changes. The text has three parts: an announcement of the new covenant (8b), it is not like the old covenant (9), and finally what this new covenant is (10-12).

2.1 A New Covenant (8:8b)

> **"The days are coming, declares the Lord,**
> **when I will make a new covenant**
> **with the people of Israel**
> **and with the people of Judah." (8:8b)**

The context for this declaration in Jeremiah is the Babylonian exile. The northern kingdom of Israel was already in exile, carried away

by the Assyrians in 722 BC. These Assyrians were God's instrument of judgment against his rebellious, unfaithful people. Now it was the turn of the southern kingdom of Judah. This time it was the Babylonian empire and its king Nebuchadnezzar that God used to bring judgment on his rebellious, unfaithful people. The people of Jerusalem were carried off to Babylon in several waves. Jeremiah knew that they were going to be there for several generations, so he had written letters to them telling them to settle down and seek the welfare (*shalom*) of Babylon, for in its welfare (*shalom*) will be your welfare (*shalom*) (Jer 29:7). A shocking message! Seek the welfare and flourishing of your oppressor! It is in this context that we find the famous verse:

> **I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare (*shalom*) and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jer 29:11 ESV)**

What future and hope did the Lord have in mind? He promised that he would restore the people to the Land, that Jerusalem would be rebuilt, that there would be a righteous king on David's throne. Restoration to what it was like before. Maybe next time the people would be faithful covenant partners.

This is what serious Jews at the time of Jesus thought. They needed to double down and be more faithful covenant partners. For the Pharisees this meant living at the same purity level as the priests, and creating another larger set of laws as a protective fence around Torah, the law given at Sinai. For the Essenes, who were even more strict, it meant retreating to the wilderness down by the Dead Sea, far away from contaminating influence. It meant trying harder to be faithful.

But Jeremiah, speaking for the Lord as his faithful prophet, announces that something much more radical is required: a new covenant. In the Jewish literature from the time of Jesus there is very little mention of this passage in Jeremiah, little mention of a new covenant. A new covenant was inconceivable. They already had the covenant made at Sinai. This was a bedrock truth for them. They just needed to be more faithful. This is still the case today.

But the first covenant was not faultless, and God had found fault with the people. The problem was much more serious. It required a more radical solution: a new covenant. This the Lord will do; he will make a new covenant to replace the first one.

But the preacher changes the verb from Jeremiah, though this is not reflected in most English versions. The verb in Jeremiah is related to the noun *covenant*, so one could translate it *to covenant a covenant*. It is the usual way to express making a covenant. But in Hebrews the preacher changes it to a verb meaning *accomplish* or *fulfill*, i.e., to bring something to a state of completion. *Perfection* in the sense of completion is another important word in Hebrews. With this new covenant God will bring his plans and purposes for his people to completion so that those in this new covenant be made perfect forever. This new covenant will not be faulty; it will not fail to accomplish what needs to be accomplished; it will never need replacing; it will not be frustrated by the faultiness of the people. It will perfectly accomplish God's purposes.

The rest of the passage quoted from Jeremiah 31 describes this new covenant. First negatively (9): it won't be like the first covenant. Then positively (10-12): what it will be.

2.2 Not like the Old (8:9)

> 9 **"It will not be like the covenant**
> **I made with their ancestors**
> **when I took them by the hand**
> **to lead them out of Egypt,**
> **because they did not remain faithful to my covenant,**
> **and I turned away from them,**
> **declares the Lord." (8:9)**

God *made* the first covenant with Israel's ancestors. Again the preacher changes the verb. In v. 8 he upgraded the verb to *complete*. This time he downgrades it to the plain vanilla verb *make*. He does this in both places to further differentiate the two covenants.

God made this first covenant with the *ancestors*, the forefathers whom he brought out of Egypt. This was the great act of salvation in the OT: deliverance from slavery in Egypt to freedom as God's people. God simultaneously saved his people through the Red Sea and brought judgment on the enemy with the same waters. They were helpless in Egypt. They had no agency. But God grabbed them by the hand and brought them out.

He brought them through the wilderness, where he provided them with bread in the form of manna, with water, and with his presence. He brought them to Sinai to meet with him. Here he gave them his laws. The people responded that they would be faithful and obedient. The covenant was sealed with blood. God gave himself to them as their God; he took them for his people; and he planned to dwell with them. God and his people were now bound together.

But the people did not remain faithful to his covenant. They did not abide in him. They lost faith in God, his presence, his goodness. They turned away from him. The first instance of infidelity and rebellion was just forty days after the covenant was sealed. Moses was atop Mt Sinai receiving instructions for the tabernacle, in which God would dwell amidst his people. But at the foot of the mountain the people were worshiping a golden calf. They had quickly forgotten and broken the covenant. It was only daring intercession by Moses that averted the Lord's anger from destroying them.

The second instance of infidelity came less than a year later, when the people were on the edge of the Promised Land. When the twelve spies brought back their report of the land, the people responded in fear. They rejected the leadership of the Lord and of Moses. They wanted a new leader to take them back to Egypt, the land flowing with milk and honey. Their memory was faulty. They forgot and they remembered the wrong things. They forgot what they should have remembered: God's merciful deliverance of them from oppression, and his gracious provision for them in the daily manna, the water, and his presence. They remembered their life in Egypt, but with a revisionist memory that was completely untrue. They created a false narrative. They remembered especially what they ate: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic" (Num 11:4). They never had that in Egypt! It was never for them the land flowing with milk and honey.

Because his people turned away from him and his covenant, the Lord turned away from them. He ceased caring for them. That generation wandered around in the wilderness until they all died: 38 years! This was the wilderness generation described at length in Heb 3:7–4:11. They ceased listening to the Lord and his word. They were

the people referred to in the repeated warning, quoted from Psalm 95, "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" (3:7b-8 etc.). As a result, they failed to enter into God's rest.

Their example is a warning to the original recipients of Hebrews and to us today. We are those to whom God has spoken in his Son, in whom we have so great a salvation. In the first warning passage, the preacher writes,

> **We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away… how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? (Heb 2:1, 3)**

The verb translated *ignore* is the same as for the Lord *turning away* or *ceasing to care* for the wilderness generation (8:9). The Book of Hebrews is a "word of exhortation" (13:22). It refreshes our memory so that we not drift away, so that we not cease to care about the salvation we have obtained through the Son. Lest we forget and cease to keep these truths in mind.

The old covenant was a great gift. But it didn't work for the first generation. And it didn't work for subsequent generations. Both Israel and Judah ended up expelled from the land of promise. The old covenant was unable to transform the human heart. The people were faulty. Since the old covenant couldn't change them, it too was faulty. It was clear that something new was needed.

2.3 The New (8:10-12)

The third and final section of the Jeremiah quotation is a positive statement about what this new covenant will be:

> **10 "This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel**
> **after that time, declares the Lord.**
> **I will put my laws in their minds**
> **and write them on their hearts.**
> **I will be their God,**
> **and they will be my people.**
> **11 No longer will they teach their neighbor,**
> **or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'**
> **because they will all know me,**
> **from the least of them to the greatest.**
> **12 For I will forgive their wickedness**
> **and will remember their sins no more." (8:10-12)**

The old covenant was written down: the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone; other laws written in the Book of the Covenant. But written laws can't change hearts. They are powerless and therefore ineffective. In the new covenant God will write his laws into minds and hearts, so that they be truly effective in working change. He will transform his people on the inside.

At the heart of this new covenant lies the same purpose: I will be your God, you will be my people, with its unstated corollary: I will dwell with you. Inner transformation is necessary if such co-dwelling is to succeed. Ultimately God wants to transform us into the likeness of his Son, so that we truly become sons and daughters in his family.

God wants us to know him. Not just to know about him intellectually in our mind. But to know him relationally in our heart. This is already implicit in his stated purpose: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you. This implies relationship. God has created us for himself. He makes himself known to us. He desires that we know him as one who loves us, who is for us, who has kind intentions towards us, who turns a smiling face towards us. Even when things are difficult and we might not sense his presence. Then may we know in the words of the hymn-writer, "Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face."

At the heart of this new covenant is the forgiveness of sins. Using standard Hebrew parallelism, this is stated twice: once positively, then negatively. Positively, God will forgive. Negatively, he will not remember, where this is stated very emphatically: I will never ever again remember.

God forgives sins. He revealed himself as such to Moses, as we heard in our Scripture reading:

> **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 34:6b-7a)**

Forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin: that's a comprehensive list. This was after the golden calf incident! It is no wonder that Moses immediately fell down and worshiped. Then he petitioned the Lord to come in their midst as they set out from Sinai for the Promised Land. Although, or even because, "this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance" (34:9). It's *because* we're a stiff-necked people that your presence and your forgiveness is our only hope.

Later, when the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt and God again wanted to start over with Moses, Moses reminded the Lord of his words at Sinai. He therefore had confidence to petition:

> **"In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now." (Num 14:19)**

And the Lord did: "I have forgiven them, as you asked" (14:20). But there were consequences: that generation did not enter the land. They did not enter into God's rest.

How was God to dwell with a stiff-necked people that kept sinning? He provided a priesthood and a sacrificial system for dealing with unintentional sin. The sinner would bring an animal sacrifice for the priest to offer to the Lord. Repeatedly we read in Leviticus, "the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven" (Lev 4:26 etc. ESV).

The word translated *atonement* means to *cover*. God accepted the animal sacrifice as covering the sin, and he granted forgiveness. Both were acts of grace. This gracious exchange lies at the heart of the Levitical system of priesthood and sacrifice.

When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem many centuries later, he dared to ask God to forgive even without a functioning sacrificial system. He understood that the temple was a house of prayer, that it was a conduit to the ear, eye, and heart of God in his heavenly dwelling place. He asked that when people prayed towards this house, even if they were far away: "Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive" (1 Kgs 8:30).

Five times in his prayer of dedication he made this request. He dared to ask that God would forgive even deliberate sin, for which there were no sacrifices under the Levitical system.

On the Day of Pentecost Peter gave his first sermon, one that he could not have given the previous day. Empowered by the Holy Spirit he addressed the crowd:

> **"Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you… and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead…because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him… Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear… Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." (Acts 2:22-36)**

The people asked what to do. Peter replied:

> **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off." (2:38-39)**

Under the new covenant God will continue to forgive. He will forgive even the most heinous of sins, even the crucifixion of Jesus, even the rejection of God's beloved Son whom he had sent into this world. God forgives.

The Hebrew of Jer 31:34 has the word *forgive*. The Greek translation changed that to *be merciful*, replicated in Hebrews. Some English translations use *forgive* (NIV, CSB) or *pardon* (REB). Forgiveness is mercy. In mercy God does not give us what we deserve. In grace he gives us what we do not deserve. God forgives sin. On what basis does God forgive sin under the new covenant? The preacher will show this in the next two chapters.

Describing the Levitical priesthood he writes:

> **In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (9:22)**

The blood of sacrifices had to be shed again and again. He will then contrast this with Jesus's one-time offering of himself, by which he makes perfect forever. He closes the six-chapter long exposition of priesthood by repeating the words of Jeremiah, followed by the punchline:

> **"Their sins and lawless acts**
> **I will remember no more."**
>
> **And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. (10:17-18)**

God has accepted the self-offering of Jesus as atonement, as covering for sin. He extends forgiveness to all who will accept this gift. We come to Jesus. We give him our allegiance. We are united with him in his death and in his resurrection life, as symbolized in baptism. God welcomes us as his beloved sons and daughters, for Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. We are a forgiven people. Now we learn how to live into this forgiveness. We learn how to live transformed lives as God changes our minds and our hearts. We live in the security of this forgiveness. God forgives our wickedness, and our sins he never ever again remembers.

3. Conclusion (7:13)

> **By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. (8:13)**

The very announcement of a *new* covenant (v. 8; Jer 31:31) immediately rendered the first one *old*. It was now outdated, obsolete, ripe for replacement. Soon it would disappear. The transition occurred when the risen and ascended Jesus entered into God's presence in the true heavenly sanctuary, where he presented his own self as the offering, and took his seat at God's right hand. God accepted that offering. He accepted the blood as a covering for sin—the blood not of a dead animal but the blood of an indestructible life.

What we really need is forgiveness. God wants us to know him as a forgiving God. Yet this offends many people's sense of justice. There has to be payment. Someone has to pay for the wrongdoing. This has influenced even theories about the atonement. Jesus has to pay, either to restore God's honor or to pay the penalty for sin. This attitude reflects retributive justice. The danger is that evil is repaid with evil, that the wrongdoing is multiplied.

But there is another form of justice, restorative justice. When apartheid ended in South Africa, Nelson Mandela, recently freed from prison and now the new President, took the bold and brave decision to avert retributive justice. Many wanted revenge. Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu launched a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Wrongdoers and those wronged were brought together to tell the truth. The goal was not retribution but reconciliation. There could be no true reconciliation without acknowledging the truth. But once the truth was confessed, heard, received, and forgiven, there was a path forward to hope and freedom. Confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This is how it is with God. We confess our sins, he freely forgives our sins, and we are reconciled to him. We then live out our lives in this reconciled state as friends of God, as his family.

Lest we forget is a repeated refrain in a poem by Rudyard Kipling.[2] But it is not original to him. The line occurs four times in Deuteronomy: "Take care…lest you forget." Lest you forget the Lord. Lest you forget his covenant. Lest you forget his commandments. Lest you forget what you have seen him do for you. But the wilderness generation did forget.They forgot what they should have remembered. They squandered God's forgiveness.

So how do we hear these words: Take care lest we forget? As Christians we have our own memorial service. In Communion or the Lord's Supper we refresh our memory of Jesus and his offering of himself. We remember that he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). The blood of a new covenant. The blood of an indestructible life which the risen Jesus has carried into the true heavenly sanctuary and offered to God. The blood with which our sins are covered, and then forgiven. God has accepted that offering. He forgives our wickedness and never ever again remembers our sins. Thanks be to God who is reconciling the world to himself, not counting our sins against us (2 Cor 5:19).

1. Bernard Bell, "Formed through Forgiveness (Eph 4:32)," sermon preached at PBCC, August 10, 2014.

2. Rudyard Kipling, "Recessional" (1897).

DRAW NEAR—BUT NOT TOO NEAR!

Hebrews 9:1-10

#22, 2025.01.26

In 63 BC there was civil war in Israel, which for nearly 80 years had been an independent kingdom. The two sons of the previous king fought one another for the crown. Their conflict became sectarian, for one favored the Sadducees, the other the Pharisees. The great Roman general Pompey, who had been subduing Rome's enemies throughout the eastern Mediterranean, came to restore order. He entered deep into holy space. He entered the Holy Land, Israel. He entered the holy city, Jerusalem, when one faction opened a gate for him. He entered the holy precincts of the temple. He entered the temple itself. He even entered the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place. He penetrated to the very center of the hierarchy of sacred space. When he got there he was astonished. There was nothing there! There was no image of a deity, no statue. There was no ark of the covenant for that had disappeared five centuries earlier. Pompey could not understand a temple without an image. But for the Jews, Pompey had committed the ultimate sacrilege. He had desecrated the temple. He had come near, much too near. He had intruded on God's holy space. Henceforth the Jews anticipated that their God, the one true God, would judge Rome for this desecrating intrusion.

Holy space is not part of our thinking. We generally don't even refer to this space as the sanctuary, as sacred space. But holiness was central to the Jews' conception of the world. God had given them the gift of holy space, of a sacred geography. Our women have been studying the Book of Numbers, learning something about this sacred geography, this hierarchy of holy space. It was one aspect of God's covenant relationship with his people, Israel.

A covenant is a solemn binding agreement between two parties, though sometimes only one party is active in making that covenant. God's first covenant was with Noah, his family, and every living creature. After the Flood, God bound himself to never again bring such a Flood upon the earth to destroy it and all life. All life on earth was the beneficiary of this covenant, but not an active partner to it.

God's next covenant was with Abraham. It was a promise to provide him with a son and a land. A son from whom would come a great people and many nations, and a land in which they would dwell. It was a unilateral promise of a people and a home.

Four centuries later God liberated the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from harsh slavery in Egypt. He brought them to Mount Sinai, to himself. Here he made a covenant with them. This time the people were a party to the covenant. On God's side, he stated, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." On the people's side, they agreed to keep his commandments. These commandments were a great gift; they were the gift of order, showing how to live a well-ordered life in God's presence. The people were confident that they could keep these commandments, and thus keep their side of the covenant.

God put his presence among his people, and he invited them to draw near to him. But they were terrified by his presence. It is an awesome thing to be in the presence of God: awesome in both senses of the word. In the classic description of Rudolph Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, God is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a mystery which both terrifies and fascinates. His presence causes trembling that keeps one at a distance, but also fascination that draws one closer. God's people lived in the tension of these two forces: drawn towards God but terrified by his power and holiness. The Book of Hebrews is written into this space.

We return to this book after a break of nearly six months. So let me bring us up to speed. Most of us know of the three-fold office of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King. We are generally familiar with his role as prophet and king. As prophet, he spoke with divine authority. When he spoke it was God speaking. The Gospels affirm this many times. Our Scripture reading, John 14:1-10, affirmed this close connection between Jesus and his Father. The Jews of his day realized that he spoke with unusual authority. As king, he is now exalted and enthroned at God's right hand. This is in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1 "The Lord says to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.' " This is quoted several times in Hebrews. But we are much less familiar with Jesus as Priest. This is developed only in Hebrews, where it is the primary theme.

The heart of Hebrews is an exposition of Jesus as High Priest. There are two big questions to be resolved. First, how can Jesus be qualified to serve as a priest, since he is descended from the tribe of Judah not the tribe of Levi. The kings of that independent kingdom of Israel in the first century BC were also priests, who had grasped the crown. This violation of the separation of covenant offices was itself a sacrilege. But Jesus is both priest and king without it being a sacrilege. How so? In chapters 5–7 we have seen that he is high priest not in the order of Aaron, but after the more ancient order of Melchizedek, who was himself both priest and king. Jesus is a superior priest in that he has the power of an indestructible life thanks to his resurrection after a sinless life.

The second question concerns his offering. Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices (5:1; 8:3). What does Jesus offer? What does he bring to God? This is answered in 8:1–10:18. So we are approaching the answer to this question. We will soon discover the superior offering which he, the superior high priest, brings into God's presence.

The priesthood in Israel served under the old covenant. But this covenant had failed to bind God and his people together. It had failed to maintain God's presence amidst his people. It was not God who failed: he showed *hesed* love, faithful covenant loyalty. It was the people who failed, through their failure to keep the commandments. Repeatedly they were unfaithful, reverting to disordered lives of rebellion, idolatry, and injustice. Finally God had removed his presence from the temple, from among the people. Then he removed the people from the Land. Both went into exile.

But God promised a new covenant in which he would write his laws not on tablets of stone but on his people's hearts. He would forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more (Jer 31:34;

Heb 8:13). This is where we left off last July at the end of chapter 8. Now we will spend four weeks in chapter 9. The first section (1-10) looks back on that old covenant.

1. The Old Covenant (9:1)

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. (Heb 9:1 NIV)

Under the first covenant, the Mosaic or old covenant, God put his presence among his people. But how could a holy God dwell in the midst of a sinful people? The preacher focuses on two aspects of the relationship. There was a system of *regulations for worship* that governed *how* God could be approached. And there was an *earthly sanctuary where* he could be approached. These are spelled out in great detail in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. But this is often unexplored territory, just like the old maps with blank areas labeled *Terra Incognita*, unknown territory. But our woman are becoming acquainted with Numbers. I know some of you were none too excited about the prospect of exploring this virgin territory, but I hope you have found treasure there.

Here in Hebrews, the preacher briefly summarizes a large amount of material from those books. He addresses these two topics in reverse order, first the *earthly sanctuary* (2-5), then the *regulations for worship* (6-7). Finally he shows what God through his Spirit was showing by this arrangement (8-10).

2. The Earthly Sanctuary (9:2-5)

2 A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, 4 which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. 5 Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. (9:2-5)

The tabernacle was a tent with two chambers. The outer chamber, entered through a curtain, contained the menorah, a seven-branch lampstand in the form of a tree of life, And it contained the table on which was placed the bread of presence: twelve loaves representing the twelve tribes of Israel, present in God's presence. This outer chamber was called the Holy Place.

The inner chamber, behind a second curtain, was called the Holy of Holies, a Hebraic way of saying the Most Holy Place. It contained the golden incense altar. Now some of you may realize that in the instructions given in Exodus this altar is in the outer chamber immediately in front of the second curtain (Exod 30:6; 40:26). But in Solomon's temple it is described as belonging to the inner chamber (1 Kgs 6:22). The primary piece of furniture in there was the ark of the covenant, a chest containing three items. There was a jar of manna, testifying to God's provision for his people in the wilderness. There was Aaron's staff that budded, authenticating Aaron as the holy priest whom God had appointed to officiate in the regulations for worship. And there were the two stone tablets of the covenant: on each were written the Ten Commandments, which served as the treaty document between God and his people—two full copies, one for the Lord, one for the people.

Atop the ark was a solid gold lid, imaginatively called the *cover*, rendered in English as the *atonement cover* or the *mercy seat*. On this cover were two gold cherubim of the Glory. These were representations of heavenly beings that serve as the throne attendants of God. NIV capitalizes that word Glory to indicate this is God himself. When Moses finished raising the tabernacle, "the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod 40:34). Here God was enthroned between the cherubim, on top of the cover, with the ark as his footstool. This was the earthly throne room of the heavenly king. Here God put his presence in the midst of his people. Here, from between the cherubim, God met with and spoke to Moses.

Tabernacle means tent. It was also called the *mishkan*, the dwelling place, where the Lord put his presence; and the *miqdosh*, the holy place, for the God whose presence was there was holy. Later Solomon would build a permanent temple in Jerusalem, with the same symbolic theology.

Abruptly the preacher breaks off: one gets the sense he could have carried on for a while about the tent. But he says we can't now go into detail on all the parts of this arrangement. But if you want detail, you can consult my series of 17 sermons on the Tabernacle section of Exodus (chapters 25-40), preached in 2016–19 in preparation for this series on Hebrews.

3. Regulations for Worship (9:6-7)

Having described the earthly sanctuary, the preacher now describes the regulations for worship that took place there:

6 When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. 7 But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. (9:6-7)

It was unsafe for the Israelites to approach too close to God's holy presence. So he had set aside Aaron and his sons to be holy priests, mediating between the people and their God. This was their ministry or service, as described in great detail in Leviticus. The preacher focuses on just a small part of their ministry, that which takes place inside the tent.

In these two verses he contrasts the ministry of the priests and of the high priest. Priests entered the outer chamber, but only if they were on duty; they couldn't just wander in. They entered regularly, repeatedly, with oil and with bread. They tended the oil lamps on the menorah so that there would be a continual lamp in the Lord's presence (Ex 27:20; Lev 24:2). Every sabbath day they swapped out the twelve loaves so that these would be continually in the Lord's presence (Lev 24:8). This was a limited access repeated again and again. They could not enter the inner chamber.

Only the high priest could enter that Most Holy Place. He entered alone, once a year, not with oil or bread, but with blood. "Not without blood" as a double-negative is an emphatic way of saying he could only enter the inner sanctum if he brought blood.

The preacher is describing the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the tenth day of the seventh month. All the circles of holiness—of person, of time, of space—coincided in that moment: the holiest

person, the high priest, on the holiest day, Yom Kippur, entered the holiest place, the inner chamber of the earthly sanctuary of God's presence.

Why the blood? There is a lot of blood in Leviticus. The first seven chapters describe six different types of gifts and offerings to be brought near to the Lord. Most were unblemished animals to be sacrificed. They were slain, and the blood handled in various ways: thrown against the sides of the altar in the courtyard, or daubed on the horns of the altar, or on the right ear, thumb, and big toe for the ordination of a priest. We often associated blood with death. But blood is life and life-giving. The death of an unblemished animal released its lifeblood. This lifeblood acted as a detergent, as a purifying agent, removing ceremonial uncleanness or ritual impurity from a place or object.

Over the course of a year the impurities of the Israelites and their sins built up in God's holy sanctuary. Once a year the high priest took blood within the veil into the very center of the sanctuary, into God's presence. He took the blood of a bull as his own sin offering, and the blood of a male goat as a sin offering for the people. With his finger he sprinkled some of the blood on and in front of the cover. God accepted this as making atonement for that Holy Place. The sin offering was really a purification offering. The blood purged the space of its uncleanness, restoring its purity and holiness. The high priest did the same for the altar in the courtyard. He daubed blood on the horns of the altar to make atonement for it, that is "to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites" (Lev 16:19). He then laid both hands on a live goat, confessing over it all the iniquities, transgressions, and sins of the people. This goat was led out into the wilderness, removing all sin from the camp.

The Day of Atonement was a grand reset button. The sanctuary was purged of uncleanness which was contrary to its holy state. It was restored to being God's dwelling place, his holy sanctuary in the midst of his people. If the uncleanness were to build up unchecked, then God would leave his defiled sanctuary. Which is exactly what he eventually did. He went into exile and he sent his people into exile from the land that was no longer holy.

The Day of Atonement was a great gift from God, whereby he provided a means for the periodic cleansing of his sanctuary from his people's uncleanness and sin. But its effect was limited. The impurity immediately started to return. And the purging worked only for unintentional sins; it didn't work for intentional sins, for high-handed sins. What was sin? Sin was doing one of the Lord's commandments that ought not to be done. It was specifically acting contrary to the commandments, even if unintentionally, even without knowledge.

Forty years ago I worked in Geneva for two years. One evening I returned to my car to find a parking ticket. The paper pinned to my car was a long list of well over a hundred possible infractions with one checked. As I read through the list I realized I had broken one or other of those repeatedly, unknowingly, and probably every day.

Israel's regulations for worship dealt with the impurity caused by unintentional sin, followed by forgiveness. Not so for deliberate sin. David was guilty of breaking two of the Ten Commandments: do not commit adultery, and do not murder. He did both. His were extreme high-handed sins. In Psalm 51, read as our call to worship, he acknowledged the inadequacy of a sacrifice or burnt offering. He cast himself on God's mercy: "Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins" (Ps 51:1). He realized that what he needed was a divine washing, a clean heart, and a new spirit. He needed what was later promised in the new covenant.

God was in the midst of his people but it was a fenced presence. There was limited access. The tabernacle was at the center of a larger sacred geography with God himself at the center. The tabernacle was set in a courtyard, entered through another curtain. Outside that curtain was the camp of the priests, who were set apart as holy. On the other three sides the camp of the Levites, who were also set apart to assist the priests, and to be a protective barrier against the next zone: the camp of Israel, the twelve tribes. Beyond them was "outside the camp" where those with various unclean conditions were sent to wait out their impurity. As much as God embraced his people by putting his presence among them, the holiness of his presence was exclusionary. Draw near—but not too near! The three curtains in the sanctuary at the entrance to the courtyard, at the entrance to the tent, and at the entrance to the Most Holy Place, served to exclude more than to admit. They were barriers more than entrances. Yes, God was present among his people, but the way to his presence was not fully open. Draw near, but not too near! Nevertheless, this presence was a great gift.

Israel was to learn how to make distinctions: holy from common, clean from unclean, foods that could be eaten from foods that could not be eaten. Israel was to mirror God who himself had made distinctions in the beginning. He separated light from darkness, day from night, the waters above from the waters below. He made further distinctions. From among the peoples he separated the people of Israel to be his. He commanded Moses to separate the Levites from among the Israelites to be his, to bring them near to himself, serving in his tabernacle.

4. The Spirit's Lesson (9:8-10)

The Holy Spirit was saying something through this arrangement under the first covenant:

> **8 The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. 9 This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. 10 They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.** (9:8-10)

The various gifts and sacrifices were limited in their efficacy. The sin offerings and guilt offerings could purge uncleanness, so that the people be forgiven. But they couldn't clear the conscience of the one bringing them. You never knew whether you had unknowingly broken one of the commandments unintentionally. These regulations couldn't bring the worshiper to perfection, to God's end goal for humanity.

The regulations were a matter of food and drink and ceremonial washings. God gave detailed instructions on distinguishing clean animals, which could be eaten, from unclean animals which defiled or were detestable. Most cases of ritual impurity resolved with a

certain amount of time, followed by ceremonial washing. The preacher relativizes these as external regulations, literally "regulations of the flesh." They deal with the external, not with the internal person. They don't deal with the mind, the conscience, the will, the heart, the spirit. They apply until the time of the new order. That new order has arrived. In Christ the time of putting things right has come. Next week we will see how.

Meanwhile, this is the world into which Jesus was born. His birth rendered his mother Mary ritually unclean for forty days. "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed," Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:22). Her ritual impurity ended after forty days; it just required the passage of a specified time. But now she needed to offer a sacrifice to complete the process. Her impurity was not a sin, so her offering was not a sin offering but a purification offering. They brought two doves, indicating they were from the poorest level of society.

At that time the Pharisees sought to live at the same enhanced purity level as the priests. Since impurity was contagious they were careful about whom they associated with. They formed brotherhoods of those with similar purity. They looked down on the common people who couldn't live at that level. They engaged in a lot of ceremonial washing: of themselves, their pots and pans, their furniture, and much else. They were serious about keeping the commandments so they built a hedge or fence of many additional ones to keep them from breaking one of the 613 they counted in the Torah. A rabbi passed on this way of life to his disciples.

In many ways Jesus functioned like a rabbi with his disciples. But his behavior shocked the Pharisees. He associated with the wrong people, with sinners, tax collectors, lepers. He ate with the wrong people. He touched the wrong people. In the mind of the Pharisees he should have contracted massive impurity from all these encounters. But that is not what happened. Impurity was not contagious to him. He was so full of life that it flowed into those around him. He was so full of life that it overpowered the forces of death that surrounded him on all sides.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each record an encounter between Jesus and a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (Matt 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). She was perpetually unclean. She should not have been out in public, for she would render unclean anyone she touched. But she had heard about Jesus. So she crept up, reached out, and touched the hem of his garment. Immediately she was healed. And immediately Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him. Impurity should have entered him, but it was the other way around. Jesus was so full of life that it overwhelmed the forces of death emanating from this woman. His life flowed into her instead of her deathly condition flowing into him. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (Mark 5:34).

This abundance of life in Jesus attracted the common people to him. Here was one to whom they could cry, "Lord, have mercy!" He was not repelled by their uncleanness. He overcame it with his abundant life. Jesus invited all to come to him, to draw near—yes, that near, all the way to himself. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28).

But this abundance of life was threatening to the Jewish leadership, both Sadducees and Pharisees. It threatened the Sadducees, led by the high priest and the other chief priests, who had chosen the path of power and collaboration with the Roman authorities. It threatened the Pharisees, who had intensified the external regulations of the flesh with human rules of their own making. Both groups had allied with the forces of death. They excluded themselves from Jesus. Eventually they disposed of him as too big a threat.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). In the tabernacle the Spirit was showing that the way into the inner sanctum of God's presence was not yet opened. But Jesus brought God's presence near. That presence was not in the temple. There is no record of the Lord's glory returning to the temple after the exile. But his glory returned in Jesus:

> **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)**

When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple at 40 days, they encountered Simeon, who was "righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." He took baby Jesus in his arms and praised God: "my eyes have seen your salvation… a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:25, 30-32).

God's presence was again with his people, not hidden in an inner chamber accessible once a year. But in a person, moving around among the people, confronting the forces of death, and bringing life. But the leaders preferred darkness to light, so they entered into an unholy alliance with the enemy Romans to put him to death. The Pharisees could carry on living under their enhanced external regulations. The Sadducees could continue their pursuit of power. As for Jesus, could death hold this one who had such an abundance of life that counteracted the forces of death? Could he defeat Death itself?

Are we convinced that in Jesus there is an abundance of life? That people can draw near and approach him in all their brokenness and pain and find life? Or do we think only the right people can draw near? Do we tell them, "Don't draw near until your clean up your life and make yourself acceptable"? Jesus is so full of abundant life that he bids all draw near to him.

I saw this vividly at work with my parents. They were missionaries in Thailand and both worked with lepers when leprosy was still feared as contagious. My mother and other missionary nurses would cycle out in pairs to different villages, set up under a tree, and invite the lepers to draw near. How near? Yes, even that near: all the way. Near enough to touch. In the prevailing Buddhist ideology these lepers must have done something terrible in their previous life to be reincarnated into this condition; they were getting what they deserved. But the nurses welcomed them, touched them, treated their wounds, and gave them medication. Then they told them about Jesus, to whom they could draw near. Many came to faith.

My father taught a Bible School for them. He would come home after an evening of teaching, but my sisters and I could not draw near to him. Not until he had put off his clothes, bathed, and changed into clean clothes. Only then could we draw near.

God bids us draw near in Christ. How near? All the way near. Next week we will see how Jesus opens the way to draw near to God.

EXPLORING GOD'S STRANGE DESIGN

Hebrews 9:11-14

#23, 2025.02.02

Charles Wesley was one of the most prolific hymn-writers of all time; he composed over six thousand, many of which are in current hymnals. As students in Oxford, he and his brother John sought to live disciplined holy lives as members of the Holy Club. They were ordained as Anglican ministers, and engaged in overseas mission in what would become the colony, then state, of Georgia. But they did not have hearts set free. At the age of 30 Charles had an evangelical conversion experience. Three days later his brother John had a similar experience. John wrote in his journal: "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins."

Charles's response to his conversion experience was to write a hymn, *And Can It Be?* "And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood?" Verse two begins, " 'Tis mystery all! Th'Immortal dies! Who can explore His strange design?" But we *are* trying to explore God's strange design as we work our way through the Book of Hebrews. What is the deal with our Savior's blood? How does the blood of Jesus work? How do we gain an interest in that blood? Jesus, the immortal Son incarnate, enfleshed in human body and blood, died. This death by crucifixion is usually placed at the center of the mystery. But this is not what Hebrews places at the center.

We are 2½ years into this series on Hebrews and this is sermon 23. At last we come to the heart of the preacher's written sermon, to the climactic moment, to the heart of the mystery of God's strange design. The distinct contribution of this book is the high priesthood of Jesus. He has been appointed high priest in the order of Melchizedek. He is superior to all the previous high priests who were in the Levitical order of Aaron. Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices (5:1; 8:3). What does Jesus as high priest offer? Just as he is a *superior* high priest, so his offering must be a *superior* offering.

Last week's passage (9:1-10) was all about the ministry of the priests and high priests under the old covenant. That covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly tabernacle. Priests entered the outer chamber of the tabernacle to perform their liturgical service. Only the high priest could go behind the veil into the inner chamber to perform his service, and that only once a year on the Day of Atonement. For both priest and high priest this was important and effective service. But it was inadequate and only partially effective because it had to be repeated over and over again.

In today's passage (9:11-14) we see the ministry of Christ the great high priest under the new covenant. Just like under the old covenant, there is a sanctuary which he enters (11-12) and a liturgical service which he performs there (13-14). Christ, the superior high priest, enters into the true sanctuary, there to present a superior offering.

1. Entrance (9:11-12)

We begin with his entrance into the sanctuary:

> **11 But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. 12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. (Heb 9:11-12 NIV)**

But Christ! The "but" here introduces a sharp contrast to the first covenant with its regulations for worship and earthly sanctuary, with its priests and high priests who had limited access and whose work was never done. But Christ! 'Tis music to the ear. At last!

The external regulations of the first covenant were in place only until the time of the new order (9:10). That new order has now arrived in Christ: "when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here." When did he make this appearance as high priest?

During his life on earth he could not be a priest, let alone a high priest, for there were "already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law" (8:4). Aaron and his descendants were those priests under the old covenant. Jesus was not of their lineage. According to Hebrews there are two things that qualified Christ to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek under the new covenant. First, he has been made perfect (5:9; 7:28). Perfection is a key theme in the book. It is not used in a moral sense, but in a teleological sense. That is, it means attaining the intended final goal or state. Jesus was brought by God to the final state that God intended for this human being. This perfection process included his faithful suffering unto death (2:10). The second qualification is the power of his indestructible life (7:16); he now lives forever (7:24-25). His appointment as high priest is tied to both his being perfected and his eternal life.

This points to his resurrection. He was raised a perfected, everliving, transformed human with body and blood. He was raised a human being fit for the new order. He was raised into the new creation, firstborn from the dead. His appointment as high priest is also closely tied to his ascension. It is only after the ascension that he commences his liturgical service as high priest.

It is common in Protestant circles to talk of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Thus Protestant theology is usually focused on the cross. But according to Hebrews his work is not yet finished there. Hebrews pays little attention to the cross, mentioning it only once (12:2), and that obliquely. It does mention his death and his blood many times, but not in conjunction with the cross. When he died on the cross his work as high priest had not even begun. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ are of great importance, and worthy of far more attention than we normally give them.

Verses 11-12 form a single sentence in Greek, beautifully-constructed, but difficult to translate as such into contemporary Eng-

lish. The main thought is *Christ entered*. He entered through "the greater and more perfect tabernacle." The old covenant tabernacle with its inner and outer "tents" was only an earthly representation or analog of a greater, heavenly reality.

Moses was instructed to make the tabernacle and its furniture according to the pattern the Lord showed him on Mt Sinai (Exod 25:9, 40). It was made with human hands; it was part of this creation. Not so the greater and more perfect tabernacle that Jesus entered; he entered the archetype, which is neither made with human hands, nor part of this creation.

Jesus entered *through* the tabernacle to enter *into* the inner sanctuary. Our high priest "serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being" (8:2). Elsewhere in Hebrews he passed *through the heavens* (4:14), is exalted *above the heavens* (7:26), and *entered heaven itself*, into God's very presence (9:24). This greater tent through which he passed is already not made by hand, not of this creation. The lower realms of heaven are part of creation, for the supernatural beings who are there, such as angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, are created beings. But as the ascending Christ penetrated the heavens he ultimately reached the realm of God himself, where God has been from before the beginning of creation. He entered into the very presence of God, where the Son had been since before the beginning.

Christ's entrance into this realm was also the Son's return to this realm. It was through the Son that God created the universe, and it is the Son who sustains all things by his powerful word (1:2-3). The Son is pre-existent and superior to the created realm, including the created heavens. And so the eternal Son returned through the created heavens to the uncreated realm of God himself. The Father had sent his Beloved Son to earth on a mission, to become incarnate as a human. He took on flesh and blood to become like us in every way, to share in our humanity, body and blood, even unto death. Now he returned to the Father, having faithfully fulfilled this mission. But he was no longer "just" the eternal Son. In returning he did not put off his humanity. He took that humanity into God's presence.

But how could a human being who was part of this creation enter beyond the created realm into God's presence? The humanity of Jesus Christ was now a perfected humanity, a humanity that had been brought to its telos, its intended state. The path to that perfection was faithful obedience, even unto death, even the most gruesome death under intense suffering. But this Jesus had been raised by God into a new resurrection body. He was raised into the new creation. He was raised into a body fit for God's presence.

Jesus had some interesting things to say about his body. All four Gospels record Jesus cleansing the temple in Jerusalem; John places this near the beginning (2:13-22); the other Gospels in his final week. The Jewish leaders challenged Jesus to show his authority to do such a thing. In John's account he replied, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). They objected that they had already spent 46 years building this temple, Herod's temple. The charge was brought against Jesus at his trial: "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with human hands and in three days will build another, not made with hands' " (Mark 14:58). Only after the resurrection did Jesus's disciples remember and realize he was speaking of the temple of his body.

His physical body was the temple, the place where God was present on earth among his people. "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us" (John 1:14). It was a body of this creation, flesh and blood like ours. But his resurrection body was not of this creation. It was the body of a new creation, made by God through his Spirit. It was a body ready to enter the highest heavens into God's presence. Perhaps then we can say that his resurrection body is the true and perfect tabernacle by means of which he entered into the inner sanctuary of God's presence.

The annual passage of Israel's high priest through the outer chamber of the tent to reach the Most Holy Place was an analog of the future passage of the risen and ascending Christ through the heavens to reach God himself. The earthly high priest brought the blood of goats and calves, but Jesus brought his own blood. The earthly high priest had to repeat this passage every year, but Christ entered once and for all.

The final statement of this long sentence is that Christ thus obtained eternal redemption. Did he secure that redemption before, with, or as a result of his entrance into the true sanctuary? English translations differ on this. Theological positions differ. Redemption is liberation. God redeemed the Israelites from Egypt; he set them free from their oppressive bondage to Pharaoh. He brought them to himself to become his people, to serve and worship him. God in Christ sets his people free from bondage to the greater forces of death: sin, evil, and death itself. He liberates us into the new creation. He liberates us to become his people in Christ. But what does he liberate us for?

In sum, this first sentence (11-12) describes the passage of Christ, the high priest, by means of his blood, into God's very presence, there to remain. What does he do on entering the inner sanctuary? What offering does he bring?

2. Offering (9:13-14)

Verses 13-14 also form a single carefully-constructed sentence, with two clear halves, contrasting the offerings of the old covenant (13) with the offering brought by Christ (14):

> **13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!** (9:13-14)

The blood of bulls and goats alludes to the Day of Atonement (Lev 16), when the High Priest would enter the Most Holy Place. He would sprinkle the blood on the lid of the ark of the covenant to make atonement for it, to cleanse it from the impurities that had built up over the previous year due to the sin and uncleannesses of the people encamped around the sanctuary.

The ashes of the heifer allude to Numbers 19, and the elaborate procedure for purifying those who had been rendered unclean by contact with a dead human body. Our women have recently studied this chapter.

These were effective: the life-blood of a bull and a goat sprinkled on the ark did indeed purify it. The sprinkling of water mixed with ashes on those contaminated by a corpse did purify them. But this was an outward purification. The uncleanness and cleanness were rit-

ual or ceremonial. These were regulations of the flesh. They were not permanent. They did not change the inner person.

But since they were effective in their limited scope, how much more effective is the blood of Christ which he has taken into the inner sanctum of God's presence. The Levitical high priest took blood in a basin into the Most Holy Place. Christ took his blood into the sanctuary in his own living body. It was the life-blood of one who had the power of an indestructible life. It was the life-blood of one who had been raised into the new creation. How much more powerful is that blood!

Notice that this is a Trinitarian moment: Christ, through the eternal Spirit, offered himself to God. In the beginning, in this highest of heavens which preceded creation, the Godhead was a communion of perfect love: Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father loved the Son in and through the Spirit. The Son returned that love to the Father in and through the Spirit. Lover, Beloved, and Love itself in perfect communion. There was a loving gaze, eye-to-eye, face-to-face, between the Father and the Son who was "in his bosom," in his embrace. This mutual gaze of love mediated by the Spirit is the engine that drives everything else. This gaze is glory.

As I said earlier, the Father sent the Son on a mission: to become incarnate and dwell among humanity on earth. He came to help Abraham's descendants, "made like them, fully human in every way" (2:17). He took on flesh and blood (2:14). The Son now returns to the Father, his earthly mission complete. But he has not put off his humanity. The eternal Son is also the now risen and ascended Christ. He brings that perfected and ever-living humanity with him into God's presence. He can do that because his humanity is no longer part of this creation, but part of the new creation, with the power of an indestructible life. The forces of death were completely vanquished. In his new-creation humanity he brings an abundance of life. This life-blood of a living, new-creation, human high priest is able to do so much more than the blood of now-dead, old-creation, goats and bulls.

The risen and ascended Christ Jesus is the new head of the human race. Adam was the first head, but he failed in this role. Israel was chosen to be the new humanity, with Abraham at the head. But Israel failed. The risen Jesus, the son of Abraham, true and faithful Israel, is the new Adam, the new head. Irenaeus, second-century church father and bishop of Lyon, called this *recapitulation*, re-heading, providing the human race with a new head. Paul writes of the mystery of God's will which he purposed in Christ: to bring everything together in him (Eph 1:10). The verb he uses there is *recapitulate* in its Greek form: to sum up everything in a new head. In the risen Christ God has provided a new Head in whom he sums up all things. When we are in Christ we are in this new humanity. So, Charles Wesley wrote, "Alive in Him, my Living Head."

But how do we have an interest in the Savior's blood? Under the old covenant the one bringing a sacrifice laid his hand upon the head of the animal to indicate this was his, whose life-blood was going to be used to cleanse and purify the sanctuary from his sin and impurity. In the new covenant we access Christ's life-blood by participating in him. We give our allegiance to him and begin to follow him. When we do so, we are said to be "in Christ." In union with Christ, we participate in his death and in his resurrection. We follow him in death and resurrection. We die to self and we are raised into new life. This happens through the Spirit, who is God's empowering presence among us. When we entrust ourselves to Christ we no longer belong to ourselves but to him. Our physical bodies remain part of this creation, but our identity is in the new creation. And when we belong to Christ we become children of Abraham, heirs of God's promise to him of a people and a home. We become those whom Christ helps.

Through our identification by faith with Christ and his offered life-blood, we are cleansed. This is not an external cleansing, reversing ritual impurity. We don't live under such systems of clean and unclean, things that can be eaten and things that cannot be eaten. Availing ourselves of our Savior's life-blood by identification with him cleanses our conscience. There is an inner change. As John Wesley wrote, "My heart was strangely warmed." It was certainly that way for me 47 years ago; it was like going from night to day, darkness to light. My whole inner person began to change.

There is a purpose to this: that we may serve the living God! God placed the first human in the garden to serve him. He redeemed the Israelites from Egypt and brought them to himself to serve him. From within Israel he set aside the Levites to serve him more particularly. From among them he set aside the priests to serve him more particularly still. Now we are redeemed, liberated in order to serve him. Such service is not harsh slavery; that's what we were set free from. Although Paul did call himself a slave of Christ, service in Christ unto God is true freedom.

Paul exhorted the Romans:

> **I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Rom 12:1-2a)**

This is our liturgical service unto God. We don't follow a detailed list of commandments like the Law given to Israel. We follow the Spirit who is at work in us to transform us into Christ-likeness. We are set free to love God and to love neighbor as ourselves, both our near neighbor and our far neighbor.

This is represented by the three pairs of hands in our window. One pair reaches up to God, in praise to him, to receive his Spirit who mediates the life of the slain but risen Lamb to us, and to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. One pair reaches horizontally to one another in the community of faith. We love one another as near neighbor, as brothers and sisters in God's family, as members of the body of which Christ is the Head. The third pair reaches out to the world to love our far neighbor.

In this we all serve together. It is not the case that only the professionals do the work of service. We all do. Crucial to the self-understanding of the PBC churches is Ephesians 4:11-16.

> **Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ…let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ. From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for**

building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part. (Eph 4:11-16)

We all engage in works of service unto the Lord. This is the vital principal of the priesthood of all believers. This is what we have been liberated for. Since our role is to faithfully serve the Lord, we can be confident that his role is to create the opportunities for us to walk into, to create the good works for us to do, and to create the willing spirit to do them. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "we work out [our] own salvation…for it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13).

We do all this under God's loving gaze, in his presence. In his presence here on earth, and in his presence in the throne room since we are there in Christ our Head. There is a Latin phrase for this attitude: *coram Deo*, in the presence of God. As members of the new creation, of Christ's body, the Church, may we be conscious that all that we do is *coram Deo*, in God's presence.

Irenaeus wrote, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." This is often quoted. But it is often misused, to justify and glorify whatever activity we feel makes us most alive. But it omits the second half of his statement: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive; and to be alive consists in beholding God." This is true above all of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ. He, who beholds God face-to-face, is the supreme human being most fully alive. This will be true of us at the end when we shall see God's face (Rev 22:4). Meanwhile we live out our lives in Christ *coram Deo*, before God, looking to him, and knowing his look of pleasure on us for we are his beloved sons and daughters. That gaze which he directed to his Son before the beginning, he directs to the risen and ascended Christ in his presence, and now directs also to us, for we are alive and present in him, our living Head. In the freedom of being his children we give him our service as our liturgical act. Through his Spirit he creates in us both the will and the ability to do so.

This paragraph is pivotal in the central section of Hebrews about the high-priesthood of Jesus (5:1–10:18). It is bracketed by invitations to draw near to God (4:14-16; 10:19-25):

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God… Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. (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 the full assurance that faith brings. (10:19-22)

So, Charles Wesley ended his hymn with these words: "Bold I approach the eternal throne."

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, whose service is perfect freedom. Amen.

Collect for Augustine of Hippo

WASHED IN BLOOD

Hebrews 9:15-22

#24, 2025.02.16

Two weeks ago we asked "Who can explore God's strange design?" Charles Wesley asked this question in his hymn *And Can It Be?* which we sang that Sunday. At the center of God's strange design is Jesus Christ, crucified, raised, and ascended on high. We affirm this in the Apostles' Creed:

> I believe…in Jesus Christ, [God's] only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty…

Every statement there is surprising in one way or another. Each is an important element in God's strange design. Each has an important role in Hebrews: Jesus's incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and session at God's right hand.

There is another element of strange design that forms the backdrop to this statement about Jesus. This is God's choice of Israel to play an important role in his design. Earlier this week a little ditty popped into my mind, one that I hadn't heard in many years: "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Strictly speaking it is inappropriate to talk of the Jews until after the Babylonian exile, when it was the Judahites that went into Captivity. More broadly, the Israelites were the Chosen People. This was a great gift, though not all appreciated being the focus of God's special attention. As Tevye says in *Fiddler on the Roof*: "I know, I know. We are your chosen people. But once in a while, can't you choose someone else?" Why did God choose this people?

The Table of Nations (Gen 10) describes seventy nations, the descendants of Noah's sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, who after the Flood spread out across the earth, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations. Among them was Abraham, living in Ur. Like all the other people and peoples, he served other gods; he was no different or better.

But the Lord called Abraham to leave everything behind: his clan, his land, his people, his gods. In the midst of all the other peoples he was to found a new people in a new land. A people and a home: this was the Lord's promise. A people who would be the recipients of God's blessing and conduit for that blessing to reach all peoples. The Lord called Abraham to live a different life, one lived in relation to the Lord. The Lord sealed this relationship with a covenant that bound them together.

Many centuries later God liberated this now-numerous people from slavery in Egypt. They were no better than other peoples. He brought them to Mount Sinai, to himself. He stated his purpose: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." There at Sinai he entered into covenant with this people, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Exod 24:1-13).

The Book of Hebrews has described this as the first covenant. This covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary (9:1); *how* to approach God and *where* to approach God. The tabernacle where God dwelt in the midst of his people, and a system of sacrifices mediated by priests to regularly purge the sanctuary of impurity so the holy God would remain there. If not, the impurities would build up, the sanctuary would become defiled, and God would remove his presence. This first covenant was a great gift, but it was provisional. There were things it could not accomplish.

It could not take away sins (10:4,11); the sins kept occurring and the impurities built up. The old covenant provided sin management not sin removal.

Secondly, the first covenant could not bring perfection; it could not bring humans to the final state that God intended for them. There are multiple statements of this in Hebrews: "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood" (7:1), i.e. it couldn't; "the law made nothing perfect" (7:19); the "sacrifices being offered were not able to clear [perfect] the conscience of the worshiper" (9:9); "the law…can never…make perfect those who draw near to worship" (10:1).

But Christ has offered himself, both offerer and offering, once and for all. He entered the true sanctuary, that is not part of this creation, because in his resurrection body he is part of the new creation. He entered with his lifeblood, the power of an indestructible life, which is able to "cleanse our consciences from dead works so that we can serve the living God" (9:14). This is where we reached two weeks ago.

Jesus, risen from the dead into the new creation, had attained perfection; he is now the complete human being. God has made "the pioneer of…salvation *perfect* through what he suffered" (2:10); "once made *perfect*, he became the source of eternal salvation for those who [heed] him" (5:9); he "has been made *perfect* forever" (7:28).

As we continue through Hebrews 9, this chapter that lies at the very heart of Hebrews, the preacher next presents the self-offering of Jesus against the backdrop of the old covenant. Jesus was a Jew, and his life, death, resurrection, and ascension were within the context of Israel's story, a story that centered on the old covenant.

> **For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. (Heb 9:15 NIV)**

"For this reason" points us back to the previous paragraph, where the blood of Christ is far more effective that the blood of goats and calves. Because the blood of Christ is effective, he is the mediator of a new covenant, a superior covenant (8:6). A mediator may negotiate an agreement between two parties, or seek to reconcile two parties that are estranged. Christ reconciles God and his people, not under the old covenant which is broken, but under a new covenant. He can do this because he is fully human and fully divine. God and humanity are met in him. He, uniquely, can bring God and humanity together.

There is a purpose: "that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance." Inheritance is an important theme in Hebrews. Abraham "was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance… By faith he went to live in the land of promise" (11:8-9). Yet he did not attain the promised inheritance on this earth. He died without taking possession of that land.

The risen and ascended Christ has been appointed heir of all things, inheriting the superior name; he is enthroned at God's right hand, in fulfillment of his promise to and covenant with David (1:2-4).

Those whom Christ calls his brothers and sisters (2:11) become partakers in the "heavenly calling" (3:1). We faithfully persevere in our journey towards the unshakeable kingdom, the new heavens and the new earth where we shall be fully in God's presence, as Christ already is. This is the promise held out by the new covenant: God and his people dwelling together in a manner far beyond the first covenant. A people and a home. A permanent home, our inheritance.

There is a means to Christ becoming the mediator of this new covenant: "now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (NIV). A more literal translation is "because a death has taken place for redemption from the transgressions committed under the first covenant" (CSB).

A death has happened. Whose death? It is clear this must be the death of Christ. Death happened to him, as if he were completely passive. Why did Jesus die? Why did death happen to Christ? We can give several answers, some of them straight out of Hebrews, others from the Gospels. I will give eight.

Death happened to him in solidarity with mortal human beings. He shared in our humanity (2:14). He was made like us, fully human in every way (2:17), including our mortality. Charles Wesley's hymn stated, " 'Tis mystery all, th' immortal dies." The immortal, eternal Son of God, put on a mortal human body, and died. He lived a complete human life, from conception in Mary's womb to death and burial. He knows what it is to be human, including the experience of death.

Secondly, death happened as a result of suffering. We talk of his Passion, meaning his suffering, beginning with his agony in the garden, ending in death and burial. He suffered when he was tempted or tested. He was tested in the wilderness, when he went forty days without food. He was tested on the cross: the suffering of death, that is, suffering unto death. He suffered in extremis, to the uttermost. The manner of death that happened to him was the most painful, humiliating, shameful, degrading death possible. He was tempted or tested in every way, yet he did not sin (4:16). He knows what it is to be tested and tempted; he knows what it is to suffer even unto death.

Both his humanity and his suffering are vital qualifications for his ongoing ministry as a merciful and faithful high priest who intercedes for us.

Third, death happened as a result of rejection by his own people. The Jewish leaders handed him over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion. There could be no stronger statement of rejection.

Fourth, he died as a covenant-breaker. The Jewish authorities charged him with blasphemy, for which the penalty was death under the first covenant. This covenant required obedience to the commandments. These commandments were good; they were the gift of order. God promised blessing for keeping the commandments, and warned of curses for breaking them. The ultimate covenant curses were death and exile. Jesus had lived a life of complete faithfulness, yet was condemned by his own people, God's people, to die and to go into exile in Death. He died under the covenant curse.

Fifth, Jesus died as a substitute. Caiaphas said, "it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." The gospel-writer treats this as a prophecy "that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation" (John 11:51-52). Specifically, Jesus died in the place of Barabbas, who was to be crucified as a rebel or insurrectionist (Gk *lēstēs*).

Sixth, Jesus died, treated as an insurrectionist. When Jesus cleansed the temple, he accused the Jewish leaders of making it a "den of robbers (*lēstai*)" (Mark 11:17, quoting Jer 7:11). *Robber* is too weak a translation; the word means *rebel* or *insurrectionist*. The leaders were rebelling against God just as in the days of Jeremiah. When Jesus was arrested in the garden, he said "Is it as an insurrectionist (*lēstēs*) that you have come out armed to seize me" (Mark 14:48). He was crucified between two insurrectionists, and in place of another insurrectionist, Barabbas. So Jesus was numbered among the transgressors, among the rebels. Yet he was the only one faithful to God.

Seventh, Jesus died at the hands of the great power of the day. Crucifixion was a dramatic display of Roman authority and power. He was crushed, and the Romans and the Jewish leaders thought that was the end of it. The eternal Son had given up power, status, privilege in becoming human. Jesus could have called upon legions of angels, but he chose to continue the downward path of humiliation, powerlessness, weakness. He submitted as a lamb to the slaughter.

Eighth, death happened as the climax of evil. It seemed that evil had triumphed. But evil thereby exhausted itself. Having put God to death, there is nothing worse that evil can do.

For all these reasons death happened to Jesus. Some people add additional reasons: that Jesus had to pay a price or suffer a penalty for our sin, or that God laid our sins upon him. But I don't find this within the Old Covenant framework within which his death occurs.

Theologians talk of Jesus's *active* and *passive* obedience. His life was one of active obedience to God's will. His suffering and death was passive obedience, drinking the cup which God had given him to drink, the cup which he had refused to decline in the garden of Gethsemane. Death happened to Jesus.

Jesus was faithful to God to the very end. He fully completed the role of obedient servant. He succeeded where Adam, where Israel had failed. So when death happened to him, Death had no claim on him. Death swallowed the only human who had no place in its realm. Could Death hold on to him? The supernatural world waited in suspense: the angelic beings wondered what would happen. One earth, the disciples had fled. The Jewish leaders rushed around to get the Romans to secure the tomb. The women, remarkably, were calm on that sabbath day (Luke 23:56b). The body of Jesus lay still, alone, in sabbath rest between the ages. On the first day of the week, Death had to give this body up. God raised Jesus into the new creation, in

which the risen Christ now has the power of an indestructible life. The power of Death is broken.

A purpose or result is stated for this death: he "died as a ransom to set them free" (NIV), or "for redemption" (CSB). His death as a *ransom* suggests the payment of a price, but to whom was that paid? The word translated *ransom* is very similar to the word translated *redemption* (9:12). It is unfortunate that NIV uses two different words. Most English versions are consistent: redemption (KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV, CSB) or liberation (REB) in both places. In the Greek translations of Israel's scriptures these words are used for God's liberation of his people from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt so that they might serve the living God, whom to serve is perfect freedom. There was no payment of a price or a penalty. God acted to free his people; he liberated them. This has now happened with the death of Jesus. It liberates; it sets people free.

Looking back, Christ's death liberates from the transgressions, the willful sins committed under the first covenant (15). Looking ahead, his entrance into the true sanctuary, God's presence, obtains eternal redemption (12). In both cases his blood is somehow involved in this liberation.

As a result of his submission to death and his liberation from death, Christ has become the mediator of a new covenant. In this new covenant, in which one is reconciled to God, one receives the promised eternal inheritance. This promise goes all the way back to Abraham: the promise of a people and a home. The people are those whom the risen Christ is not ashamed to call his brothers and sisters (2:11). We are of the same family, united with Christ. We are partakers in the heavenly calling (3:1). Our home will be the inheritance, the heavenly Zion, the unshakeable city, where we shall enter fully into God's presence. Christ, our older brother, is already there.

All this is because death happened to Jesus, the one, true, faithful human being, the one, true, faithful Israel. He has been made perfect. He has fulfilled the human trajectory. He has fulfilled the Israel trajectory. His death has brought in the promised new covenant.

The preacher details the relationship between death and covenant:

16 In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, 17 because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. (9:16-17)

NIV and most other English versions use the word *will* in both verses, but this is the same word translated *covenant* elsewhere. There is considerable debate about these two verses, and who it is that has to die.

Most English versions assume this is about a *will*, which is what the Greek word does mean in secular use. This will goes into effect only on the death of the one making the will. It is assumed this must be the death of Jesus, as a result of which his followers receive the inheritance. But this isn't the way inheritance works in Hebrews. Jesus himself receives his inheritance. He is heir of all things (1:2); he enters into his inheritance at his ascension and session at God's right hand (1:4).

Others take the word to mean *covenant*, as in the rest of Hebrews, the NT, and the Greek OT. Some think this is about covenant in general. In some Biblical covenants an animal is killed. In the case God's covenant with Abraham, animals were cut in half to form an avenue, through which God passed in form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch (Gen 15:7-21). God's promise was a self-maledictory oath, meaning may he, the covenant-maker, be likewise treated if he break the covenant. Thus the death is of these animals and symbolically of the covenant-maker. But the First Covenant isn't inaugurated by this sort of ceremony.

A third option is to take this as referring specifically to the Old Covenant, which has been broken. This fits the context here in Hebrews which is all about the First Covenant. The covenant-makers, now covenant-breakers, have brought upon themselves the covenant curse of death. It is necessary for this death to be borne, which it is by Christ, on whom is placed the covenant curse.

A fourth option is that it is necessary for the death of the covenant-maker to be offered, here specifically referring to Christ's offering of himself in full obedience unto death in order to inaugurate a new covenant. This new covenant is not yet in force while Jesus is alive; it comes into force only after death and his self-offering, first on the cross and then in the heavenly sanctuary.

Now I'm certainly not going to resolve all the issues with these two verses, nor is a sermon the appropriate place for that. Biblical scholars and theologians will continue to wrestle with this sentence. Suffice to say, the context is the old covenant which is broken, and there is a close association between the death of Jesus and the new covenant that replaces the first one.

The preacher next elaborates on the relationship between blood and the old covenant, the covenant mediated by Moses at Sinai:

18 This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. 19 When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. 20 He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." 21 In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. (9:18-21)

In our Scripture reading (Exod 24:1-13) we heard how the Old Covenant was enacted. Moses built an altar at the foot of Mt Sinai, where the people were assembled. He took the blood of sacrificial animals and threw half against the altar. He read the Book of the Covenant to the people, and they agreed to be obedient; they were confident that they could do all that God commanded. He threw the remaining blood on the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." There is a close association between the blood and the making of the covenant. The leaders then enjoyed a fellowship meal in God's presence. God and his people were now bound together, with the commandments as the basis.

The preacher broadens his horizon to include the consecration of the tabernacle and its furniture (21), the earthly sanctuary and the site of the regulations for worship.

There was a lot of blood. Blood for the inauguration of the covenant. Blood for the inauguration and consecration of the tabernacle and its altar. Blood for the ongoing sacrificial system. Blood was daubed on the horns of the altar, it was sprinkled on the atonement cover, it was thrown against the side of the altar of burnt offering, it was poured out at the base of the altar. All this blood

represented life not death. Yes, an animal died, but the focus is not on the death of the animal. The death of an unblemished animal released its lifeblood. There was power in that lifeblood: power to cleanse.

So the preacher concludes:

> **In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (9:22)**

The lifeblood of an unblemished sacrificial animal was a cleansing agent, a detergent removing impurity from the holy sanctuary. This was necessary so that the holy God would continue to live in their midst, and so that people who had become unclean could be released from their state and restored to full participation in the community. Yes, the law required that nearly everything be cleansed with blood. There was power in that lifeblood.

Under the First Covenant, forgiveness followed that cleansing. There is a repeated refrain in Leviticus (10×) and Numbers (2×) when laypeople bring certain sacrifices for sin: the priest shall "atone" on his/their behalf, and it shall be forgiven him/them. The blood does not accomplish the forgiveness. The blood removes the uncleanness. Forgiveness follows as a gift.

It seems that the preacher has coined a word here: this is the first known use of the single word *shedding-of-blood*. He has combined two words that are used together in the Greek OT. We usually think of bloodshed as violence. It is occasionally used this way, notably in God's statement to Noah after the Flood: "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed" (Gen 9:6).

But this is not how these words are used under the First Covenant. They refer to the pouring out of blood in the Levitical sacrificial rites. This is not the blood of violent death, but lifeblood that cleanses. Once that cleansing has happened, forgiveness is God's gift.

Many think the shedding-of-blood looks ahead to Jesus's violent, bloody death on the cross. But the parallel with the first covenant suggests the deployment of Jesus's life-blood—living lifeblood which he carries into the true sanctuary in his living new resurrection body. He is very much alive with the power of an indestructible life.

The word translated *forgiveness* here has a broader meaning of *release*. Eleven times in the NT it is used with the word sins, meaning release from sins, that is forgiveness of sins. On its own the word is used in the Greek OT for the release on the Sabbatical Year, every seventh year, the year of release. Bond-slaves are released, debts are released, lent goods are released (Deut 15). It is a liberating reset for the entire community. The word is also used for the much greater release in the Year of Jubilee, every fiftieth year, after seven Sabbatical cycles (Lev 25). On the Day of Atonement in that year the trumpet was sounded and liberty proclaimed throughout the land.

> **The Spirit of the Lord is on me,**
> **because he has anointed me**
> **to proclaim good news to the poor.**
> **He has sent me to proclaim *freedom* for the prisoners**
> **and recovery of sight for the blind,**
> **to set the oppressed *free*,**
> **to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)**

This is what Jesus's death accomplishes under the New Covenant: liberty, release from bondage and slavery into freedom. Jesus announced this at the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue in Nazareth. On the sabbath day the scroll was handed to him, he unrolled it, and read from Isaiah:Freedom for the prisoners and the oppressed. Release from their captivity. Jesus sat down and said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21).

This is what the death of Jesus accomplishes by inaugurating a new covenant. He died, but death could not hold him captive. He was released from death into the new creation. He invites all, Jew and Gentile alike, to join him in death and resurrection. When we do so we are released from our bondage. We are transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. We are united to Christ. We participate in his resurrection life, the life of the new creation, the life of freedom. As we lean into this life we start learning how to walk to the beat of a different drum, how to live the Jesus way, how to live in the freedom of Christ. We present our whole selves to God as our spiritual worship. The Spirit sets to work, transforming us into the likeness of Christ. This is about so much more than sins forgiven. Yes, sins are forgiven, but there's a much greater release as we enter into resurrection life.

We keep our eyes on Jesus, Christ before us. He is our forerunner who has finished his journey. He was released from death into new resurrection life, in which he has entered into God's very presence. He keep our eyes fixed on him. And we walk together in this pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem. And we are cheered on by a great company of spectators, the faithful saints who have finished their journey and entered into God's rest, into full liberation.

This passage begins and ends with *liberation* (15,22). In Christ God sets us free. Thanks be to God! As Charles Wesley wrote in another of his hymns:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean;
his blood availed for me.

> *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)*

CHRIST APPEARS FOR US

Hebrews 9:23-28

#25, 2025.02.23

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This first sentence of the Bible is among its most famous. Many outside the Jewish or Christian faiths know it. Most people instinctively recognize that "the heavens and the earth" is a merism, expressing a totality. God created everything. The earth we can understand: it is the Blue Marble set in the vastness of space. But what about the heavens? The word has multiple referents, in English as well as in biblical Hebrew and Greek. The birds fly across the heavens. Further out, the sun, moon, and stars shine in the heavens. Still further, beyond our gaze, are the supernatural beings in the transcendent heavens: the angels and archangels, the cherubim and seraphim. Three levels of the heavens, each part of this creation.

There is another realm of heaven that is not part of this creation. It is beyond creation, above creation. It is beyond space and time. This is the realm where the uncreated God exists in radiant glory, in the loving communion of the Trinity. This is the realm of "In the beginning God."

Heaven is important to most Christians. We lay hold of two great truths: we have sins forgiven and therefore we will go to heaven when we die. What will heaven be like? What will we do there? Will we just sit on a cloud and strum a harp? Books are written about heaven. Some are about supposed glimpses of heaven people have experienced during clinical death before resuscitation. Some of these books become best-sellers.

Heaven is an important element in the Book of Hebrews, but the book's cosmology might seem rather complex. So let's start elsewhere with Luke's account of the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Forty days after his resurrection, and after multiple appearances to his disciples, Jesus was taken up into heaven. Luke is the only one who records this event (though it is in the disputed longer ending of Mark). He records it twice: briefly at the end of his gospel (Luke 24:50-51), then in greater detail at the beginning of Acts (Acts 1:6-11). So for Luke the ascension of Jesus into heaven is a defining moment. His first volume was "about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven" (Acts 1:1-2). His second volume is about what then continues to happen through the Holy Spirit who was sent to earth after Jesus entered heaven.

Luke recounts that the disciples were taken by surprise at the ascension of Jesus. It was not what they were expecting:

> **They were looking intently up into the sky [heaven] as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky [heaven]? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:10-11 NIV)**

In just these two verses Luke mentions *heaven* four times. Jesus, who has been taken from the disciples into heaven, will one day return from heaven in similar manner. It was not until the descent of the promised Holy Spirit ten days later on Pentecost that the disciples understood what had happened. They were still thinking in an earthly and nationalistic manner, wondering if Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel (1:6).

Last week we recited a portion of the Apostles' Creed, the part about Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord. We affirmed:

> he was crucified, died, and was buried;
> on the third day we was raised again from the dead;
> he ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand
> of God the Father Almighty.

The Creed continues with one more statement, which I withheld from last week in order to say it this week:

> from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

The eternal Son came from heaven, incarnate in human flesh and blood as Jesus. He appears multiple times, in multiple forms, in multiple places. Jesus appeared to the Jews in his mortal human body. After death and resurrection, he appeared multiple times to his disciples in his post-resurrection, new-creation body. After his ascension he passed through the heavens, and is exalted above the heavens, in heaven itself. He was able to enter the true sanctuary, because of his new-creation body. There he appears now in God's presence. And we believe that he will appear again on earth at his Second Coming. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!

The eucharist was central to the liturgy of the early church. Under various names it still is today in many churches in their weekly, even daily, liturgy. Paul recounts the words of institution spoken by the Lord Jesus:

> **"This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance (*anamnēsis*) of me… This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance (*anamnēsis*) of me."**

Then Paul adds,

> **For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:24-26)**

We remember Christ, we proclaim his death, and we do so until he comes. The invitation to the Lord's table is an invitation to remembrance, an *Anamnēsis*: "Do this in remembrance of me." The congregation responds with a Memorial Acclamation. One common form is "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!" This call and response has featured in church liturgy since the early church. The brief three-part acclamation provides a structure for how to recollect or remember Jesus and how to proclaim him. He *has* died. He *is* risen, both from the dead and in ascension into heaven. He *will* come again. Past, present, and future.

This also provides a good framework for Hebrews 9 which we have been working through this month. Today we come to the fourth and final section of the chapter. Chapter 9 began:

> **Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. (Heb 9:1)**

The first covenant had a sanctuary *where* God could be approached, and a liturgy for *how* he could be approached. Covenant, sanctuary, and liturgy. Subsequently we read of a new covenant with its sanctuary and liturgy. Each covenant has as mediator between God and his people a high priest. The presentation of life-blood is central to both liturgies.

The four sections of the chapter alternate between these two regimens of covenant, sanctuary, and liturgy. The first section (9:1-10) features the first covenant on earth, where the high priest entered the tabernacle with the blood of slain animals. This was unable to perfect the conscience of worshipers.

The second section (9:11-15) follows the risen and ascended Jesus into the true, heavenly sanctuary. There, Christ as high priest of a new covenant, offered himself and his living life-blood. This brings numerous benefits: liberation from sins under the first covenant, cleansing of consciences so that we may serve the living God, and a pathway to receiving the promised eternal inheritance.

The third section (9:16-22) returns to the first covenant and its tabernacle. Both were inaugurated with the blood of animals. This section concluded:

> **In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (9:22)**

The life-blood of an unblemished animal splashed, daubed, sprinkled, or poured out upon the atonement cover or the altar purged it of the impurities that defiled its sacred state. After this pouring out of blood, forgiveness was granted as a divine gift.

Now the final section (9:23-28) presents a series of contrasts between the two regimens. It does so in three parts (23, 24-26, 27-28).

First, v. 23 continues the theme of cleansing from v. 22:

> **It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. (9:23)**

The tabernacle and its furniture of the first covenant were copies of heavenly things. God told Moses to make them exactly like the pattern he was shown on Mt Sinai (Exod 24:9, 40). It was an earthly representation of heavenly reality. Reality outside of time and place was reflected into a particular time and place. These copies were anointed with oil to sanctify them, transferring them into the realm of the holy (Lev 8:10-11). They were regularly sprinkled with the life-blood of slain, unblemished, sacrificial animals. This purification purged the uncleanness that had accumulated, transferring the sanctuary back into the realm of the clean and the holy.

If that was true for the earthly sanctuary, which was a copy, how much more so for the heavenly sanctuary. This is the real thing, the type of which the tabernacle was an antitype, the reality to the earthly shadow. Its cleansing required a better sacrifice: Christ and his lifeblood. We usually think of sacrifice as the bloody slaying of an animal. Sacrifice means an offering that is presented to the deity. It is often an unblemished animal that is slain, releasing its lifeblood, which is then used in cleansing rites. But non-animal "sacrifices" were also offered; in these instances there was no death and no blood.

But why did the heavenly sanctuary require cleansing? Surely, being beyond space and time, it never contracts impurity. Many reasons have been offered. Yet again, as with other topics in Hebrews, this is a matter of great debate. I think it is part analogy with the earthly sanctuary, and part a cleansing that is so thorough that it can never be contaminated by human uncleanness, because the ultimate goal is to have other humans enter into God's presence.

The second part (24-26) describes Christ's entrance into this sanctuary, first how he did not enter (24-26a), then how he did (26b).

> **24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. 25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. 26 Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. (9:24-26)**

Again the two themes are the sanctuary and the liturgy, first on earth and then in heaven. The earthly sanctuary was the tabernacle. It was made with human hands, it was a copy, it was part of this creation. Though the temple still stood in Jerusalem, that is not what Jesus entered here. Christ has entered the true sanctuary, heaven itself. He has entered into God's very presence.

Under the First Covenant the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, once a year, with the blood of another, of goats and bulls; then he had to exit. Jesus entered the true sanctuary, once, never to exit. He has done away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Again, the sacrifice of Jesus is often associated with his bloody death on the cross, with bloodshed understood as violent death. He did suffer a bloody death on the cross. It was the most violent form of death. But I understand this sacrifice of himself to be Christ's offering of himself and of his superior lifeblood in a very-much-living body, in the power of an indestructible life. These he presents to God. He appears there in God's presence *for us*. He is uniquely able to do this because he is one of us. The eternal Son assumed our humanity, clothed in flesh and blood. He carries this humanity into God's presence in heaven. It is a perfected humanity, perfected by obedience unto death and by resurrection into a new-creation body.

He has done this at the culmination of the ages. With the resurrection of Jesus the new age has arrived; he was resurrected into the new creation. In death, resurrection, and ascension, the present-age came to an end. The age-to-come arrived, signaled by his resurrection body.

By means of his own self-offering he has done away with sin. The First Covenant provided purification from the uncleanness caused by sin, after which forgiveness was granted as a gift. But it could not actually take away sin. Christ does so. He sets sin aside; he abolishes it.

How do we avail ourselves of this? When we unite ourselves to Christ we become the beneficiaries of his self-offering. We confess our sins, we turn from our ways, and we give our allegiance to Christ. We become the beneficiaries of his setting aside of sin. In Christ, sin is forgiven and remembered no more. This was the promise of the new covenant spoken through the prophet Jeremiah and

quoted earlier by the preacher:

> **I will forgive their wickedness**
> **and will remember their sins no more.**
> **(Heb 8:12, quoting Jer 31:34)**

The third part (27-28) looks ahead to consider human destiny and the destiny of Christ.

> **[27] Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, [28] so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (9:27-28)**

The preacher uses a "just as…so" construction to compare and contrast the two destinies. Each destiny has two parts.

Human destiny (27) is to die once followed by judgment. We are all mortal, whether we are in Christ or not. We will all die, unless the Lord return first. But if we are in Christ we will "die in the Lord" which is a blessing. Indeed this is the second of seven beatitudes in Revelation:

> **Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."**
> **"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." (Rev 14:13)**

Our body is part of the current creation, subject to death and decay. But our identity, our belonging, is in the new creation, in which death is overcome. "Blessed are they who die in the Lord." This is what I suggested to my mother and sisters that we put on our father's gravestone in Edinburgh. I had walked around the cemetery. All the older gravestones had a Bible verse. Many newer ones had the crest of the deceased's soccer team. This was their identity, their belonging. But soccer teams are ephemeral. I wanted the gravestone of our father, and now also our mother, to be a counter-message, a proclamation of hope and reassurance.

Death is followed by judgment. The word judgment is neutral, like a judge's ruling or verdict. It could be a verdict of *guilty* followed by a penalty. Or a verdict of *not guilty* followed by release. Those who die in the Lord have nothing to fear, for we have already died to self and been raised in Christ into the new creation. The most important death has already happened. The verdict will be that we live.

Christ's two-part trajectory also involved a death. First, he was offered once to bear the sins of many. I assume the subject of the passive verb is God. God offered Christ: God sent his beloved Son into this world. Then Christ offered himself. He did so first on the cross, handing over a life that was obedient and faithful to the end. Then in his resurrection, new-creation body he offered his life-blood before God in the heavenly sanctuary. The purpose is to bear the sins of many. There is a wordplay here that cannot be captured in English: he was offered (*prospherō*) to bear (*anapherō*) the sins of many. He lifts up the sins of many, removing the burden, and takes it upon himself. Here is an allusion to Isaiah's suffering Servant of the Lord:

> **he will bear (*anapherō*) their iniquities…**
> **he bore (*anapherō*) the sin of many. (Isa 53:11-12)**

Theologians and biblical scholars will continue to debate quite how atonement works, how our sins are borne up and away, and how they are forgiven. One would think that there would be agreement on such an important thing that lies at the heart of the gospel. For a long time there was, until scholars started paying more attention of the books of Hebrews and Leviticus rather than just Romans.

Two central elements are the sacrifice of Jesus and the blood of Jesus. But there are questions. Does the first refer to his bloody death on the cross, with God imposing the penalty for sin on Jesus? Or is it his self-offering of an obedient life on the cross, followed by his self-offering in the heavenly sanctuary? Does the blood of Jesus refer to his blood shed on the cross in a violent death? Or to his lifeblood that he carries in his new-creation life into God's presence? These questions are currently the subject of much debate.

After offering his lifeblood in God's presence, Jesus did not have to exit. He remains there, as announced in the opening sentence of the book:

> **After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (1:3)**

There he will remain, enthroned, until the second event of his trajectory:

> **he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (9:28)**

He will appear a second time on earth, a reference to his Second Coming. This will not be to bear sin for that was accomplished by his first appearance on earth, followed by his appearance in God's presence. This will be to bring salvation to those who are *eagerly* waiting for him—NIV's translation is too mild. The book of Hebrews views salvation as a life-long journey.

The preacher uses multiple analogies. He uses the positive analogy of Abraham, who set out from Ur to journey to the land of promise; he did not receive that promise, that inheritance. But the preacher will state that Abraham was looking further out, beyond, to reception of the promise and entrance into the inheritance. The preacher's primary analogy is a negative one: the generation that the Lord brought out of Egypt, bound for the Promised Land. They failed to listen to God's voice, so they fell in the wilderness. They were unable to finish the course and enter the promise. They did not enter into God's rest.

Since salvation is future, how do we keep pressing towards salvation? This is the reason the preacher has written this pastoral homily to people he knows and loves. He offers two recommendations to them, and now to us as we press forward. His first exhortation is to keep our eyes on Jesus. Christ before us. As our forerunner he has finished the course and entered into his inheritance as heir of all things. He is to be the object of our gaze. If we take our gaze off of him, we risk drifting away, imperceptibly at first, but eventually losing our mooring. It was when Peter took his gaze off of Jesus that he began to sink. Let us look to Jesus. Let us not ignore so great a salvation.

His second exhortation is to keep meeting together to encourage one another to persevere in our journey forwards. Salvation lies at the end. When we are weary or discouraged we are urged to boldly approach the throne of grace. Because we have a merciful and faithful high priest who has already entered there on our behalf, we will find grace and help in our time of need. He knows us. He understands us. He knows what it is to be human: he became human like us, sharing our flesh and blood. He knows what it is to suffer: he suffered unto death. He knows what it is to be tested: he was

tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin.

As we live out our lives here on earth, as we continue our race towards the finish line, we do so in eager expectation for the return of Christ. The NT uses two related metaphors for the Second Coming of Jesus. Both would have been familiar metaphors for the original readers. But they are often misunderstood today through lack of familiarity with that culture.

The first metaphor is the Greek word *parousia*, which is often used now in its transliterated form. It is similar in meaning to the Latin word *advent*. Both mean *arrival* followed by *presence*. In the first century it was used of the Roman emperor coming to visit a city. There was tremendous excitement and eager anticipation. Paul uses this word seven times in his two letters to the Thessalonians, six times of the Second Coming of Jesus, once of the coming of the lawless one or Antichrist.

The second metaphor is related: the leading people of the city would go out some distance to meet the arriving dignitary and escort him in great pomp and circumstance into the city.

Paul uses both metaphors together in his first letter to the Thessalonians. This is Paul's first or second letter, written not long after the church in Thessalonica was founded in response to his preaching. Though the church was so young, some had died before the Lord had returned. Paul writes a message of pastoral comfort (1 Thess 4:13-18). At the Lord's *coming* (*parousia*) the dead in Christ will rise first into resurrection, new-creation bodies. Then those who are still alive will be caught up to *meet* the returning Lord and their re-embodied brethren. Then who turns around and where do they go? In the popular view of the Rapture, Christ turns around and all go to heaven. But this misunderstands the metaphor. It is those still living who turn around and escort Christ to earth with great rejoicing. He is the returning king.

This misunderstanding is reflected in some hymns and choruses. Even in what we sang today: "When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation, and take me home…" Ultimately our new home is the new heavens and the new earth.

Another example: "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through." But the world is our home, though our citizenship and identity is in heaven, that is, in God's presence in Christ. Ultimately the new Jerusalem will descend and heaven will fill earth. The two shall be joined as one with God fully present among his people.

Heaven already comes to earth in the form of the church. As God's people in Christ we are a colony of heaven on earth, a colony of the future in the present. We are a vanguard, a beach-head of God's salvation on earth, for the restoration of order, the restoration of life.

We *have* been saved. We have been liberated from Sin and Death, into new creation life. Yes, our bodies are still those of the old creation, but our identity, our belonging, is in the new creation. We *will* be saved. We will enter into God's rest at journey's end. Hebrews is written to keep us faithful, to keep us persevering in this journey.

This section refers three times to the *appearance* of Christ. He appeared at the culmination of the ages for the putting aside of sin (26). He appears before God's face on our behalf where he continues to serve as our advocate (24). He will appear at his Second Coming to complete salvation (28). We look back and remember his first appearance in incarnation and crucifixion. The one for the many. We look up and remember that he is even now in God's presence as our elder brother, our forerunner. The one for the many. He is not there trying to appease an angry God. The loving gaze between Father and Son has been resumed, only now the eternal Son is embodied in a resurrection new-creation human body. He carried his humanity into heaven. If we are in him, then we too become recipients of that gaze of love. We are part of the Beloved Community.

Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, Christ *will* come again. He *has* appeared on earth and died for the removal of sin. He *now* appears in heaven in his resurrection body, on our behalf. He has offered his lifeblood for cleansing. Our sins are forgiven and remembered no more. He *will* appear again on earth to complete our salvation.

We *remember* his death,
We *proclaim* his resurrection,
We *await* his coming in glory.

Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today, and forever (13:8).

Together we say: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Amen.

> *To him who is able to keep you from falling 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)*

FROM SHADOW TO REALITY

Hebrews 10:1-10

#26, 2025.07.06

Two weeks ago Governor Greg Abbott of Texas signed into law legislation requiring that the Ten Commandments be posted in every public school classroom in the state. This may sound familiar. It's déjà-vu all over again! Exactly a year ago I started a sermon a similar way, only then it was Louisiana that had just passed such legislation. A judge has recently ruled that Louisiana law unconstitutional. Nevertheless, legislatures in a dozen other states are eager to follow suit.

Why the eagerness to post the Ten Commandments in schools? Do the legislators and governors post them in their own offices? Since most of the legislators supporting such moves are avowed Christians, why don't they also, or instead, post above their desks the words of Jesus about the Ten Commandments? In the Sermon on the Mount he drills down to issues of the heart. For example,

> **"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment…**
>
> **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt 5:21-22, 27-28)**

Or why not post Jesus's summary of the law as the two greatest commandments:

> **" 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' … 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' " (Matt 22:37, 39; quoting Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18)**

That would save a lot of space. Furthermore, it puts the word *love* front and center, a word that is not prominent in the Ten Commandments, nor in the mindset of those who want to post the Ten Commandments.

Or we could make it simpler still: *Love God and Love Others*. This seems unambiguous, unless you quibble about *ordo armoris*, how far down the order of Others our love should extend.

What is the effect of posting these words on the wall? In one sense these words are aspirational. God had aspirations for his people Israel, whether expressed in the Ten Commandments or distilled into *Love God and love neighbor*. Even Jesus's intensification of the commandments was aspirational: that our interior world be rightly-ordered. But the commandments cannot compel compliance. None of us perfectly keeps the commandments or the real intent behind them as taught by Jesus. The commandments remind us of our failures. They reawaken our consciousness of sin. They confront us with our inability to measure up to these standards. The law does not make us perfect human beings—be it the Ten Commandments, Jesus's intensification of the law, or any current laws.

Even that most noble pairing, *Love God and Love Others*, does not compel us to love vertically and horizontally. The written commandment cannot perfect our love. It cannot write that love onto our hearts and into our minds; it cannot compel our wills. It might indeed inspire us when we look at the poster on the wall…but then we go out and actually meet our neighbor. Our selfish self takes over and we fall far short of perfect love.

A year ago I started my summer block of Hebrews preaching with the sentence, "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood…" (7:11). It could not. A better priesthood was needed, and "when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also" (7:12). Ultimately what was needed was a new covenant between God and his people.

Today as I commence my summer block we start with a similar verse (10:1): "The law…can never…make perfect those who draw near to worship." Many Christians think that law is fundamental to the structure of the universe, that a moral law is somehow coded into creation, sometimes called natural law. Is this how God has really designed his creation? Is this how we picture God: standing there with his rule book open, ready to catch infractions? Is this what he really wants: a people who meticulously keep his laws? Does the keeping of law ever lead us to perfection?

With these questions hanging in the air, perhaps like a dark cloud, we return to the Book of Hebrews. Over the next five weeks we will work our way through chapter 10.

The heart of Hebrews is a long exposition of Jesus as High Priest (5:1–10:18). First, in chapters 5–7, we are shown how Jesus is qualified to serve as a priest, since he is from a different tribe: Judah not Levi. He is high priest after the more ancient order of Melchizedek. Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the people to God (5:1; 8:3). So, second, we are shown in 8:1–10:18 what Jesus offers. In both cases Jesus is superior: he is a superior high priest and he offers a superior offering in comparison to the priesthood of the old covenant. In these next two sermons the author brings this exposition to a climax.

We begin with a reminder of the system of sacrifices and offerings under the old covenant:

> **[1]The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. [2]Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. [3]But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. [4]It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Heb 10:1-4 NIV)**

The law here is the Torah, the body of legislation that God gave Moses at Mt Sinai for the Israelites. More specifically it is all the instruction about the priests and the sacrifices in the tabernacle, where God dwelt in the midst of his people. This Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system was a gracious provision on God's part. It enabled a holy God to dwell on earth in the midst of a people who were not

perfectly holy or pure. God invited his people to draw near—but not too near. How near they could come depended on their status. And they could not draw near empty-handed. The ordinary people would draw near to the entrance of the tabernacle courtyard with their sacrifices and offerings. There they would hand them over to the priests who would draw nearer, to the altar. Once a year the high priest would draw nearer still, into the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place.

It was a great privilege to be invited and able to draw near to God. But this system of approach—this law—could never make perfect those who drew near to worship. The preacher gives two reasons. First, the law, this whole system of priesthood and sacrifices, was only a *shadow*; it was not the real thing. A shadow is not real; it does not have any substance. You can see it, but you can't pick it up. But a shadow is evidence of something that is real, which casts the shadow. The preacher has already stated that the tabernacle sanctuary was "a copy and shadow of what is in heaven" (8:5). So the shadow is cast in two directions. It is cast from a heavenly reality down onto earth. And it is cast from a future reality back in time to the era of the old covenant. Here it is "the good things that are coming" which have cast the shadow. They were yet future at the time of the Levitical priesthood and tabernacle. But for us reading Hebrews today, the good things have arrived in Christ. He is the reality to which the shadow bore witness.

The second reason that the law could not perfect worshipers was that it was *repetitious*. The system had to be repeated over and over again. Notice how many terms the preacher piles up (v. 1b): the *same* sacrifices, repeated *endlessly*, *year after year*. This latter phrase suggests that he is thinking of the annual Day of Atonement, the most solemn, sacred day in Israel's calendar; the only day when the high priest went into the inner sanctuary, into God's presence. But then he came out and had to go back in the next year, every year. It was never complete. So, the law of priesthood and sacrifices was never able to make perfect those who drew near to worship.

If it had made perfect, would not the sacrifices have stopped (v. 2)? The offerings would have been effective to cleanse once and for all, with no need for repetition. And once such permanent cleansing had happened, there would be no more consciousness of sin. But that wasn't the case. The offerings and sacrifices never ceased. The consciousness of sin remained.

Instead, the annual repetition served to remind all those who drew near that they were a people beset by impurity and sin (v. 3). Every year the people gathered on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It was a day of fasting, the most solemn day in the calendar. They watched the purification ceremonies. They watched the high priest enter into the Holy of Holies with the blood of a bull for his sin, and the blood of a goat for their sin. They watched the scapegoat being led away into the wilderness, carrying all their sins, iniquities, and transgressions that the high priest had confessed on its head.

Every single day they watched the morning and evening burnt offerings go up in smoke. And in between those daily reminders and the annual reminder there was a steady parade of offerings and sacrifices brought to the tabernacle for presentation to the Lord. So many reminders! Again and again and again. They were never allowed to forget that they were an imperfect, sinful people living in the presence of a holy God.

The fundamental problem was that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (v. 4). The lifeblood of these sacrificial animals could purge the impurities, after which forgiveness was given as a gift. That forgiveness was retroactive, covering past sins. But the sins would accumulate again. The blood of animals, even unblemished ones, could never take away sins once and for all. There was power in the blood, but it was limited.

Eventually the impurities built up so much and the Lord's sanctuary became so defiled that he abandoned it. He removed his presence and went into exile (Ezek 10), and he sent his people into exile (2 Kgs 25). The sanctuary was destroyed; sacrifices and offerings ceased. Not because they had done their job. Quite the opposite. They had failed to maintain a holy place where God could dwell among his people. The shadow had faded away. There was no longer a place on earth to which the people were invited to draw near to God. The Old Covenant was too weak.

Next the preacher turns to Christ, but does so using an OT text which he reads Christologically, that is, he reads it with reference to Christ:

> [5] **Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:**
>
> **"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,**
> **but a body you prepared for me;**
> [6] **with burnt offerings and sin offerings**
> **you were not pleased.**
> [7] **Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—**
> **I have come to do your will, my God.' "** (10:5-7)

The first line is literally, "Therefore, coming into the world, he says:" followed by a quotation from Psalm 40:6-8. The psalm was written by David, so "he says" ought to refer to David. But it is clear that the preacher is putting this psalm into the mouth of Jesus, great David's greater son. NIV has made this explicit by adding "Christ," who was mentioned in 9:28.

Sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings, and sin offerings were all prescribed in the law, the Torah. They were required under the Old Covenant. But later writers such as David and the prophets realized that these were not ultimately what God desired. He was more interested in the heart and mind with which those offerings were brought. If the heart of the person offering were not oriented onto God, then the sacrifices were meaningless and ineffective; they were a stench in God's nostrils rather than a fragrant aroma that put him at rest.

David knew this better than most. He had broken two of the Ten Commandments in a most high-handed manner, committing adultery with Bathsheba and ordering the death of her husband Uriah. In Psalm 51 he acknowledged to God:

> **You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;**
> **you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.**
> **My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;**
> **a broken and contrite heart**
> **you, God, will not despise.** (Ps 51:16-17)

So he cast himself on God's mercy:

> **Have mercy on me, O God,**
> **according to your unfailing love;**

according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin. (Ps 51:1-2)

David, for all of his flaws, had a heart after God. In Psalm 40 he wrote, "I desire to do your will, my God" (Ps 40:8a). But how could he do God's will? God had prepared him. David wrote, "my ears you have opened" (Ps 40:6), literally "ears you have dug for me." This is a vivid metaphor for God opening the ear channel so that David could hear God's word and obey.

The Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint) expands "ears you have dug for me" to "a body you prepared for me," which Hebrews follows. This is a case of synecdoche where a *part* represents the *whole* and vice versa: *ear* for whole *body*. The purpose is the same: preparation to do God's will. God had prepared David's ear to hear and obey.

Reading Christologically it is now Jesus who says, "I have come." Hence the preacher introduces the quotation:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said,

"…a body you have prepared for me; …
I have come to do your will, my God." (Heb 5:5-7)

Here we have a clear reference to the incarnation of the eternal Son. God prepared a human body into which his Son was incarnated so that this human might do his will. In chapter 2 the preacher has shown that the Son took on flesh and blood to become human like us in every way. As we say in the Nicene Creed, "who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

Jesus came as prophet, priest, and king. But as priest he did not come to offer the same old sacrifices. His was a different priesthood with a different offering. So the preacher summarizes David's words as now said by Jesus:

8 First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"—though they were offered in accordance with the law. 9 Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." (10:8-9a)

Jesus, the eternal Son incarnate as a human being, sharing our flesh and blood, fully human in every way, lived his entire life within God's will. Theologians talk of his *active obedience* and his *passive obedience*. He actively obeyed God in all that he did. And in his intense suffering he passively accepted everything that the forces of evil did against him. In neither case did he turn away.

But *obedience* is perhaps the wrong word to use here. David the psalmist used the word *delight*: I desire/delight to do your will. Jesus didn't simply grit his teeth and obey God because the law said to do so. He *delighted* to do God's will. He delighted in this because it was his Father's will. His relationship with his Father was not that of master and slave, or law-maker and law-keeper. He was in a Father–Son relationship. The Son delights to do the will of his Father. And the Father delights to say, "You are my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." The Father spoke these words from heaven at the baptism of Jesus, and again at his Transfiguration. I am sure this is what the Father was thinking as Jesus hung on the cross. I do not think the Father turned his face away. Instead, he continued to gaze with pleasure on his beloved Son in whom he continued to be well-pleased, because his beloved Son continued to delight in doing his Father's will despite all the efforts of the forces of evil to turn him against his Father. They could not turn him against God in the garden nor on the cross. Jesus did not delight in the suffering itself, but he knew that his loving Father saw him.

Yes, Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46), quoting Psalm 22:1. We often refer to this as the cry of dereliction and Jesus as "the derelict on the cross." But I am confident that Jesus had the entire psalm in mind. The psalm turns:

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)

He was not derelict. He may have been forsaken by his disciples and many others. But his Father had not turned away; he did not hide his face from the intense suffering of his beloved Son.

On the cross Jesus offered up a perfect, or rather, perfected, human life, a life lived continually within the Father's will, a life in which he delighted to do his Father's will until he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46), cried out, "It is finished!" and handed over his spirit (John 19:30). God accepted that self-offering.

God made "the pioneer of [our] salvation perfect through what he suffered" (2:10). And "once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (5:9). For all who hear his voice, turn, and follow him.

Finally the preacher describes the result of this self-offering:

He sets aside the first to establish the second. 10 And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (10:9b-10)

In his self-offering of a faithful life lived entirely within God's will, delighting in that will, Jesus has set aside the first covenant with all of its laws and practices, its priesthood and sacrifices, its tabernacle and altar. He terminated it so that he could establish a second covenant, the new covenant promised by the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah.

We become the beneficiaries. By that same divine will which Christ has faithfully fulfilled, we are made holy unto God through the self-offering by Jesus of his own obedient body. NIV has *sacrifice*, which can evoke the wrong idea in our minds. The word is better translated *offering* (as in NASB, ESV, etc.); it is something that is brought forward and presented. What Jesus presented on the cross was not himself as a bleeding and slain sacrifice, but the self-offering of a human life lived entirely within God's will and pleasure. It was a human life that had attained its *telos*, perfection. This was how God always intended human beings to live.

By God's will, which Jesus delighted in, we are incorporated also. We have been made holy, sanctified, set aside unto God, not by birth into the Levites or priesthood. But through the self-offering of his body by Jesus Christ. He offered it once. It need never be offered again. It can't be offered again, because God raised his beloved Son into a new creation body that is full of indestructible life. It is this body that he takes into the very presence of God in the heavenly

sanctuary. There his blood, which is so full of indestructible life, effects the most powerful purification and cleansing. "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:3).

Jesus offered himself once and for all on the cross. He was obedient even unto death, even unto death on the cross. God vindicated, rewarded, and glorified him in resurrection. The risen and ascended Jesus presented himself once and for all in God's presence in glory. There God has vindicated, rewarded, and glorified him by seating him at his right hand. But that is for next week!

This is the good news. Jesus has lived the perfect human life, in his Father's will, all the way to death. God has raised him into the new creation, in a resurrection body that has entered God's very presence. God bids us come and be united with Christ in death and resurrection. He invites us to enter into the new creation also.

Here on earth we are invited to come and give our allegiance to this Jesus. To say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20: 28). When we do so the Spirit who was poured out ten days after Christ's Ascension comes on us to unite us with Christ. We participate in Christ, in his death and resurrection. We become the beneficiaries of his perfectly-lived life. The Spirit sets to work in us. First he sets us apart as holy, belonging to God in Christ through the Spirit. We enter into the communion of the Son with the Father through the Spirit, for we become beloved sons and daughters. And the Spirit continues to work in us, for it is the Father's will and pleasure that we become like his beloved Son. Our Father wants us to delight in doing his will, not because of commandments written on stone or hung on the wall. But because sons and daughters delight to do their Father's will, and our Father delights to say, "You are my beloved sons and daughters in whom I am well-pleased."

Jesus's path to perfection lay through suffering. He shared our humanity, flesh and blood like us in every way. He was tempted and tested like us in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. He is therefore able to empathize with our weaknesses. He knows what it is to suffer. It is clear that those to whom this letter is written are suffering. They may be tempted to give up, to turn back, to apostatize. They may be tempted to take their eyes off Jesus and slowly drift away. Hebrews is written to encourage them and us to remain faithful, persevering through our hardships and suffering. The preacher encourages us to do two things.

First, keep looking to Jesus, Christ before us. Christ before us as the one who has faithfully finished the course, despite intense suffering; he is our forerunner, our pioneer. And Christ before us as the one we look to, the object of our gaze, our inspiration. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. And we have other examples: chapter 11 lists many OT saints who lived by faith. It initially seems like a list of those who lived the victorious life. But there also those in the list who suffered greatly yet remained faithful.

Secondly, keep meeting together. We are a family, brothers and sisters together, with Christ Jesus as our older brother. We meet together to encourage one another, to listen to one another, to share one another's burdens. This calls for honesty and vulnerability, not bearing our burdens alone. There is much trauma, including religious trauma. There is much suffering. We should not carry this alone, for we are family.

In Christ we are God's beloved sons and daughters. He did not send his beloved Son into our human world to be a law-keeper, keeping the commandments because they were written on tablets of stone. The Son entered our world to do his Father's will. Through his Spirit God adopts us into his family as sons and daughters. Through his Spirit he purposes to make us more and more like his Son, doing his will from our hearts' desire.

The sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings, and sin offerings of the Old Covenant were a continual reminder of sins. Their repetition indicated that they could not dispel the consciousness of sin. Instead, they were a reminder of sins.The word reminder (*anámnēsis* v. 3) is a rare word, used only four times in the NT. The other three times are all on the lips of Jesus: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24,25). We have a new reminder, a new remembrance. No longer do we have a daily and annual reminder of sins. Jesus lived the human life unto perfection, entirely within his Father's will, free from sin that so entangles us. He bids us come and partake of him, to participate in him and his resurrection, new creation life. We die to our old self and rise to our new self which is being renewed in his image. Jesus bids us come to the table regularly, frequently, to remember him, through whom our sins are forgiven and remembered no more.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)

HE SAT DOWN

Hebrews 10:11-18

#27, 2025.07.13

There is nothing remarkable about this building—except perhaps this window behind me. Twenty long pews either side of a central aisle, facing a platform at front with a simple lectern. There are many such A-frame church buildings, built in the 1950s and '60s. Some call this a sanctuary: a sacred space, prioritizing encounter with God. Others call it an auditorium: a listening place, prioritizing the sermon.

Sometimes we stand, sometimes we sit. It used to be easy to figure out when to stand and when to sit. One would stand up to sing a hymn then sit down again. But cultures differ. In certain Presbyterian churches in Scotland that I have visited you sit to sing and stand to pray. In Orthodox churches there are no seats; you stand through the whole service. But since there's no furniture you can move around.

We usually stand to sing. We sing better when we stand; we have better posture, and our lungs work better. But it can be hard to remain standing through a full worship set of four songs. So sometimes we sit down to sing.

Very occasionally we stand to recite the call of worship together. In liturgical churches, where there are often four Scripture readings, the congregation stands for the gospel, which is read from the center of the aisle, from the middle of the congregation.

Now I am standing here at the lectern, the reading stand, in front of you to deliver a sermon, while you are seated to listen. I hope that you are not too passive in this posture so that you fall asleep, but that instead your ears, your mind, and your heart are active to hear, absorb, reflect on, and be moved by the message.

This is a normal scenario, whether in a church, a classroom, a lecture hall, or a debating chamber. But this was not so in the ancient world. Jesus sat down to teach. He *sat down* to teach his disciples, delivering the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-2). In the synagogue in Nazareth he *stood up* to read the Scriptures (Isa 61:1-2), then he *sat down* to speak about them (Luke 4:16-21). Rabbis sat to teach the disciples gathered at their feet.

Chairs were rare; many people probably went through their entire life never sitting in a chair. A chair was often a symbol of authority. A Roman governor sat in his chair on a special platform (Gk *bema*) to hear cases and render judgment. So Pilate examined Jesus (John 19:13; cf. Matt 27:19). So Paul was examined in Corinth by Gallio (Acts 18:12), and in Caesarea by Festus (Acts 25:6).

The metaphor of sitting is still widely used to represent authority. Politicians run for office, stand for election, then take their seats in the legislature. This is located in the seat of government, usually the capital city, whether on a national or local level.

Professors usually stand to teach, but some professors occupy a chair. Here there is considerable difference of usage between the US and UK. In the UK every professor holds a chair. Sometimes the chair is endowed, named after a donor or in honor of someone. Probably the most famous is the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics in the University of Cambridge, held by the Lucasian Professor, including Isaac Newton and Stephen Hawking.

Professional orchestras now have endowed chairs. The San Francisco Symphony has 44 of them. It is the chair that is endowed, not the musician or professor who fills that chair.

A professor does not have a special physical chair he sits in, nor does an orchestra musician. But a bishop does. A bishop's seat or see (from Lat. *sedes* seat) is a cathedral (from Gk *kathedra* chair). The cathedral contains the bishop's throne. There's a particularly fine one in Durham cathedral in England, formerly occupied by N.T. Wright, though I doubt he sat in it much.

Pope Leo now occupies the Chair of St Peter. The current physical chair is regarded as the very same chair Peter himself used as the first bishop of Rome. It is very ancient, but not that ancient. The metaphorical chair derives from Jesus granting Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matt 16:19). The Pope oversees the Holy See, Vatican City in Rome. The Pope may speak *ex cathedra*, from the chair, that is with the full authority of his office, in this case as the representative of Christ on earth.

A monarch has a special chair or throne. Two years ago Charles III was crowned king. He was sitting in King Edward's Chair, which is over 700 years old, while archbishops and bishops stood around him. This would never happen in Thailand: in the king's presence no one's head may be above his. Even prime ministers and royal family have to crouch on the floor.

Now chairs are commonplace. Our houses and work places are full of chairs. We spend much time sitting in chairs. Too much time, because now we are told that sitting too long is bad for our health. So I have bought a standing desk, though I haven't yet assembled it. Some even add a treadmill so they are walking in place at their desk.

Why have I gone into such detail about standing and sitting? Our text today contrasts the two postures. Both standing and sitting have a deeper significance than mere physical posture.

In our journey through Hebrews today we come to the end of the long central section about the high-priesthood of Jesus. The preacher again contrasts the ministry of the Levitical priests of the old covenant and that of Jesus to inaugurate a new covenant:

> **11 Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. 14 For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Heb 10:11-14 NIV)**

In the previous section the preacher had focused on the *annual* sacrifices offered under the old covenant (10:1-4). These were offered by the high priest on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. They did accomplish temporary cleansing but were unable to remove the consciousness of sin. Instead the ceremony was an annual reminder of sins.

Now the preacher turns his attention to the *daily* offerings presented by the regular priests (11). Every priest *stands*, *performing* his religious duties and *offering* sacrifices—all present tense denoting ongoing activity, with *stands* as the main verb.

Just as for the Yom Kippur offerings by the high priest (1), these sacrifices were repetitive: *day after day*, *again and again*, the *same* sacrifices. They were never finished once and for all. The priests could never sit down. They continued to stand. They continued to offer sacrifices. When they retired at the age of fifty, they were replaced by new priests who carried on the same liturgical functions.

This entire system was never able to do what needed to be done. The law of priesthood and sacrifices was *never able* to "make perfect those who draw near" (1), because the blood of bulls and goats was *unable* "to take away sins" (4). The same daily sacrifices were *never able* to "take away sins" (11). *Never able, unable, never able*, like a refrain ringing in our ears. Three times we are told that the Law of the old covenant was not powerful enough. Something stronger was needed in order to remove sins and thus bring God's people to perfection. What was needed was both a better priest and a better offering.

In contrast to "every priest" (11) the preacher presents "this priest" (12), that is Jesus Christ, our great high priest. Every element of v. 12 is in contrast to v. 11. This single priest *offered*, past-tense, a one-time action. The preacher emphasizes the uniqueness of this action: *one* sacrifice, *for all time*. The former sacrifices, though many, were never able to take away sins, but this one sacrifice was *for sins*. Having offered this one sacrifice, he *sat down*—that's the main verb. He did not remain standing. The offering of his one sacrifice was complete, never to be repeated. His work was finished.

What was that one sacrifice that he offered? It was himself. In fact, according to Hebrews, Jesus twice offered himself as a sacrifice. His first self-offering was on the cross. It was the offering of a human life lived entirely within God's will, a human life lived to its *telos*, its point of perfection or completion. The second offering was his self-presentation to God within the true heavenly sanctuary. Now it was a new-creation body that he presented; a body that had been resurrected as incorruptible, a body that had passed through death and out the other side, into resurrection life, into the new creation.

Many will object: how can the risen and ascended Lord Jesus offer himself as a sacrifice in heaven? This is due to a misunderstanding of sacrifice. A sacrifice is a cultic offering, that is, an offering that is presented, usually to a deity or something conceived of as deity such as the sun or moon or stars, within the context of religious ceremony. It is often an animal that is slain, but not always so. Cain's offering of grain from his first harvest was a sacrifice, just as was Abel's offering of a firstborn lamb from his flock. The Lord's rejection of Cain's offering was not because he failed to bring an animal. He was a farmer, so a grain offering was appropriate, but he failed to bring the firstfruits, whereas Abel brought the firstborn. Some of the Levitical sacrifices were grain or flour.

Jesus offered one sacrifice. He offered himself, first on earth then in heaven. In this long central section of Hebrews about the high-priesthood of Jesus, the preacher has shown first how Jesus is qualified, as a priest on behalf of the people, to make that cultic offering (chap. 5–7). He cannot be a Levitical priest because he is not from the tribe of Levi. Instead he is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Secondly the preacher shows what that offering is (8:1–10:18): it is Jesus himself. Jesus is both offeror and offering, both priest and sacrifice. He presents himself. The sufficiency of this self-offering of his body as a sacrifice is indicated by his sitting down at the beginning and end of this section (8:1; 10:12).

Multiple times Hebrews mentions the self-offering of Jesus, but only once does it mention the manner of his death. Only once does it mention the cross. Even then it is in order to show Christ now sitting down:

> **he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:2)**

In the theology of Hebrews it was necessary that Jesus die, because he had to live a life unto God, faithful to the very end, all the way to death. Was it necessary that Jesus die on the cross? Not really, but Hebrews considers that it was *fitting* that he die on the cross.

We have tamed the cross. We have glamorized the cross. We sing about it to jaunty tunes. We sing "It was finished upon that cross." This is a very common view. Jesus indeed cried out "It is finished!" (John 19:30). But what was finished? Jesus *endured* the cross. He faithfully persevered in his life of faith, faithfulness unto God until the very end. He persevered through intense suffering. Thereby he was made perfect. He attained the *telos* of his life as a human being. He died faithful to the end.

But the manner of his death was horrific. The preacher continues: "he endured such opposition from sinners" (12:3). The cross was the final rejection by the Jewish leaders of the one whom God had sent to save his people. *It is finished*, thought the Pharisees and Sadducees, as they disposed of this one who threatened their position within Jewish society. We've got rid of this trouble-maker who's rocking our boat.

It is finished, thought Pilate as he sought to maintain Roman law and order in Judea. The cross was a potent symbol of "might is right," of Rome's total power, oppression, and cruelty.

Jesus had to be tested and tempted in every way to prove his faithfulness to God. He had to endure intense opposition from sinners. His humanity as the faithful image of God was proven on the cross, bringing it to perfection.

The cross represented the culmination of sin, evil, and death. Death triumphed in the most gruesome way. But Jesus bore it all. Having put Jesus to death there is nothing worse that the forces of darkness can do; they exhausted themselves. Jesus absorbed it all. Death on the cross was a further downward stage in the eternal Son's emptying of himself, a further stage in God allowing himself to be humiliated by a rebellious humanity.

When Jesus died on the cross, those few followers who had remained there at the foot of the cross also thought it was finished. Yet another one who claimed to be Messiah dead on a Roman cross.

Jesus did end up as a sacrificial animal, slain, his blood shed, with a Roman cross as the altar. But there's a deep irony. He was lifted up onto that cross so that the Jews might be spared. As Caiaphas the high priest told the Sanhedrin, "it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish" (John 11:48).

Jesus indeed cried, "It is finished!" He endured intense opposition and suffering. He persevered, faithful to the end, doing his Father's will to the end. But now there was a dead Messiah hanging on a

Roman cross.

After Paul encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road and he came to faith, he had to rethink his entire theology to encompass a crucified Messiah. He concluded "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23), but the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). A crucified Messiah is still a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Muslims. The cross is not a tame symbol! The cross represents the opposition from sinners to God and his beloved Son.

On the third day God raised Jesus into the new creation. He clothed him in a new creation body. It was a body able to pass through the heavens into the true sanctuary, of which the earthly tabernacle was a copy and shadow. The eternal Son returned to the Father, taking with him his full humanity. The risen and ascended Jesus presented himself to the Father. He presented a new-creation body. It was a body full of potent lifeblood, the lifeblood of an indestructible life, the lifeblood of the new creation. This lifeblood he presented in his very-much-alive body. This lifeblood was able to accomplish a full and permanent cleansing or purification for sin. Because he passed through the heavens and presented his lifeblood in the true sanctuary beyond creation, it has cosmic significance. The blood of bulls and goats did temporarily sanctify the earthly tabernacle and the camp. But the lifeblood of Jesus, presented above the cosmos, has power to purify the entire cosmos.

Then he sat down. This was already stated in advance in the opening sentence of the book:

> **After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (1:3)**

He sat down in fulfillment of Ps 110:

> **The Lord says to my lord:**
>
> **"Sit at my right hand**
> **until I make your enemies**
> **a footstool for your feet." (Ps 110:1)**

This is the most-quoted OT verse in the NT. It had a profound effect on the early Christians as they sought to make sense of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. This was fulfilled in the session of Jesus, that is in his taking his seat. This session was his enthronement. Jesus sat down on the throne of David, taking office as the Messianic king. The eternal Son, who had become human, has returned to the Father, bringing with him his humanity. In that humanity he is enthroned there as the Son of David, the son God promised to David in the Davidic covenant:

> **"I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and 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 7:12b-14a)**

Now it was finished! Jesus sat down on that throne—not the earthly copy, but the heavenly reality. Peter came to understood this. On the Day of Pentecost, filled with the Spirit, he stood and preached his first powerful sermon.

> **"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… you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross… God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."**

Then he quoted Psalm 110:1 and concluded:

> **"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." (Acts 2:22-23, 32-33, 36)**

This is the good news: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." King Jesus reigns. He took up both identities at his session. As the eternal Son, sharing an identity with his Father, he has returned to his Father's side. He is Lord, part of the Godhead. He has taken with him his humanity, now the humanity of the new creation. Jesus is Lord, worshipped as divine. We see this worship of Jesus from the very beginning of the church. He is installed on David's throne as great David's greater Son, promised in 2 Samuel 7:14, but also the Son of God foreseen in Psalm 2. This is the good news at the heart of the gospel: King Jesus reigns. God has been faithful to his covenants and promises; this covenant fidelity is his righteousness.

What is Jesus doing while on his throne? One thing Jesus is doing on the throne is *waiting* (13). He is waiting for his enemies to be put under his feet as a footstool. This will be God's doing. What are these enemies? In Psalm 110 these enemies would be those rulers and nations that had set themselves against God's people and their king. This would include all those responsible for putting Jesus on the cross, both Jew and Gentile. But now God's vision for the nations is that they come and pay homage to this king, that they come and give their allegiance to this king, acknowledging his rule over all nations. God wants all peoples to come and find this king to be their savior also. Now the enemies are the greater forces of Sin and Death. Jesus has already defeated them. He defeated Sin by living a faithful life, fully within the Father's will, never yielding to sin. He defeated Death in his resurrection. But still Sin and Death are active in the world. God will eventually subdue them, subjugating them under the feet of King Jesus. They will have no place in the new heavens and new earth that the Returning King will usher in.

The King will return. So we also are *waiting*. Christ "will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (9:28). Waiting is hard. We can lose focus and slowly drift away from Jesus. Or, amid trials, temptations, and suffering we may consider giving up on Jesus, turning back. Both of these dangers are mentioned in Hebrews, notably in the five warning passages. The preacher has written this "word of exhortation" to encourage his readers to persevere, to remain faithful, to keep running the course, just as did Jesus. We are to be expectant, eagerly awaiting the appearance of the returning King to complete our salvation. To focus us in our waiting, the Nicene Creed closes with these words: "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

Secondly, Jesus is *interceding* for us. He continues to be our high priest. Therefore we are exhorted to draw near to God. The long treatise on the high priesthood of Jesus is bracketed by exhortations to draw near to God (4:14-18; 10:19-25). What a friend we have in Jesus!

He knows our every weakness, and bids us come. We will look more closely at this next week. In between these two invitations, the preacher devotes nearly six chapters to the high-priesthood of Jesus so that we will have confidence to approach the throne of grace, there to receive mercy and find grace in out time of need—which is all the time. What a privilege we have to take it to the Lord in prayer.

Meanwhile humanity is invited to come and give allegiance to King Jesus. Those who do so find that "by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (14). We become the beneficiaries of Christ's self-offering. This requires that we follow him in death and resurrection. We die to our old selves and are raised into the new creation. We join ourselves to Christ and join him in the new creation. Yes, we will die physically, but the important death has already happened: our death to our old self.

A death has occurred. That death occurred because humanity was shaking its fist at God. As I understand Hebrews, the death of Jesus, the one faithful Israelite, meant the end of the Old Covenant. Israel had failed to keep that covenant, but Jesus, true Israel, kept and fulfilled it. Next, his presentation of his new creation lifeblood before God in the true heavenly sanctuary sealed the New Covenant: the new covenant promised by God through Jeremiah. So the preacher closes out this long section with the words from Jeremiah.

15 The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:

16 "This is the covenant I will make with them
after that time, says the Lord.
I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds."

17 Then he adds:

"Their sins and lawless acts
I will remember no more."

18 And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. (10:15-18)

In 8:8-12 the preacher quoted God's promise through Jeremiah in full (Jer 34:31-34). Here he quotes just two excerpts. In the OT it was Jeremiah the prophet who was speaking, but he was speaking the words of God. Here the preacher, as elsewhere, states that the Holy Spirit continues to speak these words to his current readers. So we hear them today.

The first covenant, the old covenant, had laws written on tablets of stone. These written laws could not compel obedience; they had no power to effect compliance. But in the new covenant God puts his laws into our hearts and minds. He internalizes them so that we are actually able to practice them. What are these laws? Ultimately they are to love God and love neighbor. The Holy Spirit instills this love into us as we are being sanctified.

Under the new covenant, enacted upon the death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Jesus, God will remember sins no more. The language is triply emphatic: I will *never ever again* remember them. Surely God remembers everything. How can he forget? How do we avail ourselves of this forgetting by God?

Those who heard Peter's sermon on Pentecost "were cut to the heart" and asked, "what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). What must we do to be saved? Peter replied,

"Repent and be baptized…in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off." (Acts 2:38-39)

How far off? There were Jews there in Jerusalem who had come from far away. They believed. The Book of Acts keeps pushing the boundaries: the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius the Roman centurion, gentiles in Antioch… How far? All the way into the heart of Caesar's household in Rome. All the way into the heart of enemy territory. All are invited to repent and find forgiveness of sins. To come and give our allegiance to Jesus and thereby enter into the new covenant.

God will never ever again remember our sins. He will never bring them to mind in how he deals with us.There are no more reminders of sin. Instead we are given a new reminder: of Christ's body and blood given for us. We should eat and drink regularly in remembrance of him. There should be no more consciousness of sin. Instead we have a consciousness of Christ, his body and blood given for us.

This year is the 1700th anniversary of the first version of the Nicene Creed, the creed that unites all branches of the church. It includes a lengthy statement about Jesus Christ, about the Son of God who has become human.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God…

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.[1]

This trajectory of Jesus's life is laid out in Hebrews. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, made a little lower than the angels. The eternal Son took on human flesh and blood, becoming just like us in every way. The Creed then jumps to the end of his life: crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and session. That trajectory was not complete with his death by crucifixion. Crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and session go together as a package. We pay too much attention to the cross, and too little attention to what comes next: his resurrection into the new creation, his ascension into God's presence in the true sanctuary above the cosmos with cosmic effect, and his installation as Messianic king. God has made this Jesus, whom his rebellious people crucified, both Lord and Messiah.

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)

1. *Common Worship* (Church of England, 2000).

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

Hebrews 10:19-25

#28, 2025.07.20

The so-called *Letter to the Hebrews* is not actually a letter, despite it being titled as such in some English translations (NRSV, ESV). It is not the *Letter of Paul to the Hebrews* (KJV). The document does not begin with the usual format for a letter, naming the author and the recipient(s). This lack has engendered no end of debate over who wrote Hebrews and to whom? Even the simple title *To the Hebrews*, though very early, is a guess, based on an assumption that the recipients must be Hebrew, i.e. Jewish, Christians since there is so much material about the priesthood and sacrifices of the old covenant. But in Paul's letters he expects his Gentile recipients to have considerable knowledge of Israel's Scriptures. So a Jewish audience for Hebrews is now questioned.

This document is a sermon. Therefore I have been calling the author "the preacher." He calls this a "word of exhortation" (13:22). But it also includes exposition. Many of Paul's letters are similar. They start with theological exposition. Then comes a *therefore*, which marks a transition to exhortation. He moves from the indicatives to the imperatives, from declarations of what God has done in Christ and is doing through his Spirit to instructions for how we should live. In Hebrews the exposition and exhortation, the theology and the practicalities, are interleaved.

Theology can seem abstract and theoretical, written by theologians in their ivory towers, far removed from daily Christian life. The archetypal image is of medieval theologians debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. But there is no evidence these scholars debated such a topic. This was actually a jibe by 17th-century Protestants against medieval Catholic scholastics.

Theology is not abstract for the author of Hebrews. His expositions form the basis for his exhortations. Last week we reached the end of his expositions. The rest of his sermon is exhortation (10:19–13:19). Before embarking on this final block of exhortation, I thought it would be helpful to summarize the exposition. What theology have we learnt?

The sermon begins with a strong blast of theology:

> **[1] In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, [2] 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. [3] 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. [4] So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Heb 1:1-4 NIV)**

In Greek this is a single sentence, beautifully constructed. It is hard for us today to grasp such a complex sentence, so NIV divides it into four. It is rich in theology which underlies much of the subsequent exposition.

God spoke many times in the past to Israel through the prophets. Now God has spoken to us in his Son. This establishes a basic framework. In the past was the old covenant which failed to accomplish what was needed. Now there is a new covenant which is successful.

Who is this Son? The preacher elaborates in seven statements (vv. 2b-4). In the first two God is the subject (2b); in the last five the Son is the subject (3-4). In these five the main clause is "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." This session of Jesus at God's right hand is the climactic moment. There are two subsidiary clauses, one either side. Having provided purification for sins, he sat down, having attained a status and a name superior to the angels.

These two clauses, in reverse order, are the topics for the two major blocks of exposition in the book. The first block (1:5–2:18) expounds how the Son attained this superior name and status. The second block (5:1–10:18) expounds how he made purification for sins. Both culminate in his sitting down at God's right hand.

How and why did the Son obtain his superior status and name? The preacher strings a chain of seven OT texts (1:5-14). He begins with "You are my Son, today I have become your Father" (5, quoting Ps 2:7), and ends with "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (14, quoting Ps 110:1). Both quotations are from Messianic psalms. The Son is seated on David's throne as the Messianic king, a human role. The eternal Son has become also the Son of David. The Son has become the Son. Heaven and earth, deity and humanity are joined together in this joint Sonship.

But how can the eternal Son who is part of the Godhead take his seat on a throne intended for a human king? How can the Creator be part of creation? The preacher expounds this in chapter 2. The Son became incarnate as the human Jesus. He "was made lower than the angels for a little while" (2:9). He shared our humanity, incarnate as flesh and blood, made like us, fully human in every way (2:14, 17). He lived a full human life. He was tested and "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (4:15). Because humans suffer, he too suffered. It was fitting that he be made "perfect through what he suffered" (2:10). He suffered death, but thereby broke the power of death for Death had no claim on him. He has lived the perfect human life. He is humanity perfected, brought to its intended state.

God has raised him from the dead, into the new creation. He has installed him on David's throne, superior to the angels. He already was superior in his deity, in which he has returned to the glory that he had from before the beginning. He is now also superior in his humanity, which is now glorified. He did not put off that humanity, but took it into God's presence and onto David's throne.

He is now "the Son over God's house. And we are his house" (3:6). But how do we become part of God's household? God's intention through his incarnate Son is "bringing many sons and daughters to glory" (2:10). He didn't come to help angels, but "Abraham's descendants." Yes, Israel, but Gentiles also become Abraham's descendants in Christ.

The early church fathers understood this theology. Gregory of

Nazianzus was one of the Cappadocian Fathers, and as Bishop of Constantinople presided over the Second Ecumenical Council (381) in that city; that was the council that finalized the Nicene Creed. He wrote, "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved." The eternal Son assumed our humanity so as to heal it. Having healed it, he did not put off that humanity. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon in the second century, wrote: "He became what we are so that we might become what He is."

God sent his Son into this world to assume our humanity, to become like us. He has returned to God's side with his humanity, and in his humanity is enthroned. This trajectory of the Son is the topic of the first block of exposition.

The second block of exposition (5:1–10:18) shows how the Son provided purification for sins. He became "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" (2:17). He is a superior high priest (5–7) and offers a superior offering (8:1–10:18). He offers himself, first on earth, then in heaven. Having finished offering himself he sat down (10:12).

The Son, incarnate as Jesus Christ, now has a dual identity. He is a priest, for the role of a priest is to offer sacrifices for purification. He is a king, for his session at God's right hand is an enthronement. He was already the eternal Son, the exact representation of his being, and the agent of creation. He is now the Son of David, ruler of God's kingdom.

Last week we finished this second and largest block of exposition, all about the high-priesthood of Jesus. The preacher sets that exposition within two short blocks of exhortation, one at either end. The rich theology is the basis for the exhortation, the practical application. These two blocks are very similar. Here is the block at the beginning:

> **14 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. 15 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. 16 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)**

There are two commands, each based on a similar theological point. The first imperative is "Let us hold firmly (our) confession." The basis is having a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. A confession is something we "say together," that is, a set of shared beliefs. Hence NIV's "the faith we profess."

The second imperative is "Let us approach the throne of grace." This is based on the sort of high priest that we have: he is able to identify with our weakness—here the preacher uses a double negative "not unable" to make a strong positive. He can empathize with us because he has been tested and tempted in every way like us, but without sin. Therefore we can approach God's throne of grace with confident boldness. There we will find help in our time of need. We will find mercy and grace.

Today we come to the closing exhortation after the exposition:

> **19 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 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. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 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. (10:19-25)**

In vv. 19-21 the preacher gives the basis for his exhortations. *Therefore:* following on from the long prior exposition about the superior offering made by the superior priest. He offered himself twice. First, on earth in our realm, he offered a faithful and obedient life lived all the way to death. Then, in his resurrection, new-creation body he entered God's realm and presented himself: a perfected human being in God's very presence. He passed through the created heavens. He has entered into the holy places once and for all through his own blood (9:12). He has entered the true heavenly sanctuary, the reality of which the earthly tabernacle was a copy and shadow. The Levitical high priest passed through the veil once a year, but then had to come out. Not so Jesus. He entered once and for all.

Therefore, we have two things. First, we have confidence or boldness to enter the sanctuary, the Most Holy Place. The blood of Jesus has accomplished such a great purification that we are able to enter. We are still clothed in our corruptible earthy bodies, so we cannot enter physically, but we can enter spiritually. Bold confidence indicates that we belong there; we have a right to be there. We don't have to worry that God will throw us out, saying "Get back to your station; go back where you belong." We need fear no imposter syndrome.

When John F. Kennedy was President, his young children, Caroline and John Jr, had bold access to the Oval Office because their father was the President. They ran around and played and hid under the Resolute desk, all captured in photos. They belonged in that room by virtue of their relationship to the President. They saw the friendly face of a loving father.

By virtue of our incorporation into Christ we belong in God's throne room. We are his sons and daughters. I hope we see on God the face of a loving Father looking on us with pleasure—even more pleasure than JFK on his children.

The eternal Son has returned to the loving communion he had with the Father from before the beginning of time—a communion mediated by the Spirit. The Father loving the Son, the Son returning that love to the Father. As Augustine put it: Lover, Beloved, and the Love itself; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the Son is now also Jesus Christ; his perfected humanity participates in that loving communion.

Secondly, we have a great priest over God's household. Earlier the preacher stated, "Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house" (3:6). In Christ we form God's household, his family. We are his sons and daughters. We are family, not a loose collection of individuals. Christ Jesus is our older brother who has gone ahead. He represents us. He is there for us. Our head of household is one of us, but he is also

King and High Priest.

Therefore, since we have this bold access and this head of household, *let us*… The preacher now gives three exhortations. They are in the first person, so he includes himself. The first two exhortations mirror the first block in reverse order. Then he adds a third.

The first exhortation is "Let us draw near to God." Who can draw near? All those who are in Christ. Our women studied Numbers this past year. God put his presence among his people Israel; he put his presence in the tabernacle, called the *mishkan*, the dwelling-place, or *miqdosh*, the holy place. God embraced his people: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." But his embrace was limited. There were multiple levels of exclusion. He said, "Draw near…but only so near." There were multiple barriers: curtains at the entrance to the courtyard and entrance to the tent, and the veil before the Most Holy Place.

Outside the camp were the unclean. Moving inwards, next came the camp of Israel, the twelve tribes. They could approach the tabernacle, bringing their sacrifices to the entrance. Next in was the camp of the Levites and the priests. They could enter the courtyard on duty. The priests could approach the altar to place sacrifices. Some could enter the tent. And once a year the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place. There are repeated warning in Numbers, "Any unauthorized person who comes near…is to be put to death" (Num 1:51 etc. CSB). Encroachment on sacred space beyond one's status was deadly. Yes, draw near, but only so near! It was a great privilege to have God present in the midst of his people, but it could be dangerous.

Now Christ has opened a way for us through the inner veil. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). He has opened the way. He is there in the Father's presence, and when we are in Christ, we enter there also.

We approach with sincerity of heart and fullness of faith. We have integrity, a sincere heart. And our faith is full. What is this faith? It is trust in what God has done in Christ: he has exalted his slain Messiah. Jesus has offered himself on earth, and again in heaven. His blood has sealed a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. It is also faithfulness. We have given our allegiance to Jesus, and remain loyal to him. Faith is rooted in character: that we are trustworthy. But more importantly that Christ is trustworthy and God is trustworthy. Chapter 11 is full of examples of people who lived by faith, ending with Jesus, the supreme example of faith and faithfulness (12:2).

We approach with our hearts sprinkled and our bodies washed. Under the old covenant the priests were ordained by blood sprinkled on them and washing with water. The blood removed their impurity and sanctified them. They were set aside as holy, dedicated unto God and his service. Under the old covenant the sacrifices were unable to remove the consciousness of sin; they were a constant reminder of sins. Under the new covenant we are purified and cleansed with a much more powerful agent: Christ's lifeblood. Christ has provided purification for sins. Our sins are completely forgiven, removing consciousness of evil. This purification grants us access to God's space. It also indicates we are a priesthood. Many see here a reference or at least an allusion to baptism which symbolizes a cleansing, and, as it were, an entrance into a new identity and new way of life. We die to our old selves and we rise into our new selves, putting on Christ Jesus. We enter into God's household.

By faith we "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). We approach him in faith.

How do we draw near to God, practically speaking? We draw near to him *in worship*. We are gathered here to worship, to pay attention to God. Throughout the week we've been distracted, paying attention many things. We come here to refocus, to reorientate ourselves to God. We sing, we hear the Scriptures read and expounded. We draw near to God *in prayer*, corporately or individually. When we pray in Jesus's name, our prayers are taken into the heavenly sanctuary where Jesus our high priest presents them to the Father.

We draw near to God *in our life*. Paul uses the analogy of being at home and away from home, whether in the body or with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6,8). We are at home in our physical bodies, which are still part of the old creation, but our identity and belonging are elsewhere: we are in God's household, which is in the new creation. So if you think about being in God's household, what sort of house do you have in mind? What sort of household structure? Where do you see yourself fitting in that household? Is it a household of Upstairs, Downstairs like Downtown Abbey? Are we the servants, the minions, downstairs? Or do we see ourselves as the sons and daughters who have the right to be upstairs? And where do we picture God being? Is he down the far end of a long corridor, behind a door that says "Do not enter"? Or is he the center of the life of the household? Is he a friendly presence? Is it a positive thing that we are part of God's household?

We draw near to God *in love* by cultivating our affections. We seek to grow in our love for God, in our love for the Lord Jesus Christ. This is part of spiritual formation, growing into Christ, being formed into his likeness.

The second exhortation is that we hold fast to our confession of hope without swerving. The parallel in the opening block was "Let us hold on to our confession" (4:14). It did not specify the nature of the confession, though NIV rendered it as "the faith we profess." Here it is identified as hope. Faith is confidence in things that have happened. Hope is confidence in things that are yet future. The two are closely related, and in the next chapter the preacher joins them together: "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (11:1). The reason we can have such hope is the character of the one making the promises: God is reliable. He is faithful to his promises and covenants. He will do what he says he is going to do. This faithfulness is his righteousness. God has his purposes, and he will ensure that they are fulfilled. The trajectory of the Son in chapter 2 indicates what his purposes are for humanity. The Son assumed our humanity so that he might heal it and make us fit for God's presence.

These first two exhortations echo those of the first block. The preacher adds a third exhortation: Let us think of another (24-25). NIV renders it as "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." I think it is more vivid than that. It actually starts, "Let us consider one another…" Since we are family together we are to look at one another, think carefully, and take stock. As we look at one another and consider, what do we see? This careful consideration should evoke action. The preacher uses a rare

word, used only twice in the NT. It is the word from which comes our English word paroxysm, which I am sure is not part of your vocabulary. It is usually a negative word, indicating a strong outburst of anger or rage. But here it is used positively. Our consideration of one another should produce an energetic outburst of love resulting in good works. We are family together.

Our love for one another should overflow into good works. We have our Deacons ministry. Some of you volunteer to renovate apartments at Grace Village, where we are nearing completion of the fourth unit. Meal train provides for those who are temporarily laid up. Next Sunday some of us will volunteer with Abrahamic Alliance to prepare and deliver meals to the unhoused.

But some are neglecting to meet together. They have separated themselves from God's household. That is a dangerous place to be. It can lead to drifting away from Christ, and even eventually to outright rejection. So the preacher includes five warning passages in his sermon. If we stop meeting together we are in danger of drifting away from one another and from Christ. Slowly, imperceptibly at first until one is completely untethered. The preacher repeatedly give two antidotes. First, look to Jesus, consider Jesus. Christ before us: he has run the course and finished. He was tested and suffered like us in every way, but he remained faithful. He has been perfected in his humanity. He has healed our humanity. As we look to him we are healed as well. And Christ before us, the object of our gaze, the object of our affections. The preacher's second antidote is to keep meeting together. We meet together to pay attention to Jesus, Christ before us. And we meet together to encourage one another. We encourage each other to keep going, to persevere through the trials and difficulties, through the suffering. We encourage one another to finish the course. We love one another, care for one another. We recognize that we are family together. We are the household of God. The head of household is the Son, our king and our great high priest.

The preacher has associated his three exhortations with the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. They appear together several times in the NT. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian Christians he writes, together with Silas and Timothy: "We remember before our God and Father 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). Most famously, he wrote to the church in Corinth: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). Faith, hope, and love belong together. They go together in our response to the preacher's exposition of Jesus our high priest.

So let us draw near to God in faith. Faith in what Christ Jesus has done for us. The Son has taken on our humanity and healed it. He has taken that perfected humanity into his Father's presence. Let us hold on to our confession of hope, that we too will join him there. And let us keep meeting together to give careful thought to each other, resulting in an outburst of love, leading to good works. May God grant us the grace to respond this way.

DON'T TURN BACK!

Hebrews 10:26-31

#29, 2025.07.27

Each week our PBCC e-news includes an item about the persecuted church, encouraging prayer for the church in a particular country. This week featured Cuba, where the Communist Party seeks to control the church. In many parts of the world Christians are under intense pressure to compromise or even apostatize, that is, to renounce their faith in Jesus. This is nothing new. There were periods of intense persecution against Christians during the Roman Empire. Some did renounce their faith, but many remained steadfast. Persecution is not the only reason that people renounce their faith. Indeed, persecution is not a very effective way to get Christians to renounce their faith. Church history is full of Christians who were faithful unto death, refusing to renounce Jesus even in the face of intense pressure.

The Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11:1–12:3 contains similar heroes, all the way from Abel, the first martyr, whose spilt blood still speaks (11:4), to Jesus, the supreme martyr, who "endured the cross, scorning its shame" (12:2-3).

The believers to whom Hebrews is addressed are suffering. Some might be wondering about renouncing their faith in Jesus. Five times the preacher addresses the risk of renunciation. These five warning passages pose a challenge for preachers. And they have been fertile territory for theologians, professional or amateur, to debate eternal security, or whether a Christian can lose their salvation.

The conventional view has been that Hebrews is addressed to Jewish Christians, some of whom are tempted to renounce their faith in Jesus and the New Covenant, to return to their Jewish ways under the old covenant. Many interpreters now recognize that these warning passages are addressed also to Gentile Christians who might be thinking of abandoning their faith.

Today we come to the fourth warning passage (10:26-31). The preacher has finished his long exposition of Jesus our great high priest (5:1–10:18). Jesus has entered into God's presence. There he has presented his lifeblood which provides purification for sins and establishes a new covenant in which sins are forgiven and remembered no more. He has opened the way for his followers to enter also—all those who enter into the new covenant through faith.

The preacher has followed this exposition with three exhortations (10:19-25), which we looked at last week. Let us draw near in faith. Let us hold onto our hope. Let consider one another unto love. Here is a prescription for a healthy church. We keep an eye on heaven, where Jesus our High Priest continues to minister on our behalf in the Father's presence. He is also the king whose subjects we are. We have given him our allegiance, entered his kingdom, and are loyal to him in our daily life. We keep an eye on the future: journey's end when we will finish the course. This is our hope. We keep an eye on one another, paying careful attention so that we can abound in love and good works. We keep meeting together regularly to refresh our faith, hope, and love. We pay attention to God and to one another. We encourage each another to keep going, to remain faithful. We press on towards the goal that is our hope. The preacher wants us to keep pressing forward. He is aware of the danger of looking away or looking back.

The preacher follows his exhortation with a warning. One can think of this as a negative exhortation, what to avoid. He warns of the alternative. His warning begins *for*; NIV again omits this *for*, breaking the connection between the exhortation and the warning. We should keep pressing forward in faith, hope, and love, because if we don't, then… You can think of the *for* as an *elseif*. He lays out an extreme alternative. It is a severe warning.

> **[26] [For] If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, [27] but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. [28] Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. [29] How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? [30] For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb 10:26-31 NIV)**

This paragraph readily divides into four parts. First, the preacher presents an *if…then* scenario (26-27). *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth*. If *we*: he includes himself in this warning, just as he did in the exhortation. He continues to express solidarity with his readers, here as elsewhere. He preaches to himself as well as to his readership. If we *deliberately keep on sinning*. This sin is willful, intentional, deliberate. It is ongoing: keep on sinning.

This sin occurs after receiving *the knowledge of the truth*. This phrase occurs four times in the Pastoral Epistles, where it seems to be a standard term for those who have received the gospel and turned to Christ in faith. In the third warning passage the equivalent term is *after being enlightened* (6:4). Being enlightened is another common description for Christ-followers.

The Torah distinguished between *unintentional* and *intentional* sins (Num 15:22-31). *Unintentional sins* were done by mistake, without knowledge. *Intentional sins* were done with a high hand. When someone became aware of an unintentional sin, he could offer a sacrifice for atonement. The impurity from the sin was purged and he was forgiven. There was no such provision for high-handed sins. The penalty was to be cut off from one's people.

I assume we are all guilty of intentional sins. We know a behavior is wrong and we do it anyway. We know we shouldn't lose our cool when cut off in traffic. But we do, and we do it repeatedly. Are these the sorts of sins the preacher is addressing? There are enough clues in these verses to identify the nature of this sin. No, it is not these sorts of repeated deliberate sins.

If we sin this way, *then*… There are consequences. There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. Under the old covenant the high priest presented sacrifices for sins, both his own sins and the sins of the people (5:1). But these had to be repeated every year. This meant that there did remain a sacrifice: next day's daily burnt offering, and next year's Day of Atonement offering. The clock could be reset. There was purification and forgiveness on a regular basis.

But the offering made by Jesus our great high priest is different. He did not have to offer sacrifices for his own sins (7:27). Instead, he has put away sins once-for-all through the sacrifice of himself. There is now no other sacrifice for purification and the forgiveness of sins. The one sufficient and effective sacrifice has been offered once and for all. It will never be offered again. It cannot be offered again because Jesus is enthroned in his new creation body. There is no other offering.

But something does remain. What is left remaining is judgment. The preacher uses the familiar Biblical metaphor of blazing fire that consumes everything in its path. We have become all too familiar with this image in recent years with multiple ferocious wildfires. As a child I witnessed terrifying forest fires in the Malaysian jungle, which were imprinted on my memory. Consuming fire is a familiar metaphor for judgment in the OT. In the NT it occurs as a metaphor for final judgment.

This pair of verses has caused much soul-searching. Many have wondered if they have committed the unpardonable sin and live in fear of judgment. Many might wonder if their deliberate, repeated sins, no matter how small, might be unforgivable.

Is God standing there with a stern look on his face, saying, "You knew it was sin, and you did it anyway. You're toast!" Or is he standing there with a log book, noting down all our sins? When the book is full, does he say, "Sorry, that's one sin too many"? Grace has run out. The treasury of merit is empty. You've emptied the tank of forgiveness. You've used up all your indulgences. There is no other recourse. You've exhausted the one sacrifice for sins. There is no other.

What sort of deliberate, repeated sin does the preacher have in mind? He clarifies in the next section (28-29). He moves from his *if…then* argument to a *lesser-to-greater* argument: if *a* is true, then how much more so *b*.

The lesser case is given in v. 28: *Anyone who rejected the law of Moses*, that is the Torah given by God through Moses to his people Israel. This was one of the most high-handed of sins. This was rebellion against God himself. If such behavior was observed and verified by two or three witnesses, the penalty was death. No mercy was shown. Was this the penalty for breaking any one of the 613 commandments in the Torah?

The preacher is referring to Deuteronomy:

> **If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the Lord gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God in violation of his covenant, and contrary to my command has worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars in the sky, and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death. On the testimony of two or three witnesses a person is to be put to death, but no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness. (Deut 17:2-6)**

The rebellious act was idolatry, worshiping images of created things rather than the Lord, creator of all. The early chapters of Deuteronomy contain a long, stern warning against making images (Deut 4:15-31). God had already put an image of himself in the world: the human being. This idolatry was treason, breach of faith. It is described as a *detestable thing* or an *abomination*. It must be purged from the community. It could not remain among the people that God had sanctified unto himself. The abomination was purged by the death of the idolater.

Idolatry, the worship of others gods by means of images of created things, breaks the first two commandments:

> **"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.**
>
> **"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God…**
>
> **"You shall not bear the name of the Lord your God in vain. (Exod 20:2-5, 7 alt.)**

Here I am following the Catholic and Lutheran ordering that combines "You shall have no other gods" and "you shall not make an image" as the first commandment. The second is about bearing God's name. This is not a prohibition against misusing the Lord's name, as usually translated. God put his name on his people; they belonged to him. The high priest literally bore Yahweh's name on his forehead: a gold plate reading "Belonging to the Lord." He also bore the names of the twelve tribes on his shoulders. Idolatry made a mockery of being the Lord's people, bearing his name, belonging to him. Idolatry meant that the Lord's name was borne in vain.

The Lord chose Israel to be his people: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you. *I will be your God*: the first command preserved this, prohibiting the worship of other so-called gods via images. *You will be my people*: the second command preserved this. Wear my label well, "Belonging to the Lord." Don't live in such as a way as to make a mockery of this status as the Lord's people.

If the severe punishment of death without mercy was merited by breaking the first two commandments, rejecting how God had bound himself and his people together, then how much more so… Moving from the lesser to the greater, where already the "lesser" is very severe.

How much more severe will be the punishment of someone who rejects God's word under the new covenant. God's word is none other than his beloved Son. In these last days he has spoken to us in his Son. His Son assumed our humanity so he might heal it. God has exalted him to glory at his right hand.

The preacher now lists three ways in which this one has shockingly rebelled against God. Again, this is one who has received the knowledge of the truth. This is one who bears the name of Christ, but has now rejected him. In each case the preacher gives the object

first for emphasis, followed by the verb. The subject is the same for all three.

The Son of God he has trampled underfoot. In Shusaku Endo's novel *Silence*, the main character is a Jesuit priest sent to Japan during a time of severe persecution. The Japanese Inquisitor ordered suspected Christians to literally trample on an image of Christ on pain of death.

Elsewhere in the NT, items that are trampled underfoot are salt that has lost its saltiness (Matt 5:13), pearls thrown before pigs (Matt 7:6), and seed sown on the path (Luke 8:5). To trample the Son of God underfoot is incongruous. It is desecration, a sacrilege. Son of God is the highest title, given to Jesus. The eternal Son, exact representation of God, participating with God in creation; to whom is added the glorified humanity of the Son seated on the throne.

To trample him underfoot is akin to "crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace" (6:6), the charge made in the third warning passage. God allowed his beloved Son to be trampled upon by Jew and Roman alike in Christ's Passion, culminating in his crucifixion. Jesus allowed himself to be trampled upon. But God has raised him into the new creation and glorified him. God has bestowed the highest honor upon Jesus, enthroning him in glory and giving him the name above every other name.

Second, *the blood of the covenant he has treated as an unholy thing*. The blood of Jesus has sealed the new covenant. This blood has purged the uncleanness and sanctified those who turn to Christ, setting them apart as holy. But this person now treats this blood as ordinary, as common. He desecrates it, desacralizes it. He removes it from the realm of the holy into the realm of the common. It is therefore a rejection of the new covenant, of the purification from sins that Christ accomplished, and of the forgiveness of sins. "There is wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb," as the gospel song goes. This person strips Christ's lifeblood of all its power.

Third, *the Spirit of grace he has insulted*. Insult is too mild; it is an intensive form of the verb usually translated as insult. Outraged might be better.

It is now clear that this deliberate ongoing sin is apostasy: turning away, turning back. It is a wholesale rejection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ our great high priest, of both his person and his work. Of both his work in the past to bring salvation, and his ongoing work of mediation. The Son has returned to the communion he had with the Father through the Spirit from before the beginning of time. He has taken our humanity which he assumed with him into that relationship. When we are united to Christ and his work we are embraced into that relationship also. We become beloved sons and daughters. We are members of God's household with the Son, our great high priest, as head of household. This apostate has withdrawn himself from this relationship. He has turned his back on God and Christ.

What will God do to one who spurns Christ and his blood, who rejects him, who rebels against him? The preacher again cites Israel's Scriptures (v. 30). He quotes from the Song of Moses, a song which the Lord gave him as a final word to his people before Moses would die. The Song celebrates how God chose Israel to be his people, the apple of his eye. But Israel grew fat and forsook God its creator. It worshiped other gods, new gods, and forgot the one true God. The Lord would bring judgment. Here we get the words which the preacher quotes: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" and "The Lord will judge his people" (Deut 32:5, 6). The Lord does this because he loves his people. He is a jealous God. When Moses had finished reciting the Song to the people he said to them:

> **"Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut 32:46-47)**

Many Christians have a negative view of the Law. Luther juxtaposed Law and Gospel, discrediting the former. Calvin had a more positive view of the Law. Moses urged Israel to keep the Law with its commandments. They are not empty words; *they are your life*. If that law was life for Israel, how much more so the much greater word that God has spoken in his Son. How much more so is he our life. How much more so should we listen to him and follow him. How much greater the peril if we turn aside or turn back from doing so.

The preacher concludes his warning: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). The one who has tasted God's goodness, who has turned to Christ, who has entered into the new covenant, but then walked away from it all, renouncing Christ, is in a perilous place. He has taken himself out of the safe hands of Jesus, our high priest, out of the safe hands of God, our loving Father. But he cannot take himself out of the hands of God. He is now in the hands of God who judges. But for those who remain loyal to God and his Son resting in the hands of the living God is the safest place to be.

Throughout the past two millennia many Christians have come under great pressure to recant, to deny Christ on pain of death. Many have stood firm through intense suffering. Many have remained faithful to Christ all the way unto death.

Polycarp, a disciple of John, was bishop of Smyrna in the early second century. As an old man he was arrested and brought to the stadium where a crowd had gathered to watch the games. The magistrate asked him, "What harm is there in saying, Lord Caesar?" He was brought before the proconsul who said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent…I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ." Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He never did me injury: how then can I blaspheme my king and my Savior?" He was burned at the stake for refusing to burn incense to the emperor. In May some of us visited the new Polycarp memorial in Izmir, modern-day Smyrna.

So many Christians were killed for their faith that around AD 200, Tertullian, a brilliant lawyer from North Africa and an adult convert to Christ, wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the "Rulers of the Roman Empire." He said of the Church, "We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods… The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed." From this last statement was developed the famous saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Persecution has generally proved ineffective. Persecution tends to purify and strengthen the church. The persecuted church grew rapidly in China, and is growing rapidly in Iran and elsewhere.

But there are other reasons that Christians turn back. Some might make a definitive break, renouncing their faith. The NT tells us of some. In Ephesus, Hymenaeus and Alexander, among others, had made a shipwreck of their faith (1 Tim 1:19-20). False teachers were a problem in several churches. They had gone astray and were leading others astray. Leaders in Corinth went astray in their quest for honor, position, influence, and money. These continue to be problems today. Then and today there are also those who slowly drift away until they finally realize that they have become untethered. They no longer have any attachment to Christ.

Is it possible to lose one's salvation? That's what most sermons on this passage would be about. But I think it is the wrong question. Is it possible to stop pressing forward? Is it possible to turn aside or turn back? Yes, it is. Is is possible to lose sight of Jesus? Yes, it is.

Hebrews views the Christian life as a journey towards a future salvation, or a salvation that is realized in the future. When we come to Christ we start that journey, not end it. This severe warning is part of the preacher's rhetoric to encourage his beloved readers to persevere, to be faithful to journey's end. He has exhorted them to draw near to God and to one another (19-25). He has now warned them of the peril of renouncing Christ (26-31). In the next paragraph (32-39) he will reassure them that he has confidence that they will remain faithful because they have been faithful in the past (32-39). The Christians to whom Hebrews is written were a suffering church. They had persevered so far and the preacher is confident they will continue to do so.

Suffering may plunge Christians into such pain, grief, and despair that they forsake the Lord. They may lose heart. Some of us are suffering or have suffered. There are health issues, unemployment, immigration problems, and more. We need to support one another in love so as to strengthen our faith and our hope. Jesus understands our suffering. He became like one of us in every way, sharing our flesh and blood. He suffered in every way like us. He was tested like us in every way, save without sin. He remained faithful. Therefore he is able to be a compassionate high priest. He sympathizes with us in our suffering. Therefore we can draw near to God's throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace in our time of need. Many have found the Lord to be a great comfort through suffering.

Many have the pain of watching loved ones drift away from the Lord. Some drift away because of the cares of life. These loom larger than Christ and crowd him out. Young people are leaving the faith. What they see in churches and Christians is not compelling enough to keep them. What is it that they are walking away from? What sort of Christianity?

Western Christianity is too often individualistic and transactional. It's me and God. You say the prayer and fill in the card. Perhaps there is pressure—perceived, implied or actual—to make the commitment. You become a statistic on a weekly or monthly report that is turned in. You have made a commitment and received forgiveness of sins and a place in heaven. The transaction has been made. There may be little mention of entering into the vibrant community of God's people who gather together to pay attention to God and to pay attention to one another. A community of faith, hope, and love. It is Christianity Light. This may be what people are walking away from.

In a transactional view there is a preoccupation with who is *in* and who is *out*. This applies to the interpretation of this passage. Have they lost their salvation? Are they now *out*? Were they ever really *in*? The NT is more interested in whether you are moving forward or slipping backwards. Are you moving towards God and Christ, growing in faith? If not, then you are in great danger of turning aside, or turning back, or drifting away.

Some churches may offer the best worship in town. Attendees may feel good, hit an emotional high, and enter in. But does this sustain a long obedience in the same direction? Some may get bored. Others may leave to seek a higher high. Some may become disenchanted and depart.

Just as I think the preacher gave this warning so as to exhort his readers to draw closer to God and closer to one another, may we also hear it the same way. The two major antidotes he offers to avoid apostasy or drifting away are to pay attention to Jesus, Christ before us, and to pay attention to one another. Christ has gone before us and finished the journey; he has entered God's presence. We look to Christ, follow him, and press on toward journey's end. We meet together to pay attention to God and to Christ, and to encourage one another to remain faithful. We place ourselves into the loving hands of God our loving heavenly Father, and the loving hands of Christ our elder brother.

> *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)*

THE LIFE OF FAITH

Hebrews 10:32-39

#30, 2025.08.03

Last Sunday the Tour de France finished on the Champs-Elysée in Paris. It is not all relaxed riding through fields of sunflowers, though that is an iconic image. There are steep hill climbs, creating more iconic images, and fast sprints. It is a grueling bicycle race, covering 3,300 km / 2,050 miles in 21 days. It is a race of endurance. The riders have to get up each morning, get back on their bikes, and keep going until they finally cross the finish line on the last day. This year's race was particularly difficult. Even Tadaj Pogačar, the eventual winner, was looking tired, enduring the last week.

So it is with the Christian life. The NT frequently calls for endurance or perseverance. It often uses the analogy of a race or a contest. This includes Hebrews:

> **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (12:1-2a NIV)**

The great cloud of witnesses are all those who have faithfully completed the race. They are the many people named in chapter 11, those in OT days who lived by faith. Jesus also has run the race and finished the course. He is the pioneer, our forerunner. It is as if all these OT saints are in the stands of the stadium, watching us run the race, and cheering us along. Christ is at the finish line, ready to welcome us across the line.

The three passages that we have been looking at form a unit. They feature exhortation (19-25), a severe warning (26-31), and now reassurance (32-39). The exhortation looks back to the similar exhortation (4:14-16) before the long exposition about the high-priesthood of Jesus (5:1–10:18). Since we have such a great high priest, let us approach God's throne with bold confidence. We have admission into God's very presence through Jesus our high priest. We belong there. The reassurance (32-39) looks ahead to chapters 11–12 which will deal more fully with the themes of living by faith (ch. 11) and perseverance or endurance (ch. 12).

Our text today is Hebrews 10:32-39,

> **32 Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. 33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. 34 You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. 35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.**
>
> **36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. 37 For,**
>
> **"In just a little while,**
> **he who is coming will come**
> **and will not delay."**
>
> **38 And,**
>
> **"But my righteous one will live by faith.**
> **And I take no pleasure**
> **in the one who shrinks back."**
>
> **39 But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved. (Heb 10:32-39 NIV)**

In the previous section (26-31), the preacher has warned of the dangers of falling away. As an antidote he calls on them to *Remember those earlier days after you had received the light* (32). They had started out so well. Remembrance isn't simple a mental exercise. It is also an exercise of imagination. We put ourselves back into that situation. We enter into that memory. We use our imagination to place ourselves back where it happened. He wants them to feel again the fervor they had as young believers.

Each year at Passover Jews remember. They share a meal but it is much more than simply a meal. It is a meal enveloped by remembrance. It is called a seder because it follows a script, an order (*seder*). Central to this order is the *Haggadah* (the telling). Through telling the story Jews place themselves back in Egypt. They tell the story as if they themselves had been present there. They remember what the Lord did for his people, though they themselves were never there nor their ancestors for a hundred generations before them. But they themselves remember. The Exodus is part of their cultural narrative, kept alive by regular remembrance, regular commemoration: co-remembering.

As Christians we also remember on a regular basis. We remember the Lord Jesus. He sat down with his disciples for what began as a Passover remembrance. But during the meal he changed the narrative. He shaped it around himself. He gave new meaning to two of the symbolic elements that were present on the table: the bread and the wine. Taking the bread, he said, "This is my body given for you." Taking the cup, he said "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:19, 20). He told his disciples, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24, 25).

We were not there at that table, but we place ourselves back into that picture. We recite the words of Jesus. We tell the story of the Last Supper. We eat and we drink. We re-center ourselves. Our cultural narrative is centered on Jesus who gave himself for us. But we live in a world of competing cultural narratives that de-center us. In communion, our memory is refreshed. Our faith is refreshed so that we can move into the future with fresh resolve and commitment. We belong to Christ: we have given him our allegiance. And we seek to follow him in faithfulness.

The preacher urges his readers, "Remember *those earlier days after you had received the light*." Those early days when they were young converts. They had been enlightened by the Spirit with the truth about Jesus. They were full of resolve to follow Christ.

During those days they *endured in a great conflict of suffering*. They

quickly found out that following Christ was not a bed of roses. They faced opposition that was triply strong: a *conflict*, indeed a *great* conflict, indeed a great conflict *full of suffering*. The word for conflict is *athlēsis*, from which comes our word *athlete*. Athletes suffer through rigorous training and competition. They endure the pain and the weariness in the hopes of succeeding in competition, even winning a prize. Similarly these young Christians endured, they persevered, they kept going through their suffering.

Paul several times uses the metaphor of an athletic contest. He uses a related word *agōn*, which appears in our English words *protagonist* and *antagonist*, the two parties in a contest. Using the cognate verb also, he urged Timothy, "Fight (*agōnizomai*) the good fight (*agōn*) of the faith" (1 Tim 6:12). At the end of his life he could say, "I have fought (*agōnizomai*) the good fight (*agōn*), I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7).

This is a hard word for us to hear. Shouldn't the Christian life be straightforward and easy? Why do we face trials and difficulties? Why is life often so hard? Why is it such a struggle? Why doesn't God make it easy for us? There are plenty of "health, wealth, and prosperity" preachers and teachers who imply just this: Come to Christ and all your problems will be solved. This may tickle ears, but it is not NT Christianity. It can be hard to admit that deep down, we do expect God to make our life straightforward and easy.

Peter wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet 4:12). But we are surprised. We do find it strange. Peter continues, "But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (4:13). We are not alone. Jesus was tested and tempted in every way, just as we are, but he remained faithful (Heb 4:15). This is one of his important qualifications for being a sympathetic high priest. Therefore he can empathize with us in our weaknesses. Through him we can "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). As we have just sung in Charles Wesley's hymn, "With confidence I now draw nigh" (Arise, my Soul, Arise).

Those to whom this sermon is addressed have *endured in a great conflict full of suffering*. They have remained faithful. The nature of their suffering is given in vv. 33-34. They both suffered and identified with others who were suffering. The preacher uses four clauses, arranged chiastically. The outer pair describes their own suffering: *you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution…and…the confiscation of your property* (33a, 34b). The inner pair describe their solidarity with others who are suffering: *you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison* (33b-34a).

Looking at the outer pair, they *were publicly exposed to insult and persecution* (33a). Insult is verbal abuse: shaming and reproach. They were mocked and reviled. *Persecution* here is the word often translated as *tribulation*. They suffered physical abuse. We say, "Sticks and stones may hurt my bones but words will never hurt me." This is not true. Harsh words often hurt more deeply and permanently than sticks and stones. This verbal abuse was shaming. Furthermore, this verbal and physical abuse was not hidden; it did not take place out-of-sight down some alley. It was public. Even worse, it was a public spectacle with many onlookers. The Christians were put on display before the public as they suffered this verbal and physical abuse. In an honor-shame society they were shamed in front of all.

In addition to violence to their reputation and their person, they suffered economic violence: the confiscation of their property (34b). They paid a further personal price for following Jesus, a serious economic loss.

Through this abuse and dispossession they could have withdrawn. They could have retreated into their own sense of hurt and injustice. But they did not. They looked beyond themselves to others who were in a similar situation. Looking now at the inner pair, they courageously showed solidarity with others who were being treated this same way. They were partners (*koinōnoi*) in a fellowship (*koinōnia*) of suffering. They *stood side by side with* them (NIV) helpfully conveys this close solidarity. Despite already suffering from public mistreatment themselves, they did not shrink back from their brothers and sisters who were also being publicly abused. They were not ashamed in this solidarity and identification with other targets of public humiliation and shaming.

You suffered along with those in prison (34a). The Greek verb is *sympatheō*, source of our English words sympathy and sympathize. NIV's *suffer along with* well-captures the intended meaning here. This solidarity was more than feelings. Roman prisons were not nice places to be. Those in prison were usually dependent upon family and friends bringing food. These Christians were not ashamed to identify with them by supplying their needs. In the NT we read of many Christians who were in prison for their faith. Paul was imprisoned multiple times in multiple cities. He was imprisoned so many times in so many places that we are not sure which of the various NT mentions refers to which imprisonment, so often was he locked up. He thanked the Philippian Christians for sending Epaphroditus to him with gifts to supply his needs (Phil 4:18). At the end of Hebrews we learn that Timothy has just been released from prison.

In his concluding exhortations, the preacher urges his readers:

> **Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. (13:3)**

In the midst of their own mistreatment and loss, the Christians reached beyond themselves to join in solidarity with others. And they accepted their own loss with joy. Was this because they were in denial? Or because they felt that as Christians they had to put on a happy face and deny that anything was wrong?

They were able to suffer the snatching of their property because they knew such property was ephemeral, temporary. They knew that they had another possession that was both better and permanent. They knew that in the end there would be unshakeable things that would abide (12:27). They were on a journey towards the abiding city, the new Jerusalem (13:14), a journey to God himself. It takes clear sight to see that the very visible riches of this world are only fleeting, and that the as-yet unseen riches of the new cosmos are better and lasting. Moses was able to do so. "He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin" (11:25).

These Christians were following their role-model, Jesus. "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). Crucifixion was the most cruel, painful, public, humiliating, shameful manner of

execution. The Romans intended it to confer maximum shame. But Jesus refused to accept it as shame. He scorned the shame of the cross. He refused to be shamed by it. He had come to do God's will. That honor overrode any shame the world tried to lay upon him. Indeed, John's gospel portrays the lifting up of Jesus onto the cross as the beginning of his glorification, of his being honored. In doing his Father's will, he was attaining far more honor than the great shame the Jewish and Roman leaders were placing on him.

The preacher has urged his beloved readers to look back on their lives and to remember. They had done so well. Therefore, let this remembrance refreshed be the springboard into the future. Therefore, *do not throw away your confidence*. Confidence or boldness is the Greek word *parrēsia* that we have encountered before (10:19). It is the bold confidence of having access into the presence of a superior. For Christians it is the bold confidence of knowing that we are welcome in the Father's presence, in the heavenly throne room. These Christians may be mocked before the local officials, before provincial governors, before the emperor himself. But what is that when you are welcome in the throne room of the one true God, and in the presence of Christ Jesus who has gone before us. Don't abandon that just so that you may be welcomed before mere earthly officials, however grand. It was this confident access before God that allowed Jesus and the apostles to be so bold before officials. They were mocked by the officials, but that didn't matter to them. They were bold before Roman governors: Jesus before Pilate; Paul before Gallio in Corinth and before Felix and Festus in Caesarea. Paul was bold in both synagogue and market-place (*agora*). They were bold because they were heralds of good news from God himself. They were able to endure great hostility from human officials, knowing that their honor came from God.

This bold access has great reward because at journey's end faith shall be sight. They shall enter into the celestial city, the abiding city. There they shall be welcomed. As John Bunyan imagines 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."

Verse 35 is a transitional verse from the past (32-34) to the future (36-39). Their journey is not over. They still have need of endurance. Endurance for the near future so that they will continue doing God's will. Again, this is what their pioneer did. He came to do God's will and he did it to the end. He was faithful. The pilgrims are called to endure in their faithfulness until they reach journey's end. Then they shall receive the promise, that is, what has been promised. That is "the better and lasting possessions" (34), the great reward (35), the preservation of life (39).

In vv. 37-38 the preacher draws on Israel's Scriptures to back up his exhortation: *In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back*.

If you have a printed Bible open or even an electronic Bible you may see this identified as being a quotation from Habakkuk 2:3-4. Yet if you look at those verses you might see little resemblance other than the famous phrase the righteous will live by faith. We know that phrase because Paul quotes it twice (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:1), where it is seen as foundational for the doctrine of justification by faith. In Hebrews the preacher is using it in a different way, and quoting a larger context.

Writing around the year 605 BC, the prophet Habakkuk was grieved that the Lord was not doing anything about his sinful people, Judah. They were wicked and seemed to be paying no consequences. The Lord assured him that he was about the bring the Babylonians against them in judgment. Habakkuk objected that the Babylonians were even more wicked than the people of Judah. He took his stand to await the Lord's reply to his complaint. The Lord told him to write down a vision or revelation:

> **3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time;**
> **it speaks of the end**
> **and will not prove false.**
> **Though it linger, wait for it;**
> **it will certainly come**
> **and will not delay.**
> **4 See, the enemy is puffed up;**
> **his desires are not upright—**
> **but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.**
>
> **(Hab 2:3-4)**

The puffed-up enemy is arrogant Babylon, upon whom God will bring judgment in due course. It is contrasted with the righteous one who lives faithfully. The vision will certainly come to pass, where *certainly come* reflects the Hebrew idiom *coming it will come*. Meanwhile the righteous person should carry on living a life of faithfulness to God.

However, the preacher quotes not from the Hebrew text but from the Greek translation (Septuagint), as is true for almost all NT quotations. The Greek has *for coming it/he will come*, which cannot refer to the vision, but could refer to a person. The preacher takes it this way: *the coming one* will come or *he who is coming will come* (NIV). *The coming one* is a Messianic title. In the gospels it is used several times of Jesus. But here the preacher is using it of Jesus in his return to earth at the end of this age to bring final judgment.

He is so confident that this final judgment is imminent that he substitutes in a very distinct phrase from Isaiah 26:20, used only once in the Greek OT: *In just a little while*, or, better, *in a very little while* (NASB, NRSV, CSB). This too, in Isaiah, referred to imminent judgment. In the eschatological timeframe of the NT, the next event is the return of Jesus at the end of this age. It has been 2,000 years but it is just ahead. Eschatologically it is in a very little while. We are to live in such expectancy.

Turning to v. 38, the Greek of Hab 2:4a is completely different than the Hebrew: *If it/he draws back, my soul is not pleased in it/him*. Again, the pronouns cannot refer to the vision, and are best understood as referring to a person. This person who draws back is set in contrast against the righteous one of v. 4b. The preacher switches the two halves of the verse, placing *the righteous one* first, so that *the one who draws back* refers to the Christian who shrinks back from following Jesus.

The preacher then applies this to his readers in his conclusion: *But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved* (v. 39). The wilderness generation shrank

back. The preacher described them in detail in chapter 3. They were on their way to the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. But they were so fearful of what lay ahead, of the giants in the land, that they lost heart. Their courage failed them. They wanted to go back to Egypt, which they redefined as the land flowing with milk and honey. As a result they fell in the wilderness. They neither made it to the Promised Land nor back to Egypt. Their end was destruction. They failed to hear and heed the word of the Lord. So the preacher warns, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion" (3:7, 15; 4:7, quoting Ps 95:7b-8).

But *we do not belong to those* people, says the preacher. We *belong…to those who have faith*, or better, faithfulness. We live by faithfulness. We live faithful lives in the present. We will keep running the race, fighting the fight, enduring the contest. Three words in this passage can be understood as opposites of shrinking back: endurance (32, 36), confident boldness (35), and faithfulness (39). All three of these words are being set against shrinking back, as characterized by the wilderness generation.

We live faithful lives into eternity. The result of faithfulness is we are saved. This is set against the alternate destination of destruction. The phrase *are saved* is literally *preservation of souls*, or, better, preservation of one's very being, of one's self. Our lives of faithfulness ensure we have a pathway into the new age. The triune God will keep us if we keep looking to Jesus.

God does not promise that the Christian life is easy. It is a pilgrimage beset with challenges. Just as John Bunyan imagined in *Pilgrim's Progress*, which he wrote in prison. Our challenges are relatively minor compared to the persecuted church around the world. We don't face death, or imprisonment, or confiscation of property. We don't face verbal or physical abuse. We are not shamed for following Jesus. But life is still difficult. We face many challenges. We can become discouraged, even tempted to give up. But we do not belong to those who shrink back.

The preacher has given his beloved readers a rousing attaboy or attagirl in vv. 32-34. Then he essentially says, keep on going, keep running the race, keep persevering. The preacher wrote this word of encouragement to keep his readers going, to keep running the race all the way to the finish line. He has two main exhortations. First, keep looking to Jesus: Christ before us. He has finished the race, he's run the course. He awaits us at the finish line. So,

> **let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (12:1-2)**

We need regular remembrances to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, to remind ourselves which story we are in, which our journey.

Secondly, keep meeting together to encourage one another. We are a fellowship of pilgrims. We do not walk this path or run this race alone. We are in this together. So,

> **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 are met together, gathered together here as a local part of the worldwide body of Christ. We are a fellowship of pilgrims looking together towards Jesus, encouraging one another to keep going. May the Lord grant us the grace to be faithful until journey's end, where Christ awaits us at the finish line.

> *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)*

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Hebrews 11:1-3

#31, 2025.11.02

We live on a short block of ten houses. The street is poorly lit, and there is a lot of through traffic. In the 26 years we have lived here no kids have lived on the block. There have never been any Halloween decorations, and thus no trick-or-treaters. Maybe the Grinch's cousin stole Halloween from our block. The next block down is very different. There are plenty of kids and decorations and trick-or-treaters. But for us, we leave our porch light off and go elsewhere—just a short distance away to a neighborhood that is ideal for Halloween. The street is a U-shaped loop so there is no through traffic. Every house and yard is decorated. There is an abundance of kids. And the house we go to has a fire-pit out front. There we sit and eat and talk. We hand out candy and complement the kids on their costumes.

Many churches and Christians are rather uneasy about Halloween, both the name and the celebration, so they provide safer alternatives. PBCC again hosted a Fall Festival with Trunk-or-Treat. Thanks to all of you who volunteered your cars for the event.

I grew up without Halloween, not encountering it until I moved here forty years ago. In the UK people gather a few days later: "Remember, remember the fifth of November, Gunpowder Treason, and Plot." On that date in 1605, the so-called Gunpowder Plot almost blew up Parliament during its State Opening. Guy Fawkes was discovered in the cellars with 36 barrels of gunpowder, ready to light the fuse. Had the plotters succeeded they would have then killed the king and made England a Catholic country again. For the past 400 years the British have remembered Guy Fawkes each year by burning him in effigy, known as a *guy*, atop massive bonfires, the bigger the better. Bonfire Night or Guy Fawkes Night is also the night for fireworks.

My sister assures me that Halloween is now well-celebrated in Scotland, though it is mixed in with a heavy dose of Samhain, the pagan Celtic festival on that same night. She has sent me cute photos of her grandchildren in the pumpkin patch.

Most people celebrating Halloween are unaware of the meaning of the name. It is an abbreviation for All-Hallows' Eve. Yesterday, November 1, was All Hallows' Day or All Saints' Day. It is a public holiday in many Catholic countries, including those in Europe. Today, November 2, is All Souls' Day. Together these two days form *Los Dios de los Muertos*, the Days of the Dead, widely celebrated in Hispanic communities.

These are days of remembrance, of commemoration, co-remembering. All Saints' Day remembers the faithful who have finished their journey on earth and are now in Christ's presence. They form the Church Triumphant. In Catholic theology All Souls' Day remembers the Church Penitent, Christians who have died and are now in purgatory.

The faithful saints include the martyrs, those who remained faithful in the face of death. The word *martyr* originally meant witness. In the early church so many Christians who bore faithful witness to Christ were killed for their faith that the word *martyr* acquired its current meaning of one who is killed for their faithful Christian testimony. Because the martyrs are an important component of All the Saints, the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church falls on the first Sunday of November—today. If you would like to learn more about how to pray for the persecuted church around the world, there will be a table outside after the service. There you will find material from an organization called Voice of the Martyrs, so-called because the voice of the martyrs still speaks. Each week our e-news draws attention to the persecuted church in a different country. This week is Egypt. In 2015 twenty Coptic Christians from Egypt together with one Christian from Ghana were martyred by ISIS on the Mediterranean shoreline in Libya after refusing to deny Christ. They remained faithful even unto death.

We on earth are the Church Militant. We are engaged in a struggle, a familiar theme in the NT. But our struggle is not against flesh and blood. Our weapons are not the weapons of the world. Our primary weapon is our faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ even in the face of death. It is a struggle to remain faithful, to keep going on our earthly pilgrimage until we enter the goal of that pilgrimage, which is God's presence. We continue to "fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim 6:12), as Paul exhorted Timothy. We "run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Heb 12:1). We remember those who have finished their life of faith, whose faith is now sight. At journey's end we will join them, and our faith will be sight also.

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm our belief in "the communion of saints." In the Nicene Creed we affirm our belief in "one holy, catholic and apostolic church." This communion of saints binds together all those who are in Christ not just in space but throughout time. In the most generous orthodoxy, the Nicene Creed binds in communion all the different branches of the church throughout the world. And we here on our earthly pilgrimage are also in communion with those who have finished their pilgrimage and entered God's presence.

At Halloween, with its imagery of witches and things that go bump in the night, I am reminded of a line from a poem from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* that I grew up singing as a hymn: "Hobgoblin nor foul fiend can daunt his spirit… His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim." Each verse ends with the phrase "to be a pilgrim." *Pilgrim's Progress* is the second most popular book of all time in the English language after the Bible. But few read it today. The idea of the Christian life as a pilgrimage to a destination seems to have dropped out of favor.

Our service is shaped around these two ideas: the communion of saints, and our one-way pilgrimage to God, to the New Jerusalem, the city of the living God. Some in this communion of saints have already arrived; this includes the Apostles and the Prophets and the Martyrs. We follow them on the same course.

Our call to worship was the opening stanza of the *Te Deum*, an ancient Latin text: *Te Deum laudamus*, "You, O God, we praise." It describes the great company gathered in praise to the triune God:

the angelic host and the communion of saints:

> The glorious company of apostles praise you—the apostolic foundation of the church.
> The noble fellowship of prophets praise you—those who proclaimed God's word.
> The white-robed army of martyrs praise you—those who bore faithful testimony to Jesus.
> Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you:
> Father…Son, [and] Holy Spirit.

Our Scripture reading (Rev 7:9-14) described the great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language praising God and the Lamb. They were wearing robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb, for they had come through the great tribulation. They had been faithful even unto death. They had not denied Christ. They had finished their earthly pilgrimage, and entered God's presence.

We sang, "For all the Saints who from their labors rest, who Thee by faith before the world confessed." From all the world the countless host streams in, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All over the world today congregations have been singing this very hymn.

The choir sang a beautiful anthem composed by Ralph Vaughan Williams: "Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us." This starts triumphantly, but takes a somber turn: "But some there be which have no memorial…but their name liveth forever more." Across the world choirs have been singing this anthem today.

Who are these famous men? The text is from the Apocrypha, a collection of books written between the two Testaments. The Catholic church recognizes this as Deuterocanonical, a second canon. The Protestant church recognizes it as useful for reading. The text of the anthem is taken verbatim from the KJV of chapter 44 of the book of Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Ben Sira. It lists these famous men: Enoch and Noah; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses and Aaron; and many more. You may recognize that these are the same names that appear in Hebrews 11.

Chapter 11 is the most famous part of the Book of Hebrews. It is often called the Hall of Faith. The word *faith* occurs 24 times, 18 times in the expression "By faith," always at the beginning of a sentence. It describes many OT saints who lived by faith. By faith Abel, by faith Enoch, by faith Noah, and so on.

This chapter might seem distinct on its own, and is often treated as such. But it is tightly integrated into the whole book. The preacher wrote this "word of exhortation" to encourage his readers to faithfully persevere in following Jesus till journey's end, to walk by faith.

The supreme model of faithful pilgrimage is Jesus himself. In chapter 2, for us humans and for our salvation the eternal Son came down and became human, like us in every way, sharing our flesh and blood. He was tested and tempted in every way, like us, but without sin. He was martyred, killed for being faithful. But he has become a faithful high priest.

By contrast, the wilderness generation whom God brought out of Egypt failed to be faithful. They fell into unbelief and disobedience. And so they fell in the wilderness. They failed to complete their journey. They did not enter God's rest. They did not attain God's promise: entrance into the land flowing with milk and honey.

The preacher gives a repeated warning to not be like them. "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (3:7-8, 15; 4:7; quoting Ps 95:7-8). Rest remains, so "Let us…make every effort to enter that rest" (4:11).

In the long central section (ch. 5–10) the preacher shows that Jesus has finished his journey. He was raised into a new creation body, with the power of an indestructible life. The Son has returned to God's presence, bringing his full humanity with him. He is there now as our great high priest, through whom we can boldly approach the throne of grace. We receive the grace that we need for remaining faithful on our pilgrimage.

The preacher ends chapter 10 with another exhortation (10:32-39): "You need to persevere" (10:36). He quotes a famous verse from the OT: "my righteous one will live by faith" (10:38; Hab 2:4). We can elaborate this famous statement. The one who lives by faith will be deemed by God to be righteous, that is, to be living life in right relationship with God. Also, the one who lives faithfully this way will live not just now, but into the age to come.

The preacher has confidence in his audience. He concludes, "we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" (10:39). Chapter 11 now is a catalog of OT exemplars who did not shrink back but lived by faith. They were faithful.

Chapter 11 flows straight into another exhortation:

> **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (12:1-2a)**

The great cloud of witnesses are all those who have faithfully completed the race. They are the many people named in chapter 11, those in OT days who lived by faith. Jesus also has run the race, and finished the course. He is the pioneer, our forerunner. It is as if all these OT saints are in the stands of the stadium, watching us run the race, and cheering us along. Christ is at the finish line ready to welcome us across the line and into God's rest.

What is faith? We talk of the Christian faith, the Jewish faith, the Muslim faith—the three Abrahamic faiths. The Christian church is united in some common beliefs. In the Nicene Creed we affirm: "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty… in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God… in the Holy Spirit, the Lord." This creed unites the communion of saints.

But the church has not stayed united. Friday was Reformation Day. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Saxony. He took exception to some of the beliefs that had developed within the Catholic church. This act sparked the Reformation, and the birth of the Protestant Church. The verse I quoted earlier, "The righteous shall live by faith," was a hallmark of the Reformation, particularly its use in Romans and Galatians. Faith was of great unifying importance. But the Protestant church did not stay united. It splintered into many churches. Many of these have their own statements of faith. Some are long and detailed, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith. These serve to divide rather than unite. They distinguish how one church is different from another, rather than united in a shared common faith.

The PBCC Board of Elders has a doctrinal statement: *What We Believe*. People will occasionally search our website or contact us, wanting to know what we believe: what is our doctrinal statement, as distinct from another church. They want to know if we are "sound" so that it is safe for them to come and visit us. The Elders sign that statement every year. But it is not the beating heart of PBCC. It is there. But as leadership we want to spur one another on to pursue and draw near to God in Christ by his Spirit. This is what Hebrews wants.

What does faith mean in Hebrews? In particular, what does it mean in chapter 11, this Hall of Faith? The chapter begins with a brief statement about faith:

> **[1]Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. [2]This is what the ancients were commended for. (Heb 11:1-2 NIV)**

"[F]aith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." These two parallel clauses are a little difficult to unravel. The second half of each clause is clear enough. They concern two "realities": what we hope for, and what we do not see. I say "realities," but are they really real? We can't touch them or see them; they are beyond our physical senses. It is not a matter of needing more powerful telescopes or microscopes. Both the Hubble and the James Webb Space Telescopes have conducted deep sky surveys: pointing at a seemingly-blank piece of space and leaving the shutter open for a long time. They revealed a lot of previously-unknown astronomical objects.

There are things that we do not see that better instrumentation or longer observation will never reveal. Until 250 years ago all societies accepted that there was an unseen realm, a supernatural realm. There were spiritual powers that were benevolent or malevolent or unpredictable. Plato argued that the physical world was just a shadow cast by Ideas beyond human perception.

For the Christian, the realm that we do not see includes God himself. But that is the wrong way around: the unseen God is greater than the unseen realm, for he created all things, seen and unseen. Also in the unseen realm is Jesus Christ our great high priest, who has entered God's presence, bringing with him his blood and the power of an indestructible life which purifies from all sin, seals a new covenant, and unleashes forgiveness of sins. Much of what Hebrews has been describing is in the unseen realm.

The things that we hope for lie in the future. They are unseen because they do not yet exist for us. They form our hope. True hope is not a wishful thinking beyond all evidence. It is a sure and certain thing, but it is in the future. Our hope is centered on Jesus Christ. Our hope is anchored within the veil, where Jesus has entered on our behalf. We may be beset by trials and temptations but as long as we hold on to the rope we will be preserved, because the anchor at the end of the rope is firmly set. At journey's end our hope will become reality. In the meantime, faith is the *reality* of the things hoped for and faith is the *proof* of what we do not see. By faith we lay hold of them and actualize them for our life.

Verse 2, in a more literal rendering, reads "For by this [faith] the elders were attested." The elders are those who have gone before. They are the ones commended in this chapter for living "by faith." They include the "fathers" to whom the prophets spoke in many times and in various ways in the past (1:1). They are the faithful saints of the OT. Because of their faith they were attested. The verb means to bear witness or testify. Here it is in the passive. The unnamed subject of the verb is God—what we call a divine passive. It is as if God were standing up in court and testifying: "these are my people." There is a bidirectional testifying. By their lives of faith the ancients were testifying to the reality of God; he in turn was owning them as his people living lives pleasing to him. They were being faithful to God, and God in turn was being faithful to them, owning them as his own. It is this bidirectional loyalty that gets to the heart of faith and the walk of faith.

Before the preacher describes the ancients who lived by faith, he begins with us, that is, with his own generation, the people to whom he is writing. But we can take it as encompassing us also, 2000 years later.

> **By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. (11:3)**

By faith we understand. We do not seek to understand first so that we might have faith. It begins with faith, then proceeds in a lifelong exercise of growth in understanding.

Everyone knows the first sentence of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The Nicene Creed begins, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." God spoke and things came to be. He created everything by his word. "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Light came into being in obedience to his voice.

So we live our lives oriented onto God, with whom everything begins, not oriented onto the visible things in this world. These are secondary, derivative, temporal. They are created. But God is primary, eternal. He is the Creator. This is not blind faith. It is not like the White Queen who said to Alice in Wonderland, "sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Faith helps us to see and understand. By faith we understand. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury ca. 1100, spoke of "faith seeking understanding." This has become a motto for many. More fully he wrote, "I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but rather, I believe in order that I may understand."

C. S. Lewis wrote, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else." This is inscribed on a memorial stone set in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, installed in 2013 on the 50th anniversary of his death. I believe in God, whom I cannot see. And by or with that faith in God I see everything else. I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who has finished the race, who has run the course, who has entered into God's presence, taking in there his blood, which he has offered before God, accomplishing the sealing of a new covenant and the forgiveness of sins. In the light of that I see everything else. I begin with God, and seek to understand within that framework.

Faith in, and faithfulness to, the triune God comes first. The two are closely related. If we really believe that he is, and that he is the fount of all being, then we will seek to be faithful to him. Indeed in verse 6 the preacher will go on to say that in order to approach God we must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek

him. We can seek God. He wants to be found, and he will be found when we earnestly seek him. When he is found by us he wants us to live lives oriented onto him, lives of faith.

I think too many Christians have an inadequate view of what God is up to. For too many Christians faith is an individual matter of believing in Jesus and in his death for my sins. Having said the prayer and obtained forgiveness for my sins and my ticket to heaven, that's the end of faith. But God is interested in so much more. When we come to Christ and enter into Christ, we embark on a journey towards God's presence. In Christ we are invited into the relationship that the Father shares with the Son through the Spirit. We become beloved sons and daughters. Within that relationship of faith, we seek to live out our lives faithfully, loyal to Jesus, bearing faithful testimony. He will keep us going.

The writer to the Hebrews has two main points of encouragement. First, look to Jesus. Christ before us. He has run the race ahead of us and finished the course. He is at the finish line to welcome us home. Second, meet together regularly to encourage one another to keep going. We are the communion of saints. We are in this journey together, a pilgrimage, a race. God is determined that we cross the finish line if we simply stay faithful to Jesus. May God through his Spirit grant us the grace to persevere. And when we are discouraged in trials and difficulties, we can boldly approach the throne of grace, there to find help in our time of need.

PRESENTING OURSELVES TO GOD

Hebrews 11:4

#32, 2025.11.09

Last week we began looking at Hebrews 11, the famous chapter about faith. It is often called the Hall of Faith, for it features many OT people who lived by faith. Eighteen times in the chapter a new sentence begins, "By faith." Most Christians know that Father Abraham is the Father of Faith. Faith begins with him. The Lord made him a promise:

> **He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."**
>
> **Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:5-6)**

Here we have the first occurrence of two important words: *believe* and *righteousness*. They are connected. God spoke: he made a promise concerning the future. Abram responded in faith: he trusted that God and his word were reliable. God responded in turn to Abram's trust by deeming it to be righteousness: Abram's response of trust was the appropriate response within their relationship. Both faith and righteousness are relational terms.

At the end of the previous chapter of Hebrews the preacher has used two related words from another OT verse: "But my righteous one will live by faith" (Heb 10:38), quoting Hab 2:4. Here it is the other way around: the righteous live by faith. Right-relatedness to God is worked out in an ongoing life of faith and faithfulness. Again this is relational.

Both verses are central to the idea of justification by faith, where *justification* and *righteousness* represent the same word group. I mentioned last week that October 31 was Reformation Day, in commemoration of Martin Luther nailing his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This was the spark that ignited the Reformation, though that was not Luther's original intent. Central to Reformation doctrine is *justification by faith*: God *justifies* those who have *faith*; he considers *righteous* those who *believe*.

It is all to easy to think of these two words in abstract terms. By faith we believe in a set of abstract truths and doctrines. Then justification or righteousness is some abstract status that God gives us. But this is not how the terms are used in Scripture.

Faith and righteousness began with Abraham. The apostle Paul devotes a whole chapter of Romans—chapter 4—to the justifying faith of Abraham and our call to be like Abraham for he is "the father of all who believe" (4:11), both Jew and Gentile. He is "our father Abraham" (4:12).

So surely a chapter devoted to the OT people who lived *by faith* would begin with Abraham, the father of faith. He was the one whom God called by grace to start a new people, a people who would live by faith. But the preacher begins his gallery of faith not with Abraham, but with three people who preceded Abraham by many generations: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. But if the preacher goes that far back, all the way to Abel, why not begin with Adam?

Let us consider Adam's situation. He lived primarily by sight not by faith. The preacher has stated that "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (11:1). But Adam didn't have much to hope for—in his case that was not a bad thing. Nor was there much that he did not experience directly through his senses. He lived primarily by sight.

The Lord God planted a garden and provided it with streams of water. He caused an abundance of trees to grow, yielding much fruit for eating. He spoke directly to Adam, telling him to eat of any tree in the garden. These were "pleasing to the eye and good for food" (Gen 2:9). They were visible. They were all in the realm of what could be seen. And God's word could be heard aurally, with the physical ear. Adam didn't have to labor for his food. God did all the work. He provided Adam's needs and did so in abundance.

The Lord did speak one word that did require faith: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Like all other trees, this one was good to look at and good for food. But God said it was off-limits lest the one eating die. This called for faith on Adam's part because the consequences were in the unseen future. Adam had to believe this; he had to believe God and his word.

This one prohibition was given in an environment of present abundance. But the serpent questioned God's provision. He focused the woman's attention on the one fruit denied: the tree in the middle of the garden. She saw that in addition to being "good for food and pleasing to the eye," it was "desirable for gaining wisdom." The serpent so focused her attention on what she lacked that she lost sight of what she already had. He changed her perceived environment from one of *abundance* to one of *scarcity*. He placed the one thing she lacked into the center of her imagination. He cultivated her desire for what she did not have. Her sight overrode her faith. She lived in the present with no eye to the future. She lost faith in God's word and God's provision. She fell into unbelief and disobedience.

Much later this would be replicated by the wilderness generation that God brought out of Egypt. They too lost faith in God's provision. They too saw themselves in an environment of scarcity. They too fell into unbelief and disobedience. They failed to enter into God's rest. The preacher warns his readers to not be like them (Hebrews 3–4). The Hall of Faith in chapter 11 is the positive counterpart against the negative example of the wilderness generation.

The Lord God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden. Now they would have to labor for their own provision. The cursed ground would yield thorns and thistles on which goats and sheep could graze. Here we have to put out of mind the image of sheep safely grazing in a lush, bucolic English pasture beside a soothing river. Through painful toil and the sweat of his brow, Adam could get the ground to produce grain: wheat and barley.

Civilization began with the domestication of plants and animals in the Neolithic Revolution some 12,000 years ago. Ancient historians view this as a good thing, as significant progress. Genesis views it as less than good, less than ideal. It was after expulsion from God's

provision due to lack of faith. This was the world into which Cain and Abel were born.

So we come to Abel, the first person in the Hall of Faith:

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. (Heb 11:4 NIV)

Cain and Abel: their names are famous. Their lack of brotherly love is infamous. Their names belong together, but they didn't belong together. Both names are given here, literally alongside each other. There is a wordplay that cannot be captured in English. Very woodenly the Greek reads "By faith, a better offering Abel alongside Cain presented to God." Abel alongside Cain. This is how Genesis 4 carefully presents the two brothers, interleaving their names: Cain–Abel, Abel–Cain, back and forth. They were alongside one another in their birth, in their labor, in their approach to God, and in God's evaluation (Gen 4:1-5). In each case the verb is repeated for the two brothers.

Adam lay with Eve and she conceived. She birthed *Cain*, and again she birthed *Abel*. There is no mention of a second conception, only a second birth, so they may well be twins. The narrative works best if we view them as twins. *Abel* was a keeper of sheep (and/or goats) and *Cain* was a worker of the ground. Again, side by side: the first shepherd and the first farmer. Both occupations were equally valid east of Eden.

At the end of the agricultural year *Cain* brought an offering to the Lord, and *Abel* brought, he also. Their labor had been successful. They both recognized it was appropriate to draw near to God and bring him some of the produce of their labors. The offering is a *minḥah*. We can think of this as a tribute offering from a lesser to a greater, whether to a superior human or to a deity. This was appropriate. They were acknowledging God, attributing their success to him, and returning something to him. The Greek Septuagint translates it as a *thusia*, often translated as a sacrifice. It is often thought that a sacrifice means the killing of an animal, but this word simply means something presented to a deity, i.e. an offering, a tribute.

But now we do get a slight differentiation. *Cain* brought some of the fruit of the ground; there is no mention of him bringing the firstfruits. *Abel* brought some of the firstborn of his flock and their fatty portions.

The fourth and final stage is God's response to these offerings. The Lord looked with favor on *Abel* and his tribute offering, but on *Cain* and his tribute offering he did not look with favor.

By faith Abel brought a better offering than Cain. Why was it better? Many think it was better because Abel brought a blood sacrifice, whereas Cain brought a non-blood sacrifice. Or, more particularly, Abel brought a lamb that was sacrificed. Many sermons have been preached on this basis. Many such sermons conclude by drawing a line from Abel and his sacrificial lamb to Jesus, the lamb of God, who was sacrificed for us and our sins. These make very stirring sermons, but I don't think they are true to the text.

The *minḥah* offering they brought was not a sacrifice. It was a tribute. It was entirely appropriate to bring of their own produce. Cain was a farmer, so he brought grain. Abel was a shepherd, so he brought newborn sheep or goats. But there are two reasons why Abel's offering was better.

The first reason was the *offering* itself. Abel specifically brought some of the firstborn of his flock, and, even more specifically, of their fatty portions. In our health-conscious age we trim off the fatty portions and throw them away. But I remember as a child relishing the fat portion, especially of a pork chop. In some parts of the world today the honored guests at a feast will be served the fat portion—Sue and I have been so honored in Indonesia. So, the first reason Abel's offering was better was the offering itself: he brought the best portion of his increase.

The second reason was the *offerer*. The Lord looked with favor or disfavor upon both the offering and the offeror. He looked with favor upon Abel. Abel had approached the Lord with the right attitude. His offering was the external manifestation of an internal state of mind and heart. Abel brought himself and presented himself to God. In giving his best he showed that he was living in a world of abundance and gratitude. He opened his arms to give his offering and himself to God. He emptied himself of self to focus on God. Or rather, he found his true self in relation to God.

Cain, though, lived in a world of scarcity. He may have had abundant crops, but he held on to the best for himself. His gratitude was limited. He did not present his whole self before God. Self intruded and self consumed him.One can almost hear Gollum saying, "It's mine, precious!"

The drama of this scene is brilliantly captured by Annie Valloton, the Swiss artist who drew the many line drawings for the *Good News Bible*. I grew up with these drawings! In the background stands Abel beside his altar, gazing up into heaven with his eyes on the Lord. God is in the realm of the things that cannot be seen, but he can be seen by faith. Abel's outstretched hands express his surrender to the Lord. In the foreground stands Cain beside his altar. His arms are folded in on himself, his eyes are on his brother, and his face wears a thick scowl.

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain. By this faith he was attested to be righteous. Just as in v. 2 we have a divine passive: he was attested, with God as the implicit subject. God testified that Abel was righteous, that he was acting in right relationship with God, he was rightly relating to God. Genesis does not use either *faith* or *righteous* word-groups for Abel. But it is clear that both terms are appropriate for Abel. By faith he brought himself and his better offering, presenting both to God. God accepted both as evidence of right-relatedness. Abel is mentioned several times in the NT, usually with the epithet *righteous*. We read of "the blood of righteous Abel" (Matt 23:35), and of Abel's righteous deeds (1 John 3:12).

God looked with favor on both Abel and his offering. He was well-pleased with Abel. Again, both *faith* and *righteousness* are relational terms. Abel trusted God and entrusted himself to God in a bidirectional relationship mediated by his offering. This was not true for Cain.

In v. 6 the preacher writes,

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (11:6)

I will look at the first half of this verse next week in conjunction

with Enoch (v. 5). The second half applies to v. 4. The one who approaches God must do so in faith. There are two objects of this faith. He must believe that God exists, that he is there even though he cannot be seen. And he must believe that God rewards those who earnestly seek him, that there will be something in the future that cannot yet be seen. In both cases, faith is oriented to the realm that cannot be seen, whether in the present or in the future.

The preacher began this chapter: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (11:1). There are things in the present that we do not see because our physical senses cannot penetrate the unseen realm. And there are things in the future that we do not see because they have not yet happened. God exists in the realm which we cannot see. Or rather, God has always existed, and now exists over, in, and throughout his creation, only part of which is visible. God himself we do not see. But faith is the assurance that he is there. Therefore he can be approached. He wants us humans, living east of Eden, to seek after him, and to do so earnestly. He allows himself to be found. Indeed, he wants to be found. He will be found by those who seek him.

Through his prophet Jeremiah, the Lord said to the exiles in Babylon: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you" (Jer 29:13-14). Our call to worship was from Psalm 63, written by David in the wilderness: "You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you" (Ps 63:1). We believe that God exists and so we seek him. We approach him.

Secondly, we believe that God "rewards those who earnestly seek him." Here we have to be very careful. In bringing our gifts to God we can too easily have our own mind made up as to how we expect him to reward us. Our gift may not actually be a gift if we have the wrong motives and expectations. If we are expecting the wrong reciprocity, a gift may be a bribe, or a shake-down, or greasing the palm. There are all sorts of wrong motives for giving. Let me illustrate with a modern parable, told by Tim Keller:

> Once upon a time a gardener grew an enormous carrot. He presented it to the king, saying, "This is the best carrot I'll ever grow; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." He turned to leave. But the king discerned the man's heart and said, "I own the land next to yours; I'll give it to you to garden as well." One of the king's nobles saw this and thought he could do better. The next day he brought the king a beautiful horse, saying, "This is the best horse I'll ever raise; I give it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The king discerned his heart, thanked him, took the horse and dismissed him. When the noble was perplexed the king said, "The gardener was giving *me* the carrot, but you were giving your*self* the horse."[1]

The Greek translation (Septuagint) of Genesis makes a subtle change. When God evaluated Abel and his offering, the Hebrew word for *tribute offering* is changed to Greek plural *gifts*. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his *gifts*. Cain's offering is left as a tribute, as if to state that he really wasn't bringing a gift. I think the translators were on to something important here in the dynamic of how the brothers, side-by-side, approached God. The writer to the Hebrews, like the other NT authors, followed the Greek OT: God testified about Abel's *gifts*. Confusingly, NIV, unlike the other versions, has translated this as *offerings*, not *gifts*.

God rewards those who seek him. But Abel died. Not only that, he was murdered by his brother. He was killed while being faithful. He was killed for being faithful, for his faithfulness showed up the unfaithfulness of Cain. He was the first martyr. God rewards those who seek him. The first three people in this Hall of Faith sought God; they oriented their lives onto God. They lived by faith, but they had very different outcomes. Abel lived by faith, and he died, killed by his brother. Enoch lived by faith, and he did not die; he was taken by God. Noah lived by faith, and everyone else died. Make sense of that!

Abel is dead, yet Abel still speaks. How can a dead person speak? Abel didn't even speak in life. In Genesis 4 he never speaks. Seven times it is stated that Abel is Cain's brother, but never that Cain is Abel's brother. It's as if Abel doesn't really have a brother. Abel has a very light presence in the account. He is the subject of only two verbs: he was a keeper of flocks, and he brought an offering. Cain's name is explained in the first verse. Abel's name is not explained, though his name is given seven times. The meaning is left for us the reader to infer. His name is *Hevel*, the word used repeatedly in Ecclesiastes, translated as *vanity*, *futility*, or *meaningless*. It means a transitory puff of wind or breath. It's here, then it's quickly gone. Such was Abel's life. Here, then suddenly gone.

But Abel's voice has been crying out ever since. The Lord said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground." It is crying out for justice, for this was innocent blood that was shed. We might easily jump to thinking of this as retributive justice: Cain needs to be held accountable for his actions. But that would just leave two people dead. True justice is restorative. Restorative justice for Abel ultimately requires resurrection.

God engaged Cain in dialog. He invited Cain into relationship, relationship into which he had not entered with his tribute offering. But this invitation into relationality was oppressive for Cain. He kept pushing God away, until ultimately he went out from the Lord's presence. He went into voluntary, self-imposed exile, and lived in the land of Nod. That's an oxymoron, for Nod means *wandering*. Cain settled down in the land of wandering. He went away from God. Here he lived a self-oriented life. Here he built a city. An ancient city had two things: a king and a wall. So here in the city of his own making Cain could reign as king behind his own defenses.

God continues to hear the voice of Abel's blood. He invites people to come out of exile and draw near to him. So the preacher writes, "You have come…to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (12:24). What better word is the sprinkled blood of Jesus speaking? He too was killed for his faithful witness. He was the supreme martyr. The eternal Son became human, like us in every way, sharing our flesh and blood. He was tested and tempted in every way, like us, but without sin. He was faithful unto death. God has raised him into a new creation body, filled with indestructible life. He has passed through the heavens into God's presence. There he has presented himself and his blood before God. This blood is far more powerful than the blood presented by the Levitical priests, who regularly approached God with their gifts and their offerings. This blood cleanses and purifies from all sin. It seals a new covenant, resulting in the forgiveness of sins. No matter how terrible those sins are. The blood of Jesus says, "Father, forgive." The blood of Jesus is

restorative. The blood of Jesus is the ultimate answer to the cry of Abel's blood.

Because we have such a great high priest, we are invited to draw near to God, just as Abel drew near to God; just as the Levitical priests drew near to God. We don't have to bring an offering, because Jesus has brought the perfect offering. He has brought himself and his blood.

God is now approachable through Jesus. We have access into his presence. God bids us seek him earnestly. He will be found when we seek him through Jesus by his Spirit. So, in the Book of Hebrews, on either side of the great central section about the high-priesthood of Jesus, there is an invitation to draw near to God, to draw near to the throne of grace (4:14-16; 10:19-22). God wants us to approach him, to come to him. He wants us to give ourselves to him. He will then reward us with the gift of himself, the gift of life, and the gift of making it to the end of our journey. We shall come to the New Jerusalem, the celestial city, where God himself is. There our faith shall become sight.

Cain and Abel represent two ways of living life: in relation to God and in relation to self.

One way of living is that modeled by Cain. Augustine introduced the phrase, *Homo incurvatus in se*, man curved in on himself. This was how Cain lived; he was oriented onto self. But self is a petty thing to be preoccupied with. Cain lived in a world of scarcity. He kept for himself both his goods and himself.

The other way of living life is other-centered. It is *excurvatus ex se*, curved outwards from self. Outwards towards God and towards others. This was Abel. He was oriented onto God. He lived in a world of abundance, and so he could freely give. He could give the best of what he had, the best of the yield of his flock. He could give himself as he presented himself to God. Though he died, though he was murdered, though he was martyred, yet his voice continued to speak. Abel lived by faith and God testified that he was righteous. He was in right relationship to God. Abel is a worthy first member of this Hall of Faith.

1. Abbreviated from Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 60-62.

PLEASING GOD

Hebrews 11:5-6

#33, 2025.11.16

As we work our way through the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11, we continue considering the three pre-Abrahamic exemplars of faith: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. They lived long before Abraham, the father of faith. They lived before faith is first mentioned in the Scriptures: Abraham "believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). Yet they each lived by faith. Their faith was manifested in quite different ways, and they had quite different outcomes. But in their shared faith they each lived a life centered on God.

After Abel last week, our next exemplar of faith is Enoch:

> **5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:5-6 NIV)**

It might be surprising to find Enoch in this Hall of Faith. We know so little about him. His only mention in the OT is tucked into a genealogy. When we encounter a genealogy in Scripture we tend to hit the fast-forward button. We don't really know what else to do with a genealogy. Not so the ancients. Genealogies were very important for them. Genealogies located them in their world. The Bible is full of genealogies. A large book was recently published, *All the Genealogies of the Bible*.[1] It is 608 pages, large format (8½ × 11 in), and contains over 340 genealogies.

The story of Cain and Abel is embedded in the Bible's first genealogy (Gen 4). Enoch is briefly mentioned in the second genealogy (Gen 5). This genealogy runs for ten generations, from Adam to Noah. Enoch is in seventh place and Noah in tenth, the two significant slots. The standard format of this particular genealogy is given in the second entry, that of Seth. He was the replacement son for Adam and Eve after the death of Abel and the self-exile of Cain.

> **When Seth had lived 105 years, he fathered Enosh. Seth lived after he fathered Enosh 807 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Seth were 912 years, and he died. (Gen 5:6-8)**

He lived *x* years and fathered a son. After fathering this son he lived *y* years and fathered sons and daughters. All his days were (*x*+*y*) years, and he died. He lived, he had kids, he died. This is the monotonous cycle, generation after generation. Yes, these men were filling the world with people, but they weren't really going anywhere. They lived, they fathered, they died. Round and round and round, generation after generation, cycle after cycle.

Thinking about this monotony, an image popped into my mind. It was the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics. The London Symphony Orchestra, led by Sir Simon Rattle, was playing the *Chariots of Fire* theme by Vangelis. Mr Bean was at the keyboards, playing the same monotonous note, wondering when it would ever end. Then his mind drifted to the beach, and there he was inside the movie *Chariots of Fire*, running alongside the athletes training for the 1924 Paris Olympics. He was alive!

This monotonous genealogy suddenly comes alive in the seventh generation. The pattern changes with Enoch:

> **When Enoch had lived 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him. (Gen 5:21-24)**

The lifespan changes: it is much shorter at 365 years. And the key verbs change. Enoch didn't just *live* after fathering his firstborn; he *walked with God*. After fathering more kids he didn't just *die*: he *walked with God*. He didn't just live, monotonously fathering kids until he died and was replaced by the firstborn as the next generation. He lived in relationship to God. He *really* lived. He was alive!

Then instead of dying, he continued to *walk with God*. The genealogy clarifies: "he was not, for God took him." All of a sudden Enoch was not there. His sudden absence was not because he was now a dead corpse, in which case the body was still there. He wasn't there at all. Where had he gone? God took him.

There is only one other person in the Hebrew Scriptures of whom this is said: Elijah. Five times it is stated that Elijah would be taken up. Then chariots of fire suddenly appeared and Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven (2 Kgs 2:1-11).

This is all very mysterious. Would that the author of Genesis were here: whether Moses, or a later editor, or an earlier source. We could then ask, "What were you thinking as you wrote this?" We would have so many questions? Why did Enoch have such a short life by comparison with the others? Why 365 years? Where did God take him? What did it mean to walk with God instead of living? What did it mean to walk with God instead of dying?

Nature abhors a vacuum. Inquiring minds want to know. And so there was plenty of speculation. Much later, starting in the Intertestamental Period, several works appeared claiming to be written by Enoch. Scholars know them as First, Second, and Third Enoch. The short letter of Jude even quotes from First Enoch.

Walking with God is an important concept in the OT. Enoch walked with God, both in life and in afterlife. It was with God that Noah walked (Gen 6:9). The Lord commanded Abraham, "walk before me, and be blameless" (Gen 17:1). Jacob described his forebears, Abraham and Isaac, as walking before God (48:15). It does not mean that these people were perfect in following God. Abraham and Isaac certainly stumbled. In each case the verb is iterative: it describes a repeated, ongoing behavior. Walking with God denotes an ongoing relationship: living life in relationship to God, even while living life present here on earth.

God even uses the term of himself: he walked among his people

Israel. He was in relationship with them, present in their midst.

Enoch and Noah walked *with* God. Elsewhere the term is usually that people walked *before* God, in the presence of God. Walking before God means living life in his presence, even though we cannot see him. The Latin term for this is *coram Deo*, before God, in the presence of God, or before the face of God. This term has become quite popular recently to convey intentionality in our living life, conscious that we are under God's gaze. It is now part of the language of spiritual formation, of how we are formed into Christ-likeness.

If we are living *coram Deo*, before the face of God, what do we think of that face? Is God's face a friendly one or is it a disapproving one? In the case of Cain and Abel, God's gaze upon Abel and his offering was one of approval. It was a friendly gaze. But his gaze upon both Cain and his offering was disapproving. Abel brought his offering *coram Deo*, before the face of God. He brought it there both physically and spiritually. Cain, on the other hand, brought his offering physically *coram Deo*, but he really did not bring himself. Abel was walking before the face of God, but Cain was not.

Living *coram Deo*, before the face of God, is intended to be an inspiring, comforting thought. *Coram Deo* should be a safe place to live out our life. God sees us anyway, whether we are conscious of that or not. Far better, then, that we be conscious that we live our lives before him.

The Septuagint makes two significant changes in its Greek translation of the Hebrew text. Instead of "Enoch walked with God," it reads, Enoch "was well-pleasing to God." Instead of "he was not, for God took him," it reads, "he was not found, because God transferred him" (NETS).

The writer to the Hebrews, like all other NT authors, uses and quotes Israel's Scriptures in Greek. So his statement about Enoch reflects these changes:

> **By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "*He could not be found, because God had taken him away*." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who *pleased God*. (Heb 11:5)**

Before he was taken, Enoch pleased God. While he was living, he pleased God. Is this possible? Is it possible for a human being on earth to please God, even to be pleasing to God? Is it possible to be not simply pleasing but *well*-pleasing to God? The verb here both in Hebrews and in the Septuagint is intensive; it is prefixed with *well*: *well-pleasing*. Unfortunately most English versions water it down to simply *pleasing*. No, God wasn't simply pleased in Enoch; he was *well-pleased* in him. Enoch was part of the divine pleasure.

The preacher states that Enoch was commended or attested as being well-pleasing to God. We have already read that the forefathers, the ancients, were attested by their faith (2), and that Abel was attested to be righteous (4). In each case the verb is a divine passive: God himself was testifying about these people who lived by faith. God himself bore witness that Enoch was well-pleasing to him. Why was he well-pleasing? Because he walked with God. Indeed, as we have seen, walking with God and being well-pleasing to him are equated through the Septuagint's translation.

Perhaps we can imagine God standing up in some heavenly courtroom to give testimony to all the powers and forces, including the power of Death. "Have you seen my servant Abel? I testify that he is righteous; he is in right-relationship with me." That did not save Abel from death, but Abel's blood continued to speak, crying out for justice. Then God says, "Have you seen my servant Enoch? I testify that he is well-pleasing to me." Enoch was spared from death.

We have precedent for imagining this scene. In the heavenly court, the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). Job was attested by God. The Lord himself bore witness about him, attesting his character. This did not keep Job from affliction. In his affliction Job was honest with God, unlike his so-called friends. God answered by giving Job an overwhelming revelation of God himself. To which Job replied, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). God had privileged Job with the gift of himself.

Enoch was attested by God to be well-pleasing to God. And so God took him. The preacher quotes from Enoch's genealogy in Genesis: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away" (Gen 5:24). The word "taken away" means to transfer from one place to another. So dramatic was this transfer that the preacher refers to it three times in this one verse: Enoch was transferred, God transferred him, and before the transfer he was attested to be well-pleasing to God.

Where did God transfer Enoch to? We can assume that God transferred Enoch to himself, to his presence, just as he did later with Elijah.

Enoch was a signpost to the future. He was a signpost to Elijah. And he was a signpost to Jesus, a forerunner of Jesus. Jesus lived his life *coram Deo*, before the face of God. He was always conscious of living under God's gaze. His desire was always to do the will of his Father who had sent him. But he died, killed by sinful men who rebelled against God and against the one whom he had sent. He was crucified, the penalty intended to confer maximum pain, humiliation, shame, and rejection. But this happened *coram Deo*, under God's gaze.

Yes, Jesus cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1). This leads many to think that God did forsake Jesus, leaving him the derelict on the cross. But I think Jesus had the entire psalm in mind. God did not turn his face away: "he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him" (Ps 22:24). God was well-pleased, not in the anguished suffering of Jesus, but in his Beloved Son's faithfulness even unto death. Jesus died under the watchful, loving gaze of his Father.

The body of Jesus lay in the tomb, likewise *coram Deo*, before the face of God. Now another psalm was fulfilled: "you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay" (Ps 16:10). God did not abandon him to Sheol. Jesus was not the derelict in the tomb. He remained *coram Deo*, under the loving, watchful gaze of his Father. God kept faithful vigil.

So Peter in his Pentecost sermon quoted this psalm: "Seeing what was to come, [David] spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay" (Acts 2:31, cf. 2:27). God raised Jesus from the dead.

Forty days later Jesus ascended into heaven. Or, that is the way we usually describe it, with Jesus as the active subject of the verb. That

is not the NT view. Five times Luke states that he *was taken up* (Luke 9:51; 24:51; Acts 1:2, 9, 11). It was God who took Jesus up to himself, just as he took Enoch and took Elijah. So these two OT saints were signposts to a greater future event: the taking up of Jesus by the Father into his presence. The Eastern church better refers to the Ascension as the *Analēpsis*, the taking up. God took Jesus up to himself.

The preacher ends his presentation of Enoch with God's attestation that Enoch was well-pleasing to him. Then the preacher reflects more generally about this idea of pleasing God:

> **And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (11:6)**

Without faith it is impossible to please God. The corollary is that with faith it *is* possible to please God. So what is the necessary faith? Faith is necessary if we are to successfully draw near to God. God wants us to draw near to him. The one who does draw near must believe that God exists. He is in the realm of the things not seen, so it is only by faith that we perceive him. Only with faith can we discern that he is there. Only with faith that he is there can we draw near. Secondly we must believe that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. The reward lies in another realm we cannot see: in the future realm of the fulfillment of God's promise. It is our hope.

Enoch earnestly sought God and found him. After fathering his firstborn he walked with God. The Apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus contains a paean of praise, "Let us now praise famous men," as our choir sang for us two weeks ago. The first famous man in the list is Enoch. "Enoch pleased the Lord and was taken up, an example of repentance to all generations" (Sir 44:16 NRSVue). It understood Enoch to repent after his firstborn. He turned from his worldly way to start walking with God. And thus he is a model for all subsequent generations. He is a signpost to the future of turning in order to walk with God and live a life pleasing to God.

Enoch walked with God. He walked *coram Deo*, before God's face. God rewarded him by transferring him into his presence. The reward that God gave was God himself. He gave that to Enoch in life, for he walked with God by faith. He gave that to Enoch in the afterlife, for he continued to walk with God, now by sight, for God has taken him to himself. The greatest reward that God can give us is himself.

Christians often think that we are wretches, undeserving of God's love, care, and attention. This works its way into a lot of our language. But we misunderstand the significance of being in Christ. When we are in Christ we are members of the Beloved Community.

The prologue to John's Gospel ends, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18). The one and only Son is "in the bosom of the Father" (KJV), in his closest embrace. The Word was with God (1:1), face-to-face. The look between Father and Son was glory, conveyed by the Spirit. At the Last Supper, the Beloved Disciple reclined "on Jesus' bosom" (John 13:23 KJV). The Beloved Disciple was in the same position relative to Jesus as the eternal Word relative to God. In turn the Beloved Disciple is a model for us now who are beloved disciples. In Christ we enter the Beloved Community. In Christ we are adopted as beloved sons and daughters of God.

God has moved towards us from the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit. He calls us to draw near to him in the Son, through the Spirit. We thus enter into the incarnate and exalted Son's communion with the Father. We enter into the divine joy and pleasure.

At the Baptism and again at the Transfiguration, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, and the voice from heaven declared, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; 17:5). When we are in Christ, the Father says the same thing of us. We are in the Beloved Community. We are part of the divine pleasure, of the joy of the Lord, of his happiness.

Augustine begins his *Confessions*, "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You" (1.1). Later he rather playfully asks, " Why do you mean so much to me? Why do I mean so much to you?" (1.5).[2] Have you ever thought of how much we mean to God? Of how much God means to us? He takes great pleasure in his Son, his beloved. When we are in Christ, he takes great pleasure in us.

One of the most famous essays by C. S. Lewis is "The Weight of Glory." He defines glory as God's approval. He writes,

> In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised…
>
> 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.[3]

If we are in Christ, then we are a real ingredient in the divine happiness. Enoch walked with God, and he pleased God. Not what he did; God was pleased in Enoch himself. How much more so, then, will we, when we are in Christ, not only please God, but be a real ingredient in his happiness, be a component of his pleasure, be an element of his joy.

God invites us into communion with himself. He invites us into the communion which the Father and the Son share through the Spirit. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father back, with the love being the Spirit who moves back and forth between them. God invites us to enter into that communion through the Son by the Spirit. God invites us to walk with him and be part of his pleasure.

J. I. Packer's most famous book is *Knowing God*, written more than fifty years ago. He begins chapter 2:

> I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. 'But it doesn't matter,' he said at length, 'for I've known God and they haven't.' The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something

I said, but it has stuck with me, and set me thinking.[4]

I read that 45 years ago, and that comment has stuck with me and set me thinking ever since, while the rest of the book has faded in my memory. "I've known God and they haven't." To know God, not simply to know about him, not simply to have the correct doctrine of God. But to know him and be known by him in relationship. This is what he desires for us: to walk with God and thus to be pleasing to him. To be an ingredient of his pleasure, joy, and happiness.

Enoch walked with God and was pleasing to God. He did so by faith because without faith it is impossible to please God. God bids us come to him in Christ, through his Spirit. We come, believing that he exists, though we do not see him in the present, and believing that he rewards those he earnestly seek him, though we do not yet see the full reward for it is in the as-yet-unrealized future. When we come in faith we enter into his pleasure. We become part of his joy. He looks on us with the warm, loving gaze of a Father looking on his beloved sons and daughters.

Enoch, like Abel before him, is a worthy member of the Hall of Faith.

May God work in us what is well-pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:21)

1. Nancy S. Dawson, *All the Genealogies of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023).

2. Augustine, *Confessions*; translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin; Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1961), 21, 24.

3. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory: and Other Essays* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000 [1946]), 38-39.

4. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973), 20.

NOAH BUILT AN ARK

Hebrews 11:7

#34, 2026.02.08

After Darren's series on the OT book of Haggai, we turn to the NT to continue my series on Hebrews. But really we remain in the OT, because we are in Hebrews 11, which is all about heroes of faith from the OT.

The word *faith* occurs 24 times in this chapter. On 18 occasions it is as the phrase *by faith*, always at the beginning of a sentence. This chapter is therefore often called the Hall of Faith. We think, with good reason, of Abraham as the father of faith. His response to God's promise is the first reference to faith in the OT: Abram "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

But Hebrews 11 begins with three exemplars of faith who lived before Abraham: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. Their faith was manifested in quite different ways, but in their shared faith each lived a life centered on God. We could translate *faith* as *allegiance*; indeed, this is becoming an increasingly-popular option to express a major aspect of the meaning of faith. Abel, Enoch, and Noah each lived in allegiance to God.

"Abel brought God a better offering" (11:4). He brought the best of yield of his flock. His allegiance was to God, not maximizing his own yield. God attested that he was righteous, in right standing with him.

"Enoch walked faithfully with God" (Gen 5:22, 24). His allegiance was to God not the world. God attested that Enoch was pleasing to him.

God desires that we draw near to him, but "anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb 11:6). Abel, Enoch, and Noah each believed that God exists. Though they could not see him, they lived their lives oriented onto him. Their allegiance was to the unseen God. But God "rewarded" their faith with three quite different outcomes.

Abel lived in allegiance to the Lord, and he died—murdered by his brother Cain—but Abel still speaks as his blood cries out. Enoch lived in allegiance to the Lord, and he did not die, but was taken by the Lord unto himself. Noah lived in allegiance to the Lord, and everyone else died.

Today we consider the third exemplar of faith, Noah:

> **By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. (Heb 11:7 NIV)**

Noah has just one verse in this Hall of Faith, but he has a prominent place in the early chapters of Genesis. His story covers four chapters (Gen 6-9). If you want an in-depth look at Noah, I preached twelve sermons on these four chapters in 2010–2011. This included five on Noah and the Flood.

By faith Noah… In the days of Noah world history reached a tipping point. In the beginning God created first an ordered cosmos, forming and filling in seven creative acts. Then he created humanity in his own image, with a dual-facing role. He created humanity for the cosmos, to rule over the earth and its creatures. He also created humanity for himself, to dwell in his presence. So he placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, where the Lord God strolled in the cool of the day.

But the early chapters of Genesis tell of the progressive banishment of humanity from God's presence, further and further eastwards. He banished Adam and Eve eastwards, outside the garden, placing cherubim as guards at the entrance. After murdering his brother Abel, Cain departed the Lord's presence and settled east of Eden. From Cain developed civilization, but without any reference to God.

Ten generations after Adam humanity descends further into crisis. The sons of God *saw* that the daughters of men were *good* and they *took* them for themselves as wives (Gen 6:2). Their behavior echoed Eve who *saw* that the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was *good* and she *took* and she ate (Gen 3:6).

The offspring of this union were the Nephilim. They were the mighty men of old, the men of renown (Gen 6:4). They had power and they had a name. These were the ancient heroes, the famous men. These were the men written about in Ancient Near Eastern mythology, similar to the heroes of ancient Greek mythology. These were the men in the room where it happened, and they made it happen.

The sons of God *saw* that it was *good* and *took*. But the Lord also saw and he made the opposite evaluation:

> **The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. (Gen 6:5-6)**

The verb translated *regretted* is a very hard word to translate and to comprehend. But it is also an important word to comprehend in developing a good, robust theology of God. We could render it *he was sorry*, or *he changed his mind*. But can God really change his mind? Is he fickle, like human beings? Does he go back on his word? He was deeply grieved, pained in his heart. Humanity had frustrated the purposes for which he created it. So he resolved to act differently. He determined to wipe the earth clean.

But there was one man who was different. He was not like the mighty men, the world's heroes, the famous men, who pursued power and name.

> **But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. (Gen 6:8)**

The world was full of leaders pursuing their own desires, taking whatever was good in their own eyes and consuming for their own satisfaction, using and abusing, chasing power and name. But Noah… Noah faced towards God. He was oriented onto the Lord. He walked to the beat of a different drum. He was not afraid to be different. He was not envious of the power and fame of mighty men. In a generation facing away from God he faced towards God. Noah

was the Lord's hero. How was Noah different?

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God. (Gen 6:9)

He lived by faith. He lived in allegiance to God. He did not give his allegiance to power or fame. His allegiance was to God and to God alone: he walked faithfully with God. Indeed, the text is emphatic: it was with God that he walked. As a result, Noah had access to the room where it really happened. The Lord privileged him with access to his will. Noah was "warned about things not yet seen" (Heb 11:7). Here we have another so-called divine passive: it was God who warned him.

Hebrews 11 began:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (Heb 11:1)

Faith and hope are closely bound together. We hope for things we do not yet see, and in faith we have confident assurance that those things will materialize. Things may be unseen for two reasons: because they lie in a realm beyond human perception, or because they are as yet future. God warned Noah about things the world had never yet seen. First God stated his general plan, then gave Noah a task:

"I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark." (Gen 6:13-14)

"Make yourself an ark." Some of you who are old enough may remember Bill Cosby's famous comedy piece about the imagined dialogue between God and Noah. "What's an ark?" Noah asked. We might ask the same question. We are so used to the word, whether in art, or in children's storybooks, or in children's songs, that we rarely wonder what the ark actually was.

So what is an ark? The English word *ark* is simply a transliteration of the Latin *arca*, meaning a chest in which you put something for safekeeping. This in turn is the translation of a Greek word that means the same thing. Hence the term, in both Greek and Latin, is used also for the ark of the covenant in which the two tablets of the Law were kept.

But the Hebrew word is never used for the ark of the covenant. It is used only for Noah's ark and one other thing. But it is a chest in which things are put for safekeeping. What the ark most definitely is not is a boat or ship. It had no means of propulsion or steering: no rudder, and no sail or oars. I doubt that it looked much like Ken Ham's ark at the Creation Museum in Kentucky. God gives very few details, and several of the terms are obscure and of uncertain meaning. What is clear is that the ark had a door; this is its most important feature. The only other object in the Hebrew Bible that has the same name is Moses's basket (Exod 2:3). A Hebrew reader would have certainly drawn the parallel. So we should not think of Noah's ark as a big boat. We should think of his ark as a very big version of Moses's basket, and the basket as a very small version of Noah's ark.

But why is Noah to build an ark? God next announces his specific plan whereby he will destroy humanity: "I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth" (Gen 6:17). Floodwaters were not something "not yet seen." Ancient civilizations developed in Mesopotamia between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, and in Egypt along the Nile. These rivers flooded every year. The floodwaters were a great blessing. They brought fresh alluvium, and they watered the fields. The arrival of the annual flood was celebrated.

I grew up in a floodplain, alongside the Chao Phraya River in central Thailand. In flood season the land along the river would be covered in up to ten feet of water. We lived in houses on stilts. My sister was born during a flood and we brought her home in a little boat—I say we, but I was only 19 months.

But for modern society floods ceased to be a blessing; it became inconvenient to bring your newborn home in a little boat. Society fought the floods and controlled them. Floods still happen. They are more rare but when they do happen they are major disasters, as we continue to witness.

Noah's society would have rejoiced at the annual "floodwaters on the earth." But what God announced to Noah was no ordinary flood. It was The *Mabbul*, a word used only of this event. The Lord explains what it is: waters upon the earth—totally covering the earth. This is a cosmic Flood. This was indeed something the world had not yet seen. The Greek OT calls it a *kataklysmos*, and Latin a *diluvium*. Both mean a washing. God would give the earth a thorough wash.

God made a promise to Noah:

"But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—" (Gen 6:18)

Who is to enter the ark? You, and your family, and bring in the animals "to keep them alive with you." They "will come to you to be kept alive" (Gen 6:18b-20). This why the door is the most important feature of the ark.

Noah was warned. He obeyed: in holy fear he built an ark. This does not mean that he was afraid. Rather, *fear* here, as elsewhere in Scripture, implies a reverent response to God. He took God at his word. He built an ark. The world had never seen such a thing. In Genesis we don't actually see him building the ark. This is all covered in the summary statement:

Noah did everything just as God commanded him. (Gen 6:22)

Genesis does not describe the building of the ark, but devotes much attention to the entrance into the ark. The Lord commanded Noah, "Go into the ark" (Gen 7:1). The word *enter* is used seven times in 7:1-16. Three times this entrance is described as fulfillment of God's command (7:5, 9, 16). Again, the Flood Narrative is much more interested in the entrance into the ark than in its construction.

The animals went in two-by-two,
Hoorah! Hoorah!
The animals went in two-by-two,
The elephant and the kangaroo,
And they all came into the ark,
For to get out of the rain.

Finally they had all entered:

Those that entered…entered just as God had commanded him. Then the Lord shut him in. (Gen 7:16 CSB)

The Lord shut the door. All were aboard who were supposed to be aboard. God did not shut the door until they were all aboard. Again,

the emphasis is on entering into the ark.

The rains came down and the floods came up…

Oops, wrong song: that's the song for *The wise man built his house upon the rock*. The rains did come down and the floods did come up. But no house could stand against these, for these were no ordinary rains, no ordinary floods. These were cosmic—quite literally!

all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. (Gen 7:11)

The carefully-ordered cosmos of Genesis 1 collapsed. The living space between the waters above and the waters below, created on Day Two, disappeared. The land in the midst of the gathered waters, created on Day Three, disappeared. God undid his cosmos. Humanity was further banished, into death and non-existence. The exile of humanity from God was total and complete. Almost complete:

Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. (Gen 7:23)

Life was saved and safeguarded in this chest floating on the waters.

Noah built an ark for the salvation of his household. (Heb 11:7)

God remembered Noah (Gen 8:1). He sent his spirit-wind over the earth, the same spirit that was present at the beginning of the first creation (Gen 1:2). The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, and the waters receded.

Noah and everyone and everything else came out of the ark. Then Noah approached God.

Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (Gen 8:20-22)

Noah was not the first person to bring offerings to the Lord. Cain and Abel had presented tribute offerings to the Lord. Noah offers a different offering: an *olah*. This is usually translated as *burnt offering* because the whole animal is incinerated on the altar. But *olah* means something that goes up, and the verb here translated *sacrificed* means *cause to go up*. Noah caused to ascend the ascension offerings. The entirety was transformed into smoke and transferred into God's presence where the Lord received it as a fragrant aroma, an aroma that put him at rest. He promised never again to send The *Mabbul*, the cosmic Flood. Even though the human heart had not changed. Every inclination of the human heart was still evil from childhood, just as it was before the Flood (6:5). But God's heart changed: he was willing to accept Noah's ascension offering and be put at rest.

Our call to worship asked,

Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?
The one who has clean hands and a pure heart. (Ps 24:3-4a)

Ascension offerings, the most fundamental of all Israel's offerings, symbolized this ascension into God's presence. When God filled the newly-constructed tabernacle with his glory, he invited his people to draw near. They did so by bringing their ascension offerings to the courtyard entrance. On the altar these offerings were transferred into God's presence where they were received as a pleasing aroma. God delighted in the one who drew near. He wanted his people to draw near. He had put his presence in the midst of his people to be with them. Noah was the prototype, the forerunner. He was the first to ascend an ascension offering into God's presence.

There is still more in our Hebrews verse:

By his faith [Noah] condemned the world. (Heb 11:7)

It was God who condemned the world and brought judgment on the world. But Noah showed that there was a different way of living life. It was possible to resist the quest for power, for a name, for influence, for sex. It was possible to live differently. His life was a rebuke to the mighty men of renown who pursued power and name. It was with the Lord that Noah walked. He lived differently. Therefore the Lord considered him to be righteous:

Noah…became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith. (Heb 11:7)

Noah was in right relationship in the relationship that most mattered. He had integrity; he was a whole person. Inheritance is an important theme in Hebrews. It is an important component of Abraham's life. So this thought of Noah being an heir serves as a hook into the next example of faith, that of Abraham, whom we will consider next week.

The waters of The *Mabbul*, the cosmic Flood, were both destructive and purifying. They destroyed life and they saved life, holding up the ark and its residents. The only other thing that is called the same name as Noah's ark is Moses's basket. Pharaoh had ordered that every baby boy born to the Hebrews be thrown into the Nile and drowned (Exod 1:22). But Moses was preserved alive in a little ark that floated on the waters—waters that were otherwise destructive. He was brought safely through those destructive waters. Later God would bring his people safely through the Red Sea but the same waters would destroy Pharaoh's army. The waters were both destructive and saving.

The NT suggests that God will again cleanse and purify the earth, this time using fire. Like water, fire is both destructive and purifying. Even though water and fire seem like complete opposites they can have the same double purpose or effect. The end will be not a destroyed earth but a purified earth ready for the new creation.

But in Christ we already enter into the new creation. Given the symbolism of waters that are both destructive and purifying, it is not surprising that a parallel was drawn to baptism (1 Peter 3:20-21). Passing through the waters of baptism symbolizes the death of our old nature, and purification with a new nature. We go down into the waters and die to our old self. We rise up out of the waters into our new self which is putting on Christ Jesus.

God has provided Jesus for our salvation. God sent his beloved Son into this world to become one of us, to do what we are unable to do: to live a faithful human live. Jesus lived a life of faithful obedience to his Father. He resisted those around him who were pursuing power or name or influence. He was loyal to his Father to whom he gave his allegiance. At the end he offered up himself. The Father looked down on his Son on the cross. I am confident that God looked down with pleasure. Not pleasure in the painful suffering of the cross. But pleasure that his beloved Son absorbed all the worst that humanity could throw at him, and still remained

faithful. Jesus's faithful life even unto death ascended to his Father as a fragrant aroma.

On the third day he was resurrected into the new creation, in a new creation body with the power of an indestructible life. He ascended into God's presence, taking his humanity with him. In which humanity he was received in God's presence as a fragrant aroma. He is the true ascension offering.

God now invites all to come and give their allegiance to this one. The door is open. Jesus himself said, "I am the door" (John 10:9). He has provided for our salvation. In Christ Jesus we find our salvation. When we live our lives faithfully in Christ we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ. Our lives ascend as a fragrant aroma and are received by God and he is well-pleased.

We are those "who who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us" (Heb 6:18). We have fled to Jesus for refuge. He is our anchor within the veil. That anchor holds firm through all the storms of life (6:19-20).

Noah, like Abel and Enoch before him, is a worthy member of the Hall of Faith. All those in this Hall of Faith are the positive counterpart to the wilderness generation that God brought out of Egypt (3:7-19). He had brought them safely through the otherwise-destructive waters. But they ceased listening to God's word. They were afraid. They all fell in the wilderness and failed to reach the end of their pilgrimage to God.

The Book of Hebrews is a word of exhortation (13:22). It is a word of encouragement to keep going in the Christian life. The writer wants his beloved readers to persevere so that they cross the finish line. Don't be like them, the wilderness generation that stopped listening to God's word. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts…as in the rebellion during the time of testing in the wilderness" (3:7-8). Keep going! There is the danger of apostasy, the outright rejection of Jesus. But often a bigger danger is of slowly drifting away. But "how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?" (2:3). We have entered the door that is Jesus himself.

All these faithful people of Hebrews 11 form the great cloud of witnesses that surround us as we run our race. They are at the finishing line, cheering us on. And there at the finishing line is the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we see before us. This is why I have called this series *Christ Before Us*. He has run the course ahead of us, has been faithful, and has entered into God's presence. As we fix our eyes on him we will faithfully run the course ourselves.

> **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses** [—Abel, Enoch, Noah, and many more—] **… let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Heb 12:1-2a)**

ABRAHAM LEFT HOME

Hebrews 11:8-12

#35, 2026.02.15

Forty-one years ago yesterday, on Valentine's Day 1985, I arrived at SFO on a flight from London. It was not my first visit to the US. In Fall 1982 I spent two months in El Centro surveying the Imperial fault line. In Fall 1984 I attended a wedding in Norfolk, Virginia, and spent two weeks cycling an 1100-mile loop around Maryland and Virginia. But this time it was different. I arrived here to start a new job the next day at SLAC. It was a job that had fallen into my lap out of the blue two months earlier, in the last week of a two-year assignment at CERN in Geneva. The job was expected to last 18 months so I was on a nonimmigrant J1 exchange visa. I had no intention of staying any longer. Instead, I anticipated returning to Europe. But I'm still here! I was 24 then; I'm 65 now.

Where am I from? And where do I belong? For any Third Culture Kid (TCK), these are usually difficult questions. One answer to both questions is often *Everywhere and Nowhere!* Being asked where I am from is still a difficult question. I usually reply with Edinburgh, Scotland. I was born there, and my mother's side had been living in the same small part of Edinburgh for 150 years. But I left the city of my birth when just a few months old: my parents took me by ship to Singapore and Bangkok. I have lived in Edinburgh in bits and pieces for about three years of my life. It is the only place in the UK that feels at all like home, though I have lived longer in other parts of the country.

So where was home? When did I leave home, wherever that was? This, too, is complicated. My parents were missionaries in Thailand for nearly forty years. For missionaries they had unusual stability: during 22 years they lived in three different houses within a 100-meter circle in a very small "town."

I was born on their first furlough. At the end of their second furlough, aged five, I was dropped off at the mission boarding school, located in a jungle clearing 5,000 feet up in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. For four years the rhythm was four months at school then two months at home. Travel between the two took 2–3 days on multiple trains and buses.

At ten I started boarding school on the south-east tip of England; I was there 7½ years. Holidays were spent in a hostel south of London: 20 MKs packed into a house together. In the summer we flew out to Thailand or one or other parent would fly back. I finished school at 17 and had nine months before starting university. My parents had just come home on their fifth furlough. So I lived with them in Edinburgh, but by now I was quite independent. I got a job, opened a bank account, made Edinburgh my own city. Then back down to England for university and graduate school. Followed by the two-year position at CERN in Geneva. Since the lab straddled the Swiss-French border I had work and residence permits and bank accounts in both countries.

Then I came here, fully expecting I would continue my wandering lifestyle for a while longer. To my great surprise I settled down. My temporary job turned into a permanent one. I got an H1 visa granting permanent residency. And I got married: to Sue in 1990. She had moved here a year earlier to work at PBC. A few months later we went for six months to south-east Asia, mostly Indonesia. I felt I was back home; Sue did not! On our return we came to PBCC and settled in Cupertino. But there was one more move: 18 months in Vancouver BC at Regent College. Then, out of the blue in 1997, the PBCC elders invited me to join the pastoral staff here. We are still here. We even did something we never thought possible: we bought a house, in which we have lived nearly 27 years.

For 35 years I was a card-carrying Resident Alien. This is a strange term; it's an oxymoron. *Resident* implies that one is settled, at home. But *Alien* indicates that one is Other, not at home. It is a liminal status. I am no longer in this limbo because I finally became a US citizen almost a year ago. I still find this a strange concept even after being here forty years. I consider myself an accidental or unintentional immigrant. But in God's strange design, here I am. And I am delighted. This is home.

Where do I belong? I may not have a strong sense of belonging in the US as a whole, but I do have a strong sense of belonging in the Bay Area. It has been home now for 60% of my life. I feel very at home in the multicultural diversity. And for nearly 40 years I have been part of the PBC community, first in Palo Alto, then for nearly 35 years here in Cupertino. I belong here. But there is more to my identity than this belonging.

This has been a long introduction, but it helps explain why I feel a special affinity with Abraham and with today's passage. As a result of writing this introduction I changed the sermon title to *Abraham Left Home*. The former title in the e-news—*Where Do We Belong?*—is still pertinent, but the new title is much more evocative for me.

We continue our journey through the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11—this long list of people from the Hebrew Scriptures who lived by faith. The longest section by far is devoted to the Patriarchs (11:8-22), mostly Abraham, with cameo appearances by Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We will spend the next three weeks in this material.

The phrase *By faith*, which occurs 18 times in the chapter, occurs seven times in this passage. I assume this is not accidental. There are three occurrences in today's passage (11:8-12).

> **8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Heb 11:8 NIV)**

Abraham was called. The account begins very similarly to the account of Noah in the previous verse. Noah, being warned, built an ark. Abraham, being called, went. In both cases, being warned and being called, are what we call divine passives: God is the unspoken actor. God intervened in their lives, privileging them with his counsel. Both were responsive and obedient to God's word: Noah, being warned, *built an ark*; Abraham, being called, *went*. Both Noah and Abraham lived by faith.

The call of Abraham marks a major turning point not just in Genesis but in the entire Bible. We need to understand the context for

this call. Why does God call Abraham? After the great Flood, the three sons of Noah had descendants who spread out across the earth "by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations" (Gen 10:20, 31). Seventy peoples are described in the Table of Nations, each a people in its own homeland. The world was a diverse place.

The account of the Tower of Babel or Babylon (Gen 11:1-9), though placed after the Table of Nations, is set in a time when humanity had one language. Humanity gathered together:

> **"Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Gen 11:4)**

The setting for this is undoubtedly Mesopotamia where cities were first built. Each major city had a ziggurat at its center; archaeologists have discovered the remains of about three dozen of these.

Both the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel form the backdrop for the Call of Abraham. God calls him to start a new people who will be at the center of all the other nations. He will make Abraham's name great, in contrast to the builders of the Tower who sought to make a name for themselves. The Call of Abraham marks such a major new beginning that the whole of the rest of the Bible is the fulfillment of this call.

God called Abraham to leave everything behind and venture out into the unknown:

> **"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." (Gen 12:1)**

Abraham's departure from home was in two stages. With his father he had already left Ur and journeyed up the Euphrates River to Haran. Ur was a sophisticated city. The British Museum contains some of its treasures, excavated by Leonard Woolley. These date from just before Abraham's time. The remains of Ur's ziggurat still stand today in southern Iraq. In Haran God called Abram to a second departure.

Abraham obeyed God's call. He left home. He set out for a *place*, an unspecified place. It was the place the Lord would show him. He had to trust God and he did. He set out "even though he did not know where he was going." He took God at his word. It was by faith that he obeyed. It was by faith that he set out and left home. In due course he arrived in the place (9):

> **9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Heb 11:9-10)**

When he got there, to the *place*, he "made his home" there in the Promised Land. We are so familiar with that phrase, Promised Land. But this is the only place it actually occurs in Scripture. The *place* has become a *land*, the Promised Land. He "made his home" there but he was a migrant, a sojourner. He lived in tents, the dwellings of nomadic people, not in a house. He lived as a sojourner in a foreign land. And Isaac and Jacob lived this same sort of life with him. All three were coheirs of the promise, and God would repeat the promise to each of them. Abraham was going to receive the *place* as an inheritance and Isaac and Jacob are designated coheirs. But their reception of this inheritance was rather sketchy. The only piece of land Abraham took possession of was a cave as a burial place for Sarah, and this was much later. Today that cave is in the town of Hebron, deep in the West Bank, where it is bitterly contested between Jews and Palestinians. Abraham would eventually die without receiving the whole land as an inheritance.

How could Abraham live a contented life if he didn't have the usual accompaniments for belonging? He didn't have a settled home. He didn't really have a settled family life. He was able to live this way because he was looking "further up and further in" to borrow a phrase from C. S. Lewis. He lived in anticipation, in expectation of a city. He had left a city behind; a city built by mankind living in autonomy from God. Abraham was looking for a city with foundations, a city that would be solid and lasting. A city whose architect and builder is God. The *place* (8) has become the *Promised Land* (9), which points towards a future *City of God* (10). City implies community, where people live together in security under the reign of a benevolent ruler. An ancient city had two important features. It had a wall for protection, and a ruler for wise governance. This is the first mention of city in Hebrews. It will be an important theme in the last three chapters of the book.

Abraham was on a pilgrimage. He had set out from home, responding to the call of God. He had journeyed, sojourning. And he was looking ahead to the destination. We, too, are on a pilgrimage. For us, too, there is a departure, a journeying, and a destination. Our destination, like Abraham's, is the city of God, the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. Our destination is God himself. We shall dwell with him and he shall spread his tent over us. God and his people dwelling together.

By faith Abraham obeyed God's call and set out into the unknown, knowing that it was known to God. By faith he lived a nomadic life in a foreign land.

The third instance of *By faith* applies to Sarah:

> **11 And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. (11:11-12)**

Abraham's wife Sarah was barren and well beyond the age for bearing children. "Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive" (Gen 11:30). But by faith she "was enabled" (NIV). More literally, she "received power" for something that was otherwise impossible. Again we have a divine passive: God is the unspoken actor who gives her this power. What is the power for? There is a considerable range across the English translations. The power was for the "laying down of seed." Normally this applied to the male; he was the one who deposited seed. But Abraham had no need for any special power. He was still virile despite his age. He had impregnated Hagar, from whom was born Ishmael. Later he would take another wife Keturah, whom he would impregnate yielding six sons. The power was needed to overcome the barrenness of Sarah womb; to enliven that womb to receive the seed and bear it into life. The conception of that life was miraculous.

The word "deposition" is used ten other times in the NT, always in the phrase *the foundation of the world*. It is as if the deposition of

the seed in Sarah's womb marks a new foundation, the foundation of a new world, a new creation. This is certainly true on a cosmic scale. The seed of Abraham miraculously implanted in Sarah's now fruitful and receptive womb would grow into the new people set in the midst of the seventy peoples.

This happened because Sarah considered the one who promised to be faithful, reliable, trustworthy. She lived by faith. Therefore, because of this faith in the power of God to do the impossible, from one man, Abraham, who was himself effectively dead, came a people as numerous as the stars in the heavens and as the uncountable sand on the seashore. We are all familiar with this language, which is repeated several times in Genesis. The Hubble Space Telescope and now the James Webb Space Telescope reveal how vast is the number of stars in the heavens.

In the midst of seventy nations the seed of Abraham would increase. By the end of Genesis it had attained seventy males, who went down to Egypt (Gen 46:27). There in Egypt God multiplied them greatly and they filled the land (Exod 1:7, 20).

God brought them up out of the land of Egypt; this was the great act of salvation for Israel. He brought them through the wilderness to meet with him at Mt Sinai. There he took them to be his people, sealed by covenant. "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He put his presence in the midst of the people in the tabernacle, and invited the people to draw near to himself. Together they set out on pilgrimage to the Promised Land. But the people grumbled along the way, until they rebelled outright and demanded to go back to Egypt, the land that they redefined as flowing with milk and honey. They failed to heed God's voice, so they fell in the wilderness. They failed to complete their pilgrimage. They failed to finish. These are the rebellious people of Hebrews 3, the wilderness generation. They serve as a warning: Today, if you hear his voice, do not be like them! They are the opposite to the many listed in chapter 11 who did live by faith. They heeded the word of God and acted on it. The wilderness generation did not complete their journey; they did not attain their final goal.

The faithful saints of chapter 11 did finish their earthly journeys in faith. But even they did not attain the final destination. The chapter ends:

> **These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Heb 11:39-40)**

They are waiting for *us*, so that together we attain and receive the promise. Nevertheless these faithful saints of old form a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on:

> **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses…let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. (Heb 12:1-2)**

They inspire us to remain faithful as we continue our pilgrimage. What is the connection between *them* and *us*? They were physical descendants of Abraham. Most of us are not. How do we fit in?

The NT starts, "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). Jesus is the son of Abraham. He is ultimately the seed. There is another miraculous conception: the deposition of seed into virgin Mary's womb. This is accomplished of the Holy Spirit as both Matthew and Luke affirm. With the implantation of the seed, Mary's womb becomes the "container of the uncontainable."

Paul writes to the Galatians:

> **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 3:28-29)**

Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, are united together in one family, the family of Christ. If we are in Christ then we belong to Christ. And we are heirs of the promise to Abraham all the way back in Genesis 12. This means we are family. The NT describes us as brothers and sisters. The Roman world understood brotherly love. The strongest love was that between siblings. The fact that a master and a slave, that a Jew and a Gentile would consider one another as siblings, as brothers and sisters together in Christ, was radical. How could such different people be bound together that strongly. How could you feel deep sibling love for someone to whom you are not closely related? But in Christ we are closely related. We are all the children of Abraham. Through the Spirit of adoption we are adopted into God's family, with Christ Jesus as our elder brother. Adoption is about becoming sons and daughters, becoming brothers and sisters. With the Spirit at work in us we experience, first, a strong affection for Christ, and thus, secondly, a strong affection for those who are in Christ. The ancient world had never seen anything like this.

The modern world needs to see this among Christians: a very diverse group of people bound together by a deep sibling love. Unfortunately, there has been a powerful idea, first in missional outreach, then in the church growth movement, an idea called the Homogenous Unit Principle. The argument is that missional work and church growth is more successful when you focus on people of similar type. It may indeed be the most effective way if you are wanting to report positive statistics. But a homogenous church is a denial of fundamental NT principles. God's vision is not for a group of people who are like one another to learn how to love one another. It is for a group of people who are very different from one another to learn how to love one another as brothers and sisters. God intends for his church to be very diverse. John the Revelator saw in heaven

> **a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. (Rev 7:9)**

God wants his church in Christ through the Spirit to be a very diverse body. I grew up with a powerful illustration of this. Both my parents worked with lepers, back in the days when leprosy was highly feared. When missionaries went into central Thailand in the early 1950s there were no known Christians. In the first twenty years half of the converts were lepers. They had nothing but two important things: a lot of time, and profound gratitude that God should pay attention to them, that the gospel should apply to them. My father taught a Bible school for those who were residents in long-term rehabilitation. Two churches developed: the leprosy church and the well church. It took a long time for the "well" Christians to fully accept the leprosy Christians. But finally the two came together.

I am delighted that PBCC has become more diverse as Cupertino has become more diverse. Many have come because we are a Bible-teaching church. Every Wednesday afternoon during school sessions, when it isn't raining, we hold Tea on the Patio. We serve snacks and a drink to kids on their way home from Collins Elementary School and Lawson Middle School. Over a hundred kids come by every week and gather. They are a very diverse group. These are our neighbors.

The church is the temple of the living God. In an individualistic culture it is easy to think of this in an individualistic manner: *I* am the temple of the living God. This is true, but the NT focus is that the church as a gathered community is the temple in which God is present in the midst of his people.

Paul wrote about the implications of Christ making the two, Jew and Gentile, one through his Spirit, reconciling both together to God:

> **Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also 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 2:19-22)**

All the verbs, all the nouns, all the pronouns, are plural not singular. And the more diverse this plurality the better it embodies God's design.

Christian nationalism ought to be an oxymoron, especially because in practice it often implies white Christian nationalism. But the merging of race, nationality, and Christianity is an offense to the gospel. It is an offense to what God has done in Christ, breaking down the dividing wall of hostility and making the two into one. It is an offense to what God is doing through his Spirit, filling his people with genuine, deep sibling love for one another among those who are very diverse, those who in other society would not belong together as brother and sister.

Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27), where the verb *conduct yourselves* is to *live as a citizen*. Later he writes, "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20). I fear many Christians misunderstand what such citizenship means. Philippi was a Roman colony where Rome settled many retired soldiers who had served twenty years in the army. Philippi was in the province of Macedonia, but legally it was an outpost of Rome, where the laws of Rome applied. It also served to spread the influence of Rome into that province.

When we are in Christ, our citizenship is in heaven. But we are here on earth as a colony of heaven. We have the privilege of extending the life of heaven here on earth. The church is an outpost of heaven on earth. This does not mean that we withdraw from the world. Rather, we extend heaven's influence into the world. We are present in the world as a fragrant aroma of Christ, spreading his influence throughout the world.

Who does God want in his heavenly colony on earth? Our call to worship, Psalm 87, described the glorious things that will be said of Zion, the city of God. The psalm lays out a daring vision of who would be included in the register of peoples as citizens of Zion. Of whom will it be said, "This one was born in Zion"? Rahab (that's Egypt), Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, Cush (that's Ethiopia). All the enemy peoples! All the descendants of Ham! The Lord intends to record them in the register of the peoples, as those who acknowledge him. This is a breathtaking vision.

How can this possibly happen? Only in Christ and through his Spirit, can the walls of hostility and enmity be broken down. But in Christ and through his Spirit the unthinkable can happen. Those whom we might say do not belong together, find to their great surprise and great delight that they do belong together because they belong to Christ. We discover that we are brothers and sisters.

Where do I belong? Because I belong everywhere and nowhere I have long had a strong conviction that where I belong is in Christ, and I belong with his people everywhere. The diverse, multicultural body of Christ is a beautiful thing, where brothers and sisters in Christ live together in deep love.

The deposit of seed in Sarah's barren womb is indeed the foundation of a new humanity, birthed in the midst of the Table of Nations to draw people together. The miraculous deposit of seed in Mary's virgin womb, through the Holy Spirit, is the foundation of a new creation. God himself sent his beloved Son into the world to become like us, sharing our flesh and blood—this is the thrust of Hebrews chapter 2. In Christ we become one big family, brothers and sisters together, with Christ Jesus as our elder brother.

Abraham left home. Through him God founded a new people, which we all are together in Christ Jesus. For this people God has provided a new homeland: the city of God.

FINDING HOME

Hebrews 11:13-16

#36, 2026.02.22

One of the most famous and moving choruses in opera is *Va pensiero* in Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842)—that's Nebuchadnezzar. It is popularly known as the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves. In exile in Babylon they remember their distant homeland with great longing:

Va, pensiero… Go, thought.
Go my thoughts on wings of gold;
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,
where, soft and mild, the sweet airs
of my native land smell fragrant!

O, mia patria, sì bella e perduta!
O my homeland, so lovely and lost!

Verdi set this to a mournful tune full of yearning, a tune that pulls at the heart strings. It was an instant classic. So much so that several times this chorus has been proposed as the Italian national anthem.

The chorus is inspired by Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How shall we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1-4 NIV)

Perhaps you are more familiar with the rendition by Bob Marley:

By the rivers of Babylon,
where we sat down,
and there we wept,
when we remembered Zion.

But I think Marley's tune is too upbeat and jaunty for the wistful lyrics.

A similar mournful longing is conveyed in the Advent hymn:

O Come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until…

Until… Oh, what a pregnant word that is right there. A longing for the end of exile. A longing to find home again.

Home and homeland, people and place: these go together. The separation of a people from their homeland is usually traumatic. An exception would be when a group sets out to establish a colony, a new outpost of their homeland. The ancient Greeks and Phoenicians were particularly good at this. They extended their homeland to distant shores around the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea.

European colonial powers did this. They brought part of their homeland with them as they established colonies. They wanted to feel at home in a very foreign land. The mission boarding school I attended was high up in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. In the 1930s the British developed the area as a hill station and they planted tea. The original building around which the school was later built, is a mock-Tudor house with leaded glass windows. It was built by an English tea planter in the middle of the jungle so he could feel at home while he drank his own tea. Nearby is Ye Olde Smoke House restaurant and hotel, also mock Tudor with leaded glass. Here all the Brits could feel at home.

Many Jews were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, exiled far from home. Under the Persian King Cyrus there was a limited return home to the Land. But in NT times most Jews were in the Diaspora, dispersed in many lands. There was a further dispersion after the two failed Jewish rebellions against Rome. Jews were first expelled from Jerusalem in AD 70, then from Judea in AD 135. In medieval Europe there arose the myth of the Wandering Jew, never able to find home. This motif has made its way into literature and art.

In the later 19th century Jews began to return to the Land to settle and live. Zionism is the movement to reestablish Jews in their ancestral homeland. It arose because Jews who had attempted to assimilate in Western Europe realized that they would never be accepted. Europe would never be their homeland. They could never find home there. Christian Zionism advocates for this return as a fulfillment of prophecy. Israeli law grants the automatic right of return to anyone with at least one Jewish great-grandparent, one out of eight. A return home.

Zionism was promoted under the banner *A land without a people for a people without a land*. It was actually Christians who first promoted this idea before the birth of Zionism. But this was a myth. There *were* people in the land: Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all Palestinian because they lived in Palestine, and all speaking Arabic.

But Israeli governments have consistently denied Palestinian attachment to the Land, and refuse the right of return to those who fled or were expelled in 1948 or 1967. The current Israeli government denies that the Palestinians are even a people; therefore they don't have a homeland. The Palestinians meanwhile hold to the principle of *sumud*, steadfastness in the face of efforts to expel them. They remain attached to the Land. They continue to call it home.

People and Land, people and their home. These twin ideas lie at the heart of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. and they lie at the heart of God's promises to Abraham. They loom large in the presentation of Abraham in Hebrews 11. These are controversial topics right now, not just in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but here in the US. Who belongs in *We, the People*? Who belongs in this land? Who gets to call this home? Again, People and Land, people and their homeland.

We continue working our way slowly through the section about Abraham in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11. People and their homeland are dominant themes. Our passage today forms an interlude; it is a theological reflection upon people and homeland. The phrase *by*

faith, which occurs 18 times in the chapter, does not occur at all in this paragraph. This is one of the features that marks it out as an interlude.

> [13] **All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.** [14] **People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.** [15] **If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.** [16] **Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.** (**Heb 11:13-16 NIV**)

The paragraph starts on the note of death not life. *All these people…died*. All these people are Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob, mentioned in vv. 8-12. They lived *by faith*. But now they are dead. Nevertheless, they died still *in faith*. They were faithful to the end.

Three things are said about their status at death. First, negatively, *they did not receive the things promised*. They died without taking possession of the Promised Land, except for the burial cave that Abraham purchased. Does this mean that the promises failed? Did they live faithfully in vain?

No, because, secondly, they died looking ahead into the future. They weren't looking back to the past, wondering whether they should have left Ur or Haran. Nor were they looking to the present, seeking present fulfillment. They were looking ahead. There in the future they *saw* the fulfillment of the promises and they *greeted* or *welcomed* them. They *saw* and they *greeted*, as if they were greeting a familiar friend in the distance. Somehow they recognized that the promised things were on the distant horizon. With the eyes of faith they could see them there.

Therefore, thirdly, they were able to admit and accept that *they were foreigners and strangers on earth*. Abraham admitted this to the Hittites when he sought to purchase a cave for the burial of Sarah. He said, "I am a foreigner and stranger among you" (Gen 23:4). The phrase *on earth* could be translated *on the land*, referring to the Promised Land, or it can be translated, as here, *on earth*. It is perhaps deliberately ambiguous. They were foreigners and strangers in the land of Canaan. They were resident aliens, at home but not at home. They were in that liminal zone of being both resident and alien. The preacher credits Abraham and his family with greater faith than this: that he was not at home in this earth, because his true home lay beyond. Home would be found in some future, transcendental realm.

Those who understand that they are sojourners on earth, resident aliens, make it clear that they have a mental horizon far beyond the confines of this earth (v. 14). They are able to think more expansively. They are earnestly looking for a homeland, but recognize that this homeland is greater than a piece of real estate on this earth. That homeland is where they will finally and fully belong. They will find home. We will find home.

The alternative to such forward-looking thinking is a backward-looking gaze:

> **If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.** (**11:15**)

The patriarchs could have remembered the land they had left, and wished themselves back home. They could have spent their lives looks backwards rather than forwards.

There are two reasons for being a sojourner, a temporary resident in a land not your own, however long that temporary status may last. You may be a sojourner because you intend to return home, back to where you came from. This was my original attitude when I came here forty years ago: I would be here for 18 months on a J-1 exchange visa then return to Europe. Or you can be a sojourner because you intend to move on somewhere else, perhaps with the intent of finding home elsewhere. Finding home may be a return to the past or a journey further into the future. On an earthly plane I finally resolved my liminal status by becoming a US citizen a year ago. I ceased to be a resident alien. I exited my liminal space of being resident here as if at home, but also alien as if not at home.

When God was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, angels grabbed Lot and his family and dragged them out of the city:

> **"Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!" … But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt.** (**Gen 19:17, 26**)

Don't look back! But she did look back. This was not just a quick glance, but an intent gaze. She "looked back longingly" (NET). This longing gaze showed that she hadn't really left Sodom and Gomorrah behind. She hadn't left mentally, psychologically, emotionally, or spiritually. She wished herself among them.

The wilderness generation that God had brought out of Egypt looked back. Looking ahead, they were terrified. Looking in the present, they were fed up with manna. Looking back, they remembered Egypt:

> **The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!"** (**Num 11:4-6**)

We remember… but it was a selective memory: idealized, sanitized, glamorized. Their memory bore no relationship to the horrors of their enslavement in Egypt. A few chapters later, the ringleaders of Korah's rebellion attacked Moses:

> **"Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?… Moreover, 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 looked back and thought of their enslavement in Egypt as home. They grumbled that God and Moses had failed. They had given up looking ahead for a future home in the land of promise—despite the Lord's assurance that he would bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. Better the past life that they knew than the future life that seemed a mirage in the distance. For them, finding home meant going back.

There is a stark contrast between the ten spies on the one hand and Joshua and Caleb on the other. The ten acknowledged that Canaan was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, a fruitful

and productive land. But there were giants in the land. These giants dominated their thinking. They filled their horizon. They looked through the lens of fear. Joshua and Caleb acknowledged that there were indeed people in the land, but they had confidence that God would be with them. They looked through a God-centered lens. So they were able to look into the future with optimism.

What about us? Are we looking backwards or forwards? Are we looking through a pessimistic lens or an optimistic one? Are we afraid of the future? Or do we look to the future in anticipation? Are we tempted to turn back, or do we faithfully press forward?

Faced with demographic and cultural changes, many are wistfully remembering former times, a former golden age: be it the 1950s, or the confederacy, or the founding fathers, or the pilgrim fathers. These all recall a particular telling of American history. In this way of thinking, finding home means returning or restoring some mythical past age. This is in response to seeing both the present and the future in fear. Being afraid of what the country is becoming.

This was not true of the patriarchs. Abraham had left a sophisticated, highly-cultured city in Ur. But he and his family were looking ahead. They were desiring a better homeland. A homeland that could never be achieved on this earth:

> **Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. (11:16a)**

The patriarchs had a small footprint in the land. They owned no property save the burial cave for Sarah. They had desires beyond what the physical land could provide, even though it was the land promised by God. They had greater longing because God had made them capable of greater longing. They were capable of thinking beyond the visible. This is a hallmark of faith, as laid down in the first verse of this chapter about living by faith:

> **Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. (11:1-2)**

Faith and hope, confidence and assurance. Faith is in the present, hope is in the future. But faith in the present includes confidence about that hope in the future. The things we hope for are things we do not see—either because they lie in a realm beyond our current perception, or because they lie in the future. But faith accepts their reality. All the OT saints of this Hall of Faith illustrate this first verse. The whole chapter is a commendation of the faith and hope of these ancients.

The patriarchs were seeking home. Abraham left home in Ur and Haran. He was a sojourner in Canaan; he did not find home there. He and the others who recognized they were sojourners were seeking home, in the future, in a transcendental realm. They were seeking a heavenly homeland. They were seeking home in God's realm. They were seeking God.

> **Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (11:16b)**

Therefore draws this paragraph to a grand conclusion. Abraham's desire for a heavenly homeland indicates that he had a desire for God himself. Therefore God is not ashamed of them. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob do not shame God. Many of us are from an honor-shame culture, so we can understand this. The preacher uses a double negative: *not ashamed*. Thereby, rhetorically, he means a strong positive: God is greatly honored to be identified with Abraham and his family.

God is honored to be called their God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He revealed himself to Isaac: "I am the God of Abraham your father" (Gen 26:24). He revealed himself to Jacob: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (Gen 31:42). At the Burning Bush he revealed himself to Moses, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:6). Four times at the Burning Bush he identifies himself this way to Moses.

At critical moments in Israel's history this identification of "the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel [Jacob]" is invoked: by David as he prays for Solomon who will build the Lord's temple (1 Chr 29:18); by Elijah as he calls upon the Lord on Mt Carmel in the contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:36); and by King Hezekiah as he summons all Israel and Judah to return to the Lord (2 Chr 30:6).

The Lord is not ashamed to be identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is honored to call out a new people in his name.

God brought the Israelites out of Egypt to Mt Sinai to meet with him. There he took them to be his people: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He literally put his name on the high priest, who represented the people before God. On the high priest's turban was a gold plate inscribed, *Holy to the Lord* (Exod 28:36; 39:30). Quite literally he bore or carried the Lord's name.

This helps clarify the third commandment, usually translated "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). As Carmen Joy Imes has argued, it should be translated, "You shall not bear or carry the name of the Lord your God in vain" or to futility.[1] Israel bore God's name. Israel belonged to him as his people. Their behavior should not render that identity futile. Sadly it did.

God was not ashamed to be called the God of Israel. They were not an exceptional people in terms of any intrinsic quality. What was exceptional was that God chose to be called their God. He took them as his people. He put his name on them.

God is not ashamed to be the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. At both the Baptism and the Transfiguration of Jesus, God spoke from heaven: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; 17:5).

The Father was not ashamed looking down on his beloved Son dying on the cross. The Romans intended crucifixion to impose maximum shame. It was the most painful, degrading, humiliating, shaming, honor-stripping form of public execution. God did not consider his Son to be shamed. He did not turn his face away. He did not abandon him. Jesus was not the derelict on the cross. I think the Father looked down with pleasure—not on the suffering of Jesus, but that Jesus bore all that suffering yet remained faithful. He was tested in every way as we are and beyond, yet without sin. God looked down: This is my Son!

God raised Jesus from the dead into the new creation. Jesus was taken up into God's very presence, taking his humanity with him. At last, a human being has found home: home in God's presence.

Thereafter the NT Epistles consistently refer to God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God was not ashamed to be identified as the God of Abraham. He was not ashamed to be identified as the Father of his Beloved Son dying the cross. God is not ashamed to have this shameful death be the center of history—literally the crux at the center. The apostle Paul was not ashamed of the gospel: the gospel of a crucified man. No wonder this was scandalous to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks, to Gentiles. But God is honored.

He is honored to be our God when we enter into Christ. We are baptized not *in* the name of the triune God, but *into* the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We belong to the triune God. God is not ashamed to own us.

So many of us are used to thinking of ourselves as worthless sinners, even after we have turned to Christ. God might tolerate us. But he is certainly not honored to identify himself with us. The Scriptures show otherwise. At the center of this identification is our Lord Jesus Christ. God's one and only became human, taking our flesh and blood. He died in faith, having lived a human life to perfection, to its end goal. God raised him into the new creation and into his presence. When we enter into Christ, as symbolized in baptism, we enter into the beloved community that is gathered around his Beloved. God is delighted to welcome us into his family. He is not at all ashamed to be our God. Indeed this is what he has made us for.

Many have a negative view of how God regards us because they had a bad role model in a parent or other person in authority. They may have grown up in an environment of negative, critical comments, with little positive affirmation. I have twice heard Paul Young speak—he is the author of *The Shack*. Both times he said it took him fifty years to wipe the face of his father off of the face of God.

What face do you see when you think of God? How do you think God views you? Can we all affirm that God is not ashamed to be called our God. Indeed, he is honored to identify with us as his people.

God told Israel his desire was to dwell with them his people. Immediately after sealing the covenant at Sinai, he instructed the people to make him a tabernacle, a dwelling place, where he could dwell in their midst. When it was finished he filled it with his glory. Then he invited his people to draw near. He told them to offer up ascension offerings which would rise up into his presence and be accepted as a fragrant aroma. He welcomed his people into his presence.

The tabernacle no longer exists. The temple no longer exists. But God has prepared a city (v. 16b). This city will loom larger as we approach the end of Hebrews. In the Jerusalem of the OT, God's presence, the king, and the people all dwelt in the city. God in the temple, the king in the palace next door, and the people all around. The city was in the midst of the Land. Temple, City, and Land were all holy.

In the New Jerusalem, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Rev 21:1-7), the city is of vast size as if it fills the whole earth. God spreads his glory over his people. God has prepared a city for us. A voice from the throne says,

> **"Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Rev 21:3)**

The one seated on the throne, God himself, says,

> **"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)**

God will not be ashamed. He will be deeply honored to take us as his people. God has prepared a city for us, saying "I am your God, you are my people, and I will dwell with you." The Holy Spirit is a guarantee or downpayment of this.

The preacher's goal in writing this "word of encouragement" (13:22), this homily or sermon, is to encourage his readers to look ahead and not look back. Don't be like the wilderness generation that died before finishing their journey. They looked back and wanted to go back, as if it were home. Instead, keep running the race. Keep moving forwards toward the finish line. There we will finally be home.

He urges his readers not to forsake meeting together. We need to meet together regularly to encourage one another to keep looking ahead, to keep moving forwards, to not look back. A major purpose of our Sunday morning gatherings should be to refresh our memory and refresh our resolve to keep moving forward. As stated each week on our worship sheet:

> 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 to one another, and to be empowered to reach out to the world.

When we know that our home is ultimately with God we can live freely in this world without undue attachment to it. Without looking to this world to satisfy all our longings.

We are not our own, we have been bought with a price. God has put his name on us. He is not ashamed to be our God. We are his beloved people in Christ through his Spirit. We find our home in him.

1. Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (IVP Academic, 2019).

ABRAHAM WAS TESTED

Hebrews 11:17-22

#37, 2026.03.01

Will it be on the test? What educator has not been asked this question? A year ago I took the US citizenship test. I knew generally what would be on the test, for the list of one hundred questions was accessible. The first time I read through the list, there were only three for which I did not know the answer. I scored so well simply from having lived here 40 years and paying attention to news and public affairs. When I had my citizenship interview I was confident that I could correctly answer the requisite six out of ten questions randomly chosen by the officer. I thought it a fair test. All hundred items are indeed useful for citizens to know. But I did wonder how many native-born US citizens would actually be able to pass the test.

Like many in Britain I failed my first driving test. I was 18, had little opportunity to drive, and would have no opportunity over the next four years. Nearing the end of grad school in London I took 20 driving lessons at 8:30 on weekday mornings, i.e. towards the end of rush hour. On the last lesson the instructor had me drive around Trafalgar Square in the heart of London! After that, the test late morning in a quiet suburb was a piece of cake. Six weeks later I was very thankful that I had been tested so hard by my instructor, because I was driving at night on LA freeways in the rain. This was something I did not anticipate when I took the test. I could never have done that had my instructor not put me to the test.

Tests. Most people don't like them. But tests can do us good as did that final driving lesson. Sometimes we know what will be on the test. But often in life we don't. We can be tested in ways we don't foresee. This was surely true for Abraham.

Today we complete the section about Abraham in the Hall of Faith, Hebrews 11. Our text, 11:17-22, consists of four sentences, each beginning with the familiar phrase *By faith* that occurs 18 times in this chapter. The subjects of the four sentences are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Four generations of Abraham and sons. Three generations of fulfilling the promise of a son that would develop into a great people. But in the first sentence this promise is in doubt.

1. Abraham (11:17-19)

17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Heb 11:17-19 NIV)

Abraham was a man of faith, but that faith needed developing. He was tested by God. God took him on a journey, a spiritual odyssey, to develop that faith. It began with God's call of Abraham:

"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." (Gen 12:1)

Leave everything behind and journey into the unknown, trusting that it is known to God. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him" (Gen 12:4). He took God at his word, and he obeyed God. This was faith. He considered God to be trustworthy. The account of Abraham in the Hall of Faith begins with this call:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Heb 11:8)

Abraham never took possession of the land that was promised, except for a cave he purchased for Sarah's burial. He did eventually receive the promised son, though it took many years.

The climax of Abraham's spiritual odyssey came when God gave a second, similar command:

"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)

There are clear parallels between these two commands at the beginning and the end. The particular form of the command "Go" occurs in only these two passages. Again, Abraham has to venture out into the unknown: formerly it was "to the land I will show you." Now it is "on a mountain I will show you." He is utterly dependent on the trustworthiness of God.

This story looms large in all three Abrahamic faiths. Christians refer to it as the Sacrifice of Isaac. Jews refer to it as the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. Muslims believe it was Ishmael not Isaac who was offered. It has a prominent place in all three faiths.

This call to sacrifice Isaac has horrified many people. How could God possibly demand child sacrifice? Many wonder why Abraham did not push back. Why didn't he argue with God?

What was God asking Abraham to do? In the OT there are many types of sacrifice. God tells Abraham to offer up Isaac as an *olah*. This is usually translated as a *burnt offering* because it is fully burnt on the altar. The Latin translation is *holocaust*, meaning *completely burnt*, though it has a more ominous meaning today. But the focus of the Hebrew word and of the verb used with it is that it all goes up, it ascends. So, "offer him up as an offering-up" (Schocken Bible). Offer *up* the *ascension* offering. Where does it go? It ascends into God's presence where it is received as a fragrant aroma. After the Flood Noah offered up an ascension offering, and it was received by the Lord as a soothing savor (Gen 8:20). God is asking Abraham to transfer Isaac back into his presence. Isaac was a gift from God; now God is asking for the gift back.

We heard a dramatized reading of the Genesis account. It is full of tension. Abraham was obedient all the way. What was he thinking? We would have so many questions. But the narrative draws a veil across his thoughts. It focuses on his obedience. So does Hebrews. "Abraham, when called to go…obeyed and went" (11:8). "Abraham, when tested, offered up Isaac" (11:17). Both responses of obedience, at the beginning and the end, were *by faith*. Faith and action were in sync. Faith resulted in faithfulness.

Hebrews first states this matter-of-factly: Abraham offered Isaac.

Then it restates this in a more dramatic manner: the one who had received the promises was offering up his one and only son. His one and only. Abraham had another son, Ishmael. But Isaac was the beloved one and only, granted as fulfillment of the promise. God had just assured him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned" (Heb 11:14; Gen 21:12). Not through Ishmael.

In our call to worship we read, "The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises, and faithful in all he does" (Ps 145:17). How can he be trustworthy if he is asking for his promise back? We sang, "He won't fail me now." Was God going to fail Abraham now?

Abraham reckoned that somehow, even from the dead, God was able to raise, to bring back to life. He believed that somehow God would resolve the situation. He had confidence that somehow he and Isaac would return to his servants. He had confidence that somehow God himself would provide the lamb for the ascension offering.

Both Genesis and Hebrews describe this as a test. Both Hebrew and Greek use the same word for *testing* and *temptation*. To us these seem very different ideas, even opposite. They are indeed opposite but they are closely related. God was *testing* Abraham. Would he be obedient to God's word and do what he said? Would he be faithful? But there would have been an evil force *tempting* Abraham to doubt God's word, to doubt God's faithfulness and character. Should a seed of doubt take root and flourish, Abraham would then disbelieve God's word, his goodness, his kind intentions. Doubt would see God as the enemy. This would fruit into disobedience. The object of the test and of the temptation was the same: would Abraham offer up Isaac? God wanted Abraham to pass the test. The forces of evil and chaos, behind whom is the Adversary, wanted him to fail.

Doubt, unbelief, and disobedience flourish in a perceived world of scarcity. Trust, belief, and obedience flourish in a perceived world of abundance. Perception of abundance and scarcity have little to do with actual abundance of scarcity.

Abraham *resisted the temptation* and he *passed the test*. The two go hand-in-hand: resisting the temptation and passing the test. The opposite is to succumb to the temptation and fail the test. He remained faithfully obedient to God's word throughout. But God took him right up to the very limit:

> **Abraham *built* an altar and *arranged* the wood on it. He *bound* his son Isaac and *laid* him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he *reached out* his hand and *took* the knife to slay his son. (Gen 22:9-10)**

Six actions by Abraham in slower and slower motion. Knife in hand and hand raised to strike, only then does God speak up:

> **"Abraham! Abraham! …[Stop!]… Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." (Gen 22:11-12)**

Now we find out the purpose of the test: so that God could learn something about Abraham. But was it God who needed to learn this? Surely Abraham also learnt. God pushed Abraham to the absolute limit, and Abraham learnt that God was trustworthy. I am sure that now he had an unshakeable confidence in God. He now lived in a world of great abundance. He could live with abandon. He was free. He had no need to hold on to things or people.

Abraham did not live to see his seed become a mighty people. He did not take possession of the Promised Land, other than the burial cave. But he had God himself. God had given him the gift of himself. That was abundance. A little later, when he sought that burial place for Sarah, he told the Hittites, "I am a foreigner and stranger among you" (Gen 23:4). He was content being still a stranger in the land. He was at home in God. Abraham indeed became the Father of Faith.

But not all of his descendants shared this faith. The counterpart to the many OT people of faith in Hebrews 11 is the wilderness generation in chapter 3. They flipped the tables. They put God to the test. They grumbled incessantly, they doubted God's provision, then they complained about it when it came. Finally they rejected God and Moses and wanted to go back to Egypt. They failed the test. They looked back longingly and they wanted to go back. As a result they failed to complete their journey. They died in the wilderness, all except Joshua and Caleb.

> **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. (Heb 3:18-19)**

They serve as a warning. The preacher quotes from Psalm 95:

> **"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."**
>
> **(Heb 3:7b-9; Ps 95:7b-9)**

This warning applied to Israel at the time the psalm was written. The warning still stands to the preacher's hearers. It still stands today.

In addition to the role models of Hebrews 11, the readers, then and today, have a supreme model. God sent his one and only into the world. The eternal son became like us in two ways. First, he shared in our *humanity*, including our mortality. In helping "Abraham's descendants…he had to be made like them, fully human in every way" (2:17). "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity" (2:14).

Secondly, he shared in our *suffering*, in our testing and tempting. "He was tempted in every way, just as we are" (4:15). "He himself suffered when he was tempted" (2:18). He was obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). He resisted the taunts, tempting him to come down off the cross. God took him to the very limit, and then beyond. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rom 8:32).

At the end Jesus called out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). "It is finished!" And he handed over his spirit (John 19:30). What was finished? His life of faithful obedience, fulfilling his Father's will. He died with his faith and faithfulness intact. To whom did he hand over his spirit? He offered up to his Father a life well-lived, a life of faithful obedience from beginning to end. A human life perfected, lived to its *telos*, its end point. What a fragrant aroma! What a soothing savor! It was well received by the Father. Jesus had finished the mission on which the Father had sent him, to live a faithful human life.

The Father raised his beloved Son, his one and only, from the dead—the better resurrection. Forty days later Jesus ascended into

the Father's presence where he presented his own life blood for cleansing and for sealing a new covenant. Jesus is the true ascension offering.

We all face testing and temptation; we face suffering. But help is available:

> **Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (2:18)**
>
> **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: 15-16)**

Abraham was tested. His faithfulness was proved though such testing. His faith was approved, commended to subsequent generations as an example, including here in the Hall of Faith. Jesus was tested. His faithfulness was proved through testing and suffering: in the wilderness, in the garden, and finally on the cross. His faithfulness was approved in the resurrection and the ascension. The faithful life of the second Adam counteracted the unfaithfulness of the first Adam. We are all invited to come to him and be incorporated into his faithfulness.

Faithful Abraham has received much attention in this Hall of Faith: twelve verses. He is worthy, for he is the faithful founding father of a new humanity. When called to go, he was obedient and went. When tested, he offered up Isaac. At both ends of his spiritual odyssey he was faithful.

The next three verses cover the next three generations in quick succession. The common theme is that, approaching death, each looked forward to future generations. Each was confident that there would be a future.

2. Isaac (11:20)

> **By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. (11:20)**

When Isaac was old he blessed his twin sons. He intended to bless Esau, the older twin, but through his blindness and the trickery and deceit of Rebekah and Jacob, he actually blessed younger Jacob (Gen 27). Abraham's clan was by no means perfect! There was plenty of drama! But God worked through this imperfect clan.

By faith Isaac conveyed the Abrahamic blessing to the next generation. He had faith that there would be future generations in which God's promises would be fulfilled.

3. Jacob (11:21)

> **By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. (11:21)**

When Jacob was dying, he was no longer in the land. He was in Egypt together with his sons. He did bless his twelve sons, prophesying of what would become of them in the future when they became the tribes of Israel (Gen 49). But immediately before that he blessed Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen 48). Here, too, Jacob blessed them in reverse order: the younger Ephraim before the older Manasseh, despite Joseph's efforts to prevent this. Ephraim and Manasseh would be the progenitors of two of the tribes of Israel in place of Joseph. This meant thirteen tribes, allowing Levi to be set apart for service in the tabernacle.

4. Joseph (11:22)

> **By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. (11:22)**

Joseph had spent most of his life in Egypt. He had suffered much treachery and ill-treatment at the hands of his brothers and Potiphar's wife. But the Lord had used him for the preservation of life, notably the lives of Abraham's descendants. Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah, and an Egyptian wife, Asenath the daughter of an Egyptian priest. She bore him two sons. But as he named these two sons Joseph was mindful of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He gave them Hebrew names not Egyptian.

When Joseph died the Egyptians "embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt" (Gen 50:26). Just like a Pharaoh or high official. Thus ends Genesis. But Joseph had an eye to the future, and it was not lying embalmed in a coffin in Egypt. He was confident that there would be an "exodus of the Israelites from Egypt." He made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place" (50:25). And so they did centuries later: "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him" (Exod 13:19). The Israelites buried the bones in Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob had bought (Josh 24:32).

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were each able to look ahead and see the future. By faith they could "see" things as yet unseen, things that were in the realm of hope. That is what this chapter is about:

> **Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb 11:1)**

Things hoped for are things not seen, because they lie in the future. Faith accepts that these unseen things are true, whether in the future or in the present in an unseen realm. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and also Joseph, exhibited both faith and hope. They had a forward-looking horizon beyond their death.

The author describes this document as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). His purpose is to encourage his beloved brothers and sisters to keep going, to keep persevering in the faith. He has two primary exhortations. First, keep looking forward to the finish line. Keep looking ahead, like Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. He has run the human course. He has pioneered the way through death into the new creation. He has opened the way into God's presence. He is the perfecter of faith. He lived a faithful life to its *telos*, the perfection of a human being. He has crossed the finish line. There at the finish line is the great cloud of witnesses, the OT saints who lived by faith. They are cheering us on as we run they race. Also they are waiting for us so that together we might all be made perfect.

Secondly, he exhorts us to keep meeting together to encourage one another (10:25) and to "keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters" (13:1).

If we need help, and we always do, we can boldly approach the throne of grace, where we have a merciful and faithful high priest. He is able to help those who are being tested and tempted. He was

tested and tempted himself, and proved faithful. He passed the test.
He will help us pass the test.

MOSES LEFT EGYPT BEHIND

Hebrews 11:23-28

#38, 2026.07.05

Yesterday we celebrated our country's 250th birthday, its semi-quincentennial or half-500th. On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was adopted by the Second Continental Congress on behalf of the thirteen colonies. They declared their independence from King George III, Mad King George. They revoked their allegiance to him and to the British crown. Wearing my British hat, this was an act of rebellion. This was treason, and the delegates knew it was. But now this Declaration is celebrated not just in this country but around the world as the first of its kind. Yesterday the country was festooned with flags: flags with 13 stripes for the first states and 50 stars for the current states.

At the same time this country has been co-hosting the World Cup, together with Canada and Mexico. Despite some initial concerns, the stadiums have been packed full of enthusiastic fans. They may be US citizens, but many have been wearing the colors and waving the flags of their countries of origin. They have mixed allegiance. Many are proud to be US citizens, but, as a diaspora, also loyal to their heritage. Many are thus hyphenated Americans: Mexican-Americans, Norwegian-Americans, even Cape-Verdean-Americans. The notion of a nation-state is relatively recent, arising with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. People are citizens of a nation-state that is defined by treaty. Now, with global mobility, many people live in countries other than their country of origin. Most nations have substantial diasporas spread across the world. This raises questions of allegiance and identity.

This is true for me. It's perhaps a bit more complicated for me. I have had residence papers in Thailand, Malaysia, Switzerland, France, Canada, and the USA, all while holding a British passport. I actually lived in the UK for less than fifteen years, nearly all for schooling. I left when I was 22. Last year I finally harmonized my residence and my citizenship. I took the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the USA, which begins with a renunciation of allegiance:

> "I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen…"

On completion of the oath I was granted US citizenship, and given a copy of the Constitution and a US flag to wave.

But have I been waving this flag during this World Cup? No! My sporting allegiance is with Scotland—though much less so in football than in rugby. Alas, supporting Scotland's football team is rather a lost cause. They did not make it out of the group stage; they have never made it out of the group stage! Don't cry for me Argentina! But the Scottish fans, the Tartan Army, have again excelled, and won themselves many admirers in Boston and Miami.

When the US Men's National Team—that's rather a mouthful—played Turkey ten days ago, I was rooting for Turkey. I've been to Turkey a dozen times and have many Turkish friends. So I was overjoyed at Turkey's last-second winning goal. Yes, USA was playing mostly its reserves, but it was a Turkish victory none the less.

But most of all I've been wanting to see good football, to see the beautiful game played beautifully. There has been plenty of that. Last Wednesday it was a joy to watch USA play some beautiful football in defeating Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The World Cup is a celebration of diversity. Most of the teams are ethnically diverse. There are four pairs of biological brothers playing for different countries. How do they manage their identity and allegiance?

We here at PBCC are a diverse mixed multitude. Where do our identity and allegiance lie? This is what we will explore this morning: identity and allegiance.

We return to the Book of Hebrews, part-way through chapter 11. This is the famous Hall of Faith, the account of many from Israel's Scriptures who lived a life of faith. They were faithful to God. Eighteen times in this chapter a sentence begins "By faith" (vv. 3-31). Apart from the first instance, "By faith we understand…," the focus is not on ideas and doctrine. The other 17 instances, from Abel to Rahab (vv. 4-31), detail action. Each individual listed acted out of a position of faith. Faith here is really faithfulness within a relationship. So I prefer the term "In faithfulness." Scot McKnight uses "In allegiance," which I also like. In faithfulness these various named individuals acted in a way appropriate to their relationship with God. And their faithfulness was in response to God's faithfulness.

Faithfulness begins with God and we respond to him in faithful allegiance. God is prevenient; he acts first and we respond. All the people of this chapter lived lives of faithfulness to God. In him they found their identity. To him they gave their allegiance and acted accordingly.

The first block of faithfulness (4-7) covered Abel, Enoch, and Noah; three figures from primeval history. The second block (8-22) included four "In faithfulness" statements about Abraham, followed by three for his immediate descendants: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Today we start the third block (23-31). Similar to the second block it begins with four "By faith" or "In faithfulness" statements, this time about Moses, followed by three for those who came after him. Today we consider the four statements about Moses (23-28); the other three (29-31) we'll look at next week. I will take the statements about Moses one at a time.

1. Baby Moses (11:23)

The first statement describes what happened at Moses's birth (23):

> **By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. (Heb 11:23 NIV)**

Most of us are familiar with the story of Moses. We heard part of it as our Scripture reading (Exod 2:1-10). Much earlier Jacob's sons had sold their brother Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Their intent was evil but God intended otherwise as Joseph later told his brothers:

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." (Gen 50:20)

Joseph ended up as Pharaoh's right-hand man who wisely oversaw seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Thereby he preserved life, of both his family and the Egyptians.

Jacob's family who entered Egypt numbered 70 (Gen 46:27). They were the kernel or nucleus of what would become a new nation in the midst of the 70 nations of the Table of Nations (Gen 10). God blessed the descendants of Jacob in Egypt:

the Israelites were exceedingly fruitful; they multiplied greatly, increased in numbers and became so numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. (Exod 1:7-8)

Alarmed at their growing numbers, this new Pharaoh subjected them to harsh forced labor, building his cities. "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied" (1:12) and the more the Egyptians increased the oppression. Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill any baby boys that they delivered. But the midwives feared God not Pharaoh, and let the boys live. So for the third time we read, "the people increased and became even more numerous" (1:20). As a result of their faithfulness the names of the midwives are preserved: Shiphrah and Puah, while Pharaoh's name is omitted, to the great frustration of scholars ever since.

Finally Pharaoh issued an edict, ordering all his people, "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile" (1:22).

That is the backdrop for the first statement about Moses. When he was born, he was not thrown into the Nile. Instead, he was hidden for three months by his parents, whom we later learn are Amram and Jochebed (6:20). The Preacher gives two reasons for their act of resistance.

First, "they saw he was no ordinary child." Most English versions render this as he was *beautiful*. Surely every parent thinks their new born is beautiful, especially in Lake Wobegon where "all the children are above average." But the word implies more than beauty. Moses was marked out from birth as being different, exceptional. He was "to the manor born."

Secondly, "they were not afraid of the king's edict." Pharaoh had all the power, but they dared to defy him. Why? Because of their loyalty to a higher power, to the Lord their God. Their allegiance was to God not to Pharaoh.

After three months mother Jochebed did put her infant son into the Nile River. But first,

she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. (Exod 2:3)

The Hebrew word, here translated as basket, is *tebah*, elsewhere used only for Noah's ark. Moses's basket is a miniature ark. Though vastly different in size they both have a similar structure: reeds sealed with pitch. Both have a similar purpose: the preservation of life amidst waters of destruction.

Mother Jochebed launched the miniature ark onto the waters. "His sister [Miriam] stood at a distance to see what would happen to him" (2:4).

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. (Exod 2:5-6a)

This scene is imprinted on my memory because it was on the cover of my first children's Bible: *The Bible in Pictures for Little Eyes* by Kenneth Taylor (Moody Press, 1956), who would go on to write the *Living Bible*. I saw this picture with my little eyes so many times that it is firmly planted in my mind's eye to this very day.

Pharaoh's daughter saw the baby crying and she had compassion. She said, "This is one of the Hebrew babies." Miriam volunteered to fetch a Hebrew woman to nurse. She fetched her mother, to whom Pharaoh's daughter entrusted the baby: "nurse him for me, and I will pay you." When he was weaned mother Jochebed took him back to Pharaoh's daughter. He became her son, and she it was who named him Moses.

Pharaoh tried multiple times to suppress the growing population of Hebrews. But his plans were thwarted by an unlikely group of women who defied his orders: the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah; Jochebed and her daughter Miriam; Pharaoh's own daughter. Pharaoh thought that he had all the power. He was considered divine. But the real power lay with these faithful women, and God working behind the scenes. And so little Moses not only was spared, but came to live in Pharaoh's own household, right under his nose!

In faithfulness to God, Moses's parents saw that he was no ordinary child, and they refused to fear mighty Pharaoh and his tyrannical orders.

Moses grew up in the Egyptian royal household. Here he received an education befitting a royal prince. As Stephen would later say, "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action" (Acts 7:22). Moses grew up with a hyphenated identity. He was a Hebrew-Egyptian, which sounds like an oxymoron. But the day came when his hyphenated identity was challenged:

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. (Exod 2:11)

Stephen in his speech tells us that Moses was forty years old when it entered his mind to visit his own people (Acts 7:23). How much did he know about the oppression of his own people? Did he grow up knowing that he was different? Moses was now faced with a choice. Who was he? Who were his people? What was his identity? And to whom was his allegiance?

2. Moses an Adult (11:24-26)

So we come to the second "In faithfulness" statement about Moses:

[24] By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. [25] He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. [26] He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was

looking ahead to his reward. (11:24-26)

For forty years Moses had been known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. But now he refused to be known as such any longer. He renounced this identity and all the privileges that came with it. He made several important decisions in his mind: he *renounced*, he *chose*, he *regarded*, and he *was looking ahead* in his mind's eye. In each case he made an evaluation between two options.

Hyphenated Moses would be hyphenated no longer. He renounced his assumed Egyptian identity. He threw in his lot with the people of God, with the Hebrews, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Renunciation was costly. He no longer belonged in the palace, where he had enjoyed a life of privilege. It would be a hasty departure for the next day he fled, when Pharaoh heard and tried to kill him. He fled far from Egypt to the land of Midian.

Second, Moses made a *choice* between two alternatives. In the palace he enjoyed privilege, position, and luxury. But he came to recognize these as the pleasures of sin, and he recognized that they were but fleeting: here today, gone tomorrow. Instead, by identifying with the Hebrew slaves, he chose the path of suffering and mistreatment. He chose solidarity with his Hebrew kinsmen at great cost to self.

Third, Moses made an *evaluation*. He looked at the alternatives, evaluated them, and made a mental reckoning. He had enjoyed the treasures of Egypt, the wealth, luxury, and honor that came from being part of Pharaoh's household. But he renounced all that. He discovered something else of greater value, though this was not the case in the world's eye. It resulted in reproach or disgrace. It brought shame and scorn.

The preacher describes it as the disgrace or "reproach of Christ." What do we mean by reproach? To reproach means "to accuse of and blame for a fault so as to make feel ashamed" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*). We can think of it as "blame and shame."

Reproaches began the very next day, when Moses tried to intervene with two Hebrews who were fighting one another. One said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exod 2:14). Throughout the wilderness journey Moses would suffer the reproaches of his own people again and again. They grumbled against him. They lost faith in him.

Many English versions understand this as reproach *for the sake of*, or *on behalf of*, Christ. I favor reading is as the reproach that Christ himself would later suffer from his own people, especially as he approached the cross. He would be mocked and abused, blamed and shamed by an ungrateful people.

In faithfulness to God rather than to Pharaoh and his daughter, Moses took a major step downwards, and suffered the consequences. He suffered the reproach that Jesus would later suffer on the cross. He weighed the reproach against the vast treasures of Egypt and found the reproach to be of much greater weight and value. Moses considered his new status of much greater worth than his former status.

His fourth mental assessment is introduced with *because*. It provides the basis for his evaluation and choice. Moses's gaze was no longer on the palace, his honored status, and the luxurious life he enjoyed. Instead he turned around and was looking ahead. The verb implies that he was looking away from what he had been looking at. The preposition *to* identifies the new object of his gaze. He looked away from his former life, away from his identity and allegiances. He looked ahead to the reward. He identified himself with God and his people. The verb *was looking ahead* is imperfect tense in Greek, implying ongoing action. It was a settled gaze. This reward lay in the realm of the "things as yet unseen." Unseen because future, and unseen because in the supernatural realm of God. But by faith, in his mind's eye, he could see.

So, in summary and working backwards: Moses *reoriented* his gaze. This enabled him to make a different *evaluation*, leading to a different *choice*, and a *renunciation* of his current privilege.

3. Moses Left Egypt (11:27)

The third action flowing from his faithfulness to God was this:

By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. (11:27)

Moses actually left Egypt twice. The first time he fled in fear. Pharaoh sought to kill him, and the two Israelite slaves had rejected him. He spent 40 years in the back of beyond as a humble shepherd. Then God appeared to him at the Burning Bush, and told him to return to Egypt "to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exod 3:10). He returned to Egypt, now as God's prophet. His mission was to confront Pharaoh on behalf of the Lord: "Let my people go!"

There would be a second departure. This departure was different. It was a decisive departure, not provoked by fear. It was a complete departure. The verb *he left* is intensive, implying a complete departure, never to return. He "left Egypt behind" (CSB); "he turned his heel on Egypt" (*The Message*).

He endured Pharaoh's rage. The preacher does not use the usual word for endurance. The word here is used only this once in the NT. But the verb and its cognate noun is used repeatedly in the intertestamental Apocrypha to describe the endurance of the Maccabean martyrs, who were killed for their loyalty to God.

Moses endured Pharaoh's rage because his eye was elsewhere: "he saw him who is invisible." How can you see the invisible? But this is what faith or faithfulness does, as described in the first verse of this chapter: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (11:1).

Moses confronted Pharaoh, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me." Finally Pharaoh allowed them to go. On the eve of their departure God gave them a sign and a memorial to remember their departure.

4. Moses kept Passover (11:28)

By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. (11:28)

Moses followed the Lord's instructions for the Passover. Each household slaughtered a lamb, and applied the blood to the doorposts and lintel of their dwelling. Inside, each family ate roast lamb. They did so in a state of readiness: sandals on their feet, belt tightened, staff in hand, ready for a hasty departure. That night the Destroyer passed through the land to kill all the firstborn sons. But,

seeing the blood applied to the doorway, he did not touch the firstborn of the Hebrews. On that night all the firstborn of the Hebrews were spared; all the firstborn of the Egyptians were slain, notably Pharaoh's firstborn.

The verb *he kept* is perfect tense in Greek, implying past action with ongoing effect in the present. This was not a one-time meal. God gave Passover as an annual feast. It was a commemoration of God's action. It was a reminder of God's faithfulness. It reaffirmed their identity as the people of God whom he had liberated. It celebrated God's faithfulness. Jews continue to observe Passover today.

What does all this have to do with us?

The Book of Hebrews is a letter, but it is also a written sermon. The author, whom I have been referring to as the Preacher, is encouraging his readers to remain faithful to God. They have given their allegiance to God in Christ through his Spirit. Their identity is now in Christ, our great high priest. The Preacher exhorts them to persevere in the Christian life until they reach journey's end and cross the finishing line. He warns them of two dangers: slowly drifting away from their allegiance or abruptly renouncing their allegiance. In either case their faithfulness falters and fails.

The Preacher knows that his readers have suffered: "sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated" (10:32 ESV). They have suffered and they have identified with others who are suffering. He exhorts his readers to "bear the reproach he [Jesus] endured" (13:13). Moses was reproached. Jesus was reproached. So they are in good company when they are reproached.

Turning to ourselves, what is our identity and to whom is our allegiance? A popular version of the gospel is that Jesus died for my sins, so that when I say the prayer I get my ticket to heaven. But there is no real change in identity or allegiance. No, the gospel is much more demanding than that, and also much more liberating. It calls for a renunciation, a choice, an evaluation, and a complete change of vision. We reorient our vision onto things as yet unseen: Christ in glory now, and, in the future, his people entering into that glory to be together with Christ. This liberates us to re-evaluate our current situation, and to make different choices, leading to a renunciation. We renounce our old identity and take on a new identity in Christ, to whom we give our allegiance. And we start the lifelong journey of learning what it means to live in this new identity. We follow Jesus in death and resurrection, as symbolized in baptism. We die to our old self, and rise to newness of life.

Our citizenship is now in heaven, while our residence remains on earth. This does not mean that we don't care about our residence. The point of a colony is to extend the influence of the homeland into new territory. The church is a colony of heaven on earth, to extend the influence of heaven onto earth. We live as heavenly people resident on earth to spread the fragrance of heaven and the aroma of Christ throughout the earth.

We still have hyphenated identities. We are citizens of heaven but residents of earth. We are residents in particular countries, and citizens of particular countries. But our primary identity is that we are *in Christ*. We belong to a people that stretches across the globe and throughout time.

We can get our hyphenated identities confused. Religious nationalism confuses the nature of hyphenated identities. It elevates the national part and equates it with the religious part. To be American, for example, means to be Christian, but only the right sort of people belong. To be Palestinian means to be Muslim. But many Palestinians are Christians. Thirty years ago there were 2 million Christians in Syria, 1.5 million in Iraq. Most Christians in the West were unaware of them. The body of Christ is a gloriously diverse body, not tied to nationality or ethnicity.

How do we remain faithful in our identity and in our allegiance? The Preacher exhorts his readers in two ways. Keep looking to Jesus: Christ before us. He is the supreme model of faithfulness. And keep meeting together to encourage one another to remain faithful in this journey. We are brothers and sisters together as God's family in Christ through his Spirit. Let us faithfully walk together.

RAHAB WAS LOYAL

Hebrews 11:29-31

#39, 2026.07.12

Yesterday many of us gathered here to celebrate the life of Chris Donatelli. This auditorium was packed full, and the parking lot overflowed. Chris lived a rich and full life. It was a life well-worthy of celebration. The service was also a memorial service: we remembered him. He left many memories, both of himself and of his actions. We remembered him and we remembered the many things he had done. We remembered his selfless service, notably to Martha's Kitchen, to the schools in Liberia, to CityTeam and Grace Village, and to PBCC. But also there were many other acts of service that he did, quietly and without drawing attention to himself. He was very generous in his time and talents. He lived an active retirement to the benefit of many, when he continued to be generous with his time, his talents, and his treasure.

We have been working our way through Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith. This is a celebration of the lives of those who lived lives of faithfulness. On my first Sunday in this chapter, back in November, I asked the choir to sing the anthem, *Let us now praise famous men, and the fathers that begat us*, set to a lovely tune by Vaughan Williams. In the Anglican tradition this is often sung on All Saints' Day and Remembrance Sunday, days devoted to remembrance. It is also sung at memorial services.

The text is drawn directly from the Apocrypha, the collection of "hidden" books between the OT and NT; books that are in the Catholic canon but not in the Protestant one. Being such an old text, it is not gender-neutral. It praises men and fathers. What about the women? Where are they?

Those praised in Hebrews 11 are overwhelmingly male. So far we have had Abel, Enoch, and Noah; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; and last week Moses. There is a brief appearance by a woman:

> **And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. (Heb 11:11 NIV)**

But the focus quickly returns to Abraham:

> **And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. (11:12)**

Sarah is included to show how Abraham came to have descendants.

Today we come to the final group of those who lived in faithfulness; the last three of the 18 instances of *By faith*. The four *by faith* statements about Moses (23-28) ended with the Passover and the sparing of the firstborn of the Hebrews in Egypt. We pick up the account:

1. Through the Sea (11:29)

> **By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. (Heb 11:29)**

In faithfulness they passed through the Red Sea, where context makes it clear that "they" is the people of God, the Hebrews, led by Moses. On Passover night the Lord struck down all the firstborn of the Egyptians, including Pharaoh's own firstborn. Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and ordered them to leave: they, the people, and their flocks and herds. But when he was told that the people had actually left, his mind changed:

> **"What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" (Exod 14:5)**

He set off in pursuit with his army. Now Israel was encamped by the sea. They saw Pharaoh's army bearing down on them, and were terrified. They took out their distress on Moses:

> **"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? 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!" (14:11-12)**

This is just one of the many times they reproached Moses. They blamed and shamed him. Had we been in their situation would we have been reproaching Moses as well? Would we have been terrified and convinced we were going to die? Again and again that's what the Israelites said: "We're going to die!"

Moses was not afraid of Pharaoh, and he was not afraid of his own people. He said to them:

> **"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." (14:13-14)**

It is hard to be still when the enemy is quickly bearing down on you and you see no way of escape!

The Lord commanded Moses to take his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea to divide it. The Lord stationed his pillar of cloud between them and the Egyptians, illuminating the path for the Israelites for it was night. *The waters parted and the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land*.

The Egyptian army pursued them into the sea, but the Lord threw them into a panic. Again at the Lord's command, Moses stretched out his hand and staff over the sea. The waters came together again and covered the Egyptians. So *when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned*. They were swallowed up.

Safely on dry ground on the other side, Moses and the people sang praise to the Lord:

> **"I will sing to the Lord,**
> **for he is highly exalted.**
> **Both horse and driver**
> **he has hurled into the sea.**
> **The Lord is my strength and my defense;**
> **he has become my salvation.**

He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him." (Exod 15:1-2)

In faithfulness the people passed through the sea. They came out of a life of harsh slavery into freedom. This passage through the Sea is the great act of deliverance in the Old Testament. Were the Israelites saved? Yes, God saved his people and destroyed their enemy. God saved his people by bringing them out of Egypt and through the Sea. On the distant horizon lay the Land flowing with milk and honey. In between lay the wilderness, the place of testing. Would God's people pass the test? Would they live in accordance with their status as the people whom God had saved, whom he had redeemed and delivered?

2. Jericho (11:30)

The second *In faithfulness* statement concerns Jericho:

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. (Heb 11:30)

We fast-forward forty years, skipping over the entire period in the wilderness. Here is another familiar Bible story, memorialized in song: "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho And the walls came a-tumbling down." The subject of both halves is actually the walls:

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. (ESV)

There is no mention of Joshua or of the people or of the army or of a battle. There was no conventional battle. The actions of the Israelites were very unconventional. God gave Joshua his battle plan:

"March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse." (Josh 6:3-5)

And so it happened. The gates of Jericho were securely barred (6:1). The city was shut up tightly against the Israelites, secure behind its massive walls and barred gate. Archaeologists have revealed the massive fortifications and thick walls of ancient Jericho.

For seven days the people of Jericho looked from their massive walls on the solemn procession of the Israelites. A vanguard of fighting men led the way, followed by the seven priests blowing their shofars continually, then the ark of the covenant which represented God's presence, and finally a rearguard. Seven days, seven times on the seventh day, seven priests blowing their seven shofars. After all these sevens were fulfilled, a long blast by the priests on their shofars signaled all the people to shout a loud shout. They shouted and the walls fell down.

The walls of Jericho fell, after being encircled for seven days. There was no fighting. God was obviously the unseen actor. He was the one who caused the walls to collapse.

What was the significance of Jericho? Why did it need to fall? It was the mighty city that blocked the entrance into the Promised Land. It must fall to make way for God's people to enter into their inheritance. So the mighty walls fell in response to the people's faithfulness to God's command: *the walls fell after being encircled for seven days*.

But the people who marched around Jericho were not the same people who had passed through the Red Sea. That generation, the wilderness generation, had fallen in the wilderness. They had started out faithful, but they did not remain faithful. They refused to heed God's word. They doubted that word. They were driven by *sight* not by *hearing*. They trusted their *eyes* not their *ears*. They saw much to make them afraid, and blocked their ears against the Lord's many spoken promises. They had no faith and as a result they were faithless; they were disobedient. They refused to obey what their ears had refused to take in. *Disobedience* flowed from *unbelief*. And so they failed to complete the journey to the Promised Land. They fell in the wilderness. Their fate is a warning to future generations. Three times in Hebrews the preacher quotes the Lord's warning from Psalm 95:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion. (3:7-8, 15; 4:7, quoting Ps 95:7).

The only two who did enter the land were Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies. The twelve spies whom Moses sent into the land reported back that it was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, but they had seen giants in the land. Ten were afraid of what they had *seen* and said the Israelites should not enter. Joshua and Caleb had *seen* the same things, but they were confident in what they had *heard*: God's word that he would be with them. They were the two faithful spies.

So we would now expect a verse about the faithfulness of Joshua who led the people into the land and led them in the conquest of that land. He is the major figure of the book named after him. But no, that's not who the final verse is about.

3. Rahab (11:31)

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. (11:31)

The final paragon of faithfulness is Rahab. She is a Canaanite, a woman, a prostitute. She is the last entry on the list, the last of the 18. She is the climax of the list. She is the focus of the list. Why? What is so praiseworthy about her?

Rahab *welcomed the spies*. The Israelites were camped on the east side of the Jordan River. Joshua sent two men across the river, "Go, look over the land, especially Jericho" (Josh 2:1). They came to Jericho and entered the house of Rahab who lived within the wall. Her dwelling was in the space between the inner and outer sections of a casemate double wall. This was reported to the king of Jericho, who sent messengers to demand that she bring the men out. But she had hidden the two spies under straw on her roof. And she sent the king's messengers off on a wild goose chase.

This has led to much debate about whether Rahab sinned by lying. Type "Did Rahab sin by lying?" into a search engine or ask ChatGPT and you will see how much discussion there is. But this completely misses the point. The key thing is that Rahab had transferred her allegiance. In welcoming the spies and sending the king's messengers away, Rahab had switched her allegiance from Jericho to Israel, from the king of Jericho to the God of Israel. She was no longer loyal to the king. She was now loyal to God. And so she was not afraid of the king and his demand. Just as Moses's parents hid Moses because they "were not afraid of the king's edict" (11:23). Just

as Moses himself was "not fearing the king's anger" (11:27), both referring to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Why did Rahab change allegiance? Why did she switch her loyalty? She said to the two spies on her roof:

> **"I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." (Josh 2:8-11)**

We have heard. All of Jericho, indeed the whole land, had heard about the passage of the Israelites through the wilderness. They had heard how the Lord created a passage through the Red Sea at the beginning for the first generation. They had heard how the Israelites had defeated Sihon king of the Ammonites and Og the king of Bashan at the end of the journey, now with the second generation. The Israelites had *completely destroyed* them. They had devoted them to *herem*. This Hebrew word is difficult to translate. NIV offers an explanatory footnote: "The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, often by totally destroying them."

All the people of Canaan were terrified by what they had *heard*. Now they could look out from Jericho to the east, and *see* the Israelites encamped just across the Jordan River. Rahab included herself in this response: it is *we* throughout.

But she starts and ends her statement with her own individual response: "I know that the Lord has given you this land…for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." She uses the name Yhwh, the personal name of God. The name by which Israel knew God, and now the name by which she knows God. Unlike the others in Jericho, Rahab has responded in faith to what she and everyone else had heard. She alone has the right perception of the situation. She alone has eyes to see the unseen, which is what faith is all about (Heb 11:1). She alone has eyes to see the hand of Yhwh the God of Israel behind the events at the Red Sea and among the Amorite kings. She sees that Yhwh is the one true God in heaven above and on earth below.

Based on this new knowledge of the Lord, she makes a request of the spies:

> **"Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death." (Josh 2:12-13)**

She invokes the name of Yhwh and asks the spies to swear on his name. I have shown kindness to you, so you show kindness to me. *Show kindness* is the expression *do hesed*. Here is another Hebrew word that is difficult to translate well, yet *hesed* is one of the most important words in the OT. It refers to loyal faithfulness within a relationship, especially a covenant relationship. It is used especially of Yhwh God of Israel in covenant relationship with his people.

Our call to worship was from Psalm 136, which we recited antiphonally. Every verse has the same refrain: His love endures forever. *Love* there is this Hebrew word *hesed*. The Lord's faithful covenant loyalty endures forever. Faithfulness begins with God. He is faithful. He is loyal. He enters into covenant with his people, and is then loyal to his covenant purposes. We then respond in faithfulness to him.

Rahab had bound herself in faithful loyalty to the two spies, to their God, and to his people. She asks them to reciprocate by being faithfully loyal to her by sparing her family from death. The spies respond:

> **"Our lives for your lives! …If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land." (2:14)**

They agree to reciprocate: we will do *hesed* with you. In fact they intensify the commitment: we will treat you *kindly and faithfully*. We will do *hesed ve-emet* with you, loyalty and faithfulness. These are the same words that the Lord uses in revealing himself to Moses on Mt Sinai after the episode of the golden calf: he is abounding in *love and faithfulness* (Exod 34:6).

After the walls of Jericho fell, Joshua sent the two men into the ruins to extract Rahab and all her family. They settled them outside the camp of Israel (6:23). Joshua saved them all alive. At the time Joshua was first written, the author could say, "and she still lives among the Israelites to this day" (6:25).

By faith the prostitute Rahab…was not killed with those who were disobedient. But the other residents of Jericho did perish. The city and the people were handed over to the Lord by total destruction. The people of Jericho had heard the same reports about the passage through the Red Sea and the victory over the Transjordanian kings. But they did not take those reports to heart. They were terrified, but they were not persuaded by the reports. And so they were disobedient.

At the heart of the Greek word for *disobedience* lies the word for *persuasion*. To be disobedient is to be unpersuaded by what one has heard. A parent may tell a child, "Don't hit your sister!" If he goes ahead and hits her anyway, it is disobedience. More than that, he has been unpersuaded by his parent's words. He has heard but he hasn't been persuaded . He has heard but he has not heeded. He has heard but he has not really heard. Conversely, at the heart of the Greek word for *obedience* lies the word for *hearing*. Right hearing leads to persuasion which leads to action. Refusal to hear leads to unpersuasion which leads to a lack of appropriate action. Rahab heard, she was persuaded, and she acted.

Incorporated into Israel, Rahab became part of the genealogy of King David and ultimately part of the genealogy of Jesus. She is included in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus along with some other women: Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, and ultimately Mary.

Hebrews 11 has an important place in the structure of the book. All these who lived by faith or in faithfulness are the counterpart to the wilderness generation in chapter 3. That generation perished in the wilderness because of their *unbelief* and *disobedience*. They failed to hear and heed the Lord's voice. Instead, they were usually driven by what they *saw*. Finally they demanded to go back to Egypt, which they redefined as the land flowing with milk and honey. And so they fell in the wilderness.

So three times in Hebrews comes that warning from Psalm 95: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Don't be like them! Hardened hearts are the result of ears that do not hear. From hardened hearts comes disobedience. In the middle is persuasion, to be persuaded or not about what one hears.

All those in chapter 11 who lived in faithfulness are the antithesis, the counterpart to the wilderness generation. But the climax of the list, and hence the supreme antithesis of the wilderness generation is Rahab, a Canaanite, a woman, a prostitute. She is presented here as the model par excellence. So we can say, "Let us now praise famous women, and the mothers that begat us." She had the privilege of being in the line that birthed king David, and then Jesus the Messiah.

But her brief mention ties into the book in other ways. Rahab sought to flee Jericho with her family, knowing that it was going to be destroyed. She recognized that it was not a lasting city. It was not an enduring city, no matter how massive its walls and strong its gate.

Abraham lived in tents "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:10). He was on a pilgrimage, having left his homeland.

We too are on a journey, a pilgrimage. We "have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22). We have come to God himself. As John Bunyan's allegorizes it in his *Pilgrim's Progress*, we have left the world city to journey to the celestial city. We have left Vanity Fair for God's presence.

In the closing exhortation in Hebrews, "Let us, then, go to him [Jesus] outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (13:13-14).

Rahab recognized that Jericho was not an enduring city. She left and was given refuge "outside the camp." She, and the other faithful ones of chapter 11, and all those who have followed Jesus are looking forward to the city that is to come, looking forward to our great reward. We look forward to the city where God and his people dwell together.

We here live between two cities. We are located in Silicon Valley where many of us earn our income, our treasure. Our workplaces demand a certain amount of loyalty, of allegiance, which we owe them. But our greatest loyalty and allegiance is elsewhere. We are citizens of heaven while resident on earth. Our ultimate loyalty is to God and to his people. The preacher in Hebrews urges his people to not forsake meeting together. We meet together regularly to remind ourselves who and whose we are. We refresh our vision of Jesus, Christ before us. We hear the Scriptures read and are again persuaded of the truths we hear. So persuaded, we live lives of faithful obedience. We love God and we love neighbor, near and far. We learn to rightly balance our loyalties to the two cities: the city of our residence and the city of our citizenship.

Yesterday we celebrated the life of Chris Donatelli. He was a great example of faithful obedience in action. While earning his treasure in this city, he was generous with his time and talents. And in retirement he was even more generous with his time, his talents, and his treasure. There were so many stories yesterday about the people he had helped, quietly and without drawing attention to himself. He loved the Lord and his people, and he showed his love in action. Now he is in the presence of the Lord he loved and served here on earth. Let us live our life likewise.

THE WHITE-ROBED ARMY OF MARTYRS

Hebrews 11:32-38

#40, 2026.07.19

Most of us love a good story. When I was a boy in the equivalent of Middle School, I read many books about explorers and adventurers. My boarding school in England was divided into four houses, each with three sections. All twelve sections were named after famous British explorers. I was in Shackleton, named for Ernest Shackleton, the famous polar explorer. These were heroic figures. The men and their exploits were legendary; they were renowned. I was also reading about the legendary heroes of Greek mythology—legendary in a different sense. The stories about these heroes were fodder for my boy's mind.

We have been working our way through Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faith. Here we have stories of the Heroes of Faith. What is faith? We are told at the beginning of the chapter:

> **Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for… And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb 11:1-2, 6 NIV)**

So faith has two axes. On the spatial axis, we cannot see God, but with the eye of faith we know that he exists in realms beyond our physical perception. He is there now in the heavenlies. He is "up there" as it were, in the supernatural world. He is also here with us now and he sees us. On the temporal axis, we believe that there is a future outcome to our present seeking of him. Earnestly seeking him here and now will bring a future reward. So we look ahead. Faith is not simply believing these two axes, but living appropriately with what we believe. Living such a life is faithfulness.

The first part of this chapter (11:3-31) has featured eighteen statements beginning "By faith". Or, as I have preferred, "In faithfulness." These have covered from Abel in Genesis 4 to Rahab in Judges 6. The account of the faithful heroes continues beyond Rahab, though with a different pattern. But faithfulness remains the dominant theme.

Today we come to 11:32-38. This long section (162 words in NIV) comprises just two sentences in Greek. It has a careful structure which can be a little difficult to discern in English translation, which uses many sentences. Most English versions do keep the passage together as a single paragraph. The first sentence is this:

> [32] **And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets,** [33] **who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,** [34] **quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. (Heb 11:32-34)**

What more shall I say? With this rhetorical question, the preacher further enhances the status of Rahab as the surprising climax of those eighteen *By faith* statements. With her, he has completed his coverage of the founding figures of Israel, finishing with a Canaanite, female prostitute who has modeled faith for Israel. The preacher is concerned that now he has run out of time to describe in detail the heroic acts of those who followed Rahab—but he had to cover Rahab! He couldn't stop without her!

He now lists six names, familiar names, but without any actions. They are in three pairs, each in reverse order. Gideon and Barak were successful judges who delivered the Israelites from foreign oppressors. After each, the land had peaceful tranquility for forty years. Samson and Jephthah were also judges, but they were more problematic. They, too, delivered the Israelites from foreign oppressors, but they did not usher in an era of tranquil peace, and they had awkward relations with the rest of Israel. Samuel was the kingmaker and David was the first great king, after the false start of Saul.

Samuel himself told the Israelites:

> **"Then the LORD sent Jerub-Baal [Gideon], Barak, Jephthah and Samuel, and he delivered you from the hands of your enemies all around you, so that you lived in safety." (1 Sam 12:11)**

He then immediately rebuked them for wanting a king like all the other nations, head and shoulders taller than everyone else. The people had a wrong understanding of what a hero was like in God's eyes. Saul proved to be faithless and unfaithful. Then God graciously provided David, the runt of Jesse's litter, to be king.

We can read the stories of these six in Judges and Samuel. But the preacher does not want to give any detail. He is eager to move towards the climax of his presentation.

Having listed six actors without actions, the preacher now does the reverse. He gives a list of actions without listing the actors (33-34). It begins with *through faith*, which will be repeated in v. 39. Through faith they accomplished great deeds. In their trust in and allegiance to God, they did heroic acts of faithfulness.

There are nine actions, listed in three triplets. In some cases we can attach these actions to actors, though the preacher has no interest in doing so. The first triplet lists political success: they "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised."

Joshua and David *conquered kingdoms*. Solomon established dominion over other kingdoms.

Good kings *administered justice*. "David reigned over all Israel, *doing what was just and right* for all his people" (2 Sam 8:15). The Lord made Solomon king "t*o maintain justice and righteousness*" (1 Kgs 10:9). Saul never did so. Doing justice meant establishing and maintaining a society in which all flourished, especially the weak and vulnerable.

They *received the promises*. David received the promise of a son. Solomon received the promise of wisdom and of the Lord God filling the temple with his presence.

The second triplet lists escapes from death: they "shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the

sword." Daniel was preserved in the lions den (Dan 6). His three friends were unharmed in the blazing fiery furnace (Dan 3). Elijah (1 Kgs 19:1-8) and Jeremiah (Jer 26:23-24) both escaped being put to the sword.

The third triplet lists military success: their "weakness was turned to strength," they "became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies." Samson's weakness after his haircut was turned into strength for his final heroic action against the Philistines (Judg 16).

These unnamed heroes did heroic deeds, all through faith. They were faithful to God and he was faithful to them, empowering them to these great endeavors. This list of nine actions is a catalog of triumphant success. Through faith, these faithful ones succeeded.

The preacher has not attached names to any of these nine actions. We want to do so, and to delve more deeply into each of the nine. And I have done so a little. But this can hinder the preacher's purpose. He is obviously not interested in individual identification. He is creating an effect. He adds layer upon layer of success, of triumph, of victory. This is what we like to hear: stories of success where the good guys win; where the white hats triumph over the black hats.

Through these three triplets, the preacher builds and builds towards a climactic tenth item:

Women received back their dead, raised to life again. (11:35a)

Women received back their dead from resurrection. Here, too, we can attach names to actions. Elijah raised back to life the dead son of the poor widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs 17:17-24). Elisha raised back to life the dead son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:11-37). These two sons were raised back into this life. They were restored to their previous situation. They would grow up and they would die again.

The second half of the verse is quite different, and really should begin with a "but":

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. (11:35b)

Here the story turns. The ten-fold success comes back to earth with a thud. There were many other people who died and were not raised up back into this life. There were many other mothers whose sick sons died and were not raised.

But this is about the specific cases of those who were killed for their faithfulness to God. They were *tortured*. Literally, they were stretched out on the rack and beaten like a drum. The word then came to mean torture more generally. They were given the opportunity to be released from their torture. They could recant their faith, they could renounce their faithful allegiance to the one true God. The path to freedom was set before them. But they refused to take up the offer. They resisted passively to the point of death. This is religious persecution.

The first section is about those who by faith, in faithfulness, *accomplished great things*. This second section is about those who, in faithfulness, *suffered great things*. These are the martyrs. Both are Heroes of Faith and Faithfulness.

All the people in this chapter bore testimony to God in their faithful allegiance. Their actions flowed from the conviction that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him and seek to please him. But from now on, they suffer greatly even unto death. They refuse to recant, and they suffer the consequences.

There was sporadic action against the faithful prophets in Israel and Judah that we read about in the OT. The perpetrators were their own people, those in power: the king or the priests in Jerusalem. But this verse describes a later period between the two testaments, a period of intense religious persecution.

[36] Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. [37] They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— [38] the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. (11:36-38)

Again, we have actions but no names. Again, we can attach names to some of the actions. They were mocked and flogged. Worse, they were chained and imprisoned. Jeremiah, for example, was lowered into a cistern.

They were killed in gruesome ways: by stoning, by being sawed in two, by the sword. The faithful prophet Zechariah was stoned to death in the courtyard of the temple on the orders of Joash, king of Judah (2 Chr 24:21). Per tradition, Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt, and Isaiah was sawn in two. Many were killed by the sword.

They went around clothed in sheepskins and goatskins. Such did Elijah and Elisha. They were destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. They lived as outcasts.

Here the preacher inserts a parenthetical note: *the world was not worthy of them*. Their oppressors, persecutors, and tormentors thought them not worthy of their world. They were losers. But that is the wrong verdict. In truth, the world was not worthy of them. As several translations state, "the world didn't deserve them!" Here we have a diametrically-opposed evaluation of what matters in life.

Because the world didn't deserve them, they were not at home in the world. They were of no fixed abode, of no permanent residence. They wandered in deserts and mountains, finding shelter in caves and holes in the ground.

Why did God allow his faithful saints to suffer? Why did he not save them from their ordeals? He saved others, why not them? Our call to worship was drawn from Psalm 116:

The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came over me…
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
"Lord, save me!"

…you, Lord, have delivered me from death…
that I may walk before the Lord
in the land of the living. (Ps 116:3-4, 8-9)

A few verses later we read:

Precious in the sight of the Lord
is the death of his faithful servants. (Ps 116:15)

It is so precious that he will not readily allow their death, but will save them.

Jonah prayed a similar prayer from the belly of the great 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…
But you, Lord my God,
brought my life up from the pit." (Jonah 2:2, 6b)

The Lord delivered even Jonah who had been unfaithful. It was only with his last breath that he finally cried out in distress. The Lord heard him and saved him.

But the time came when God *would* allow the death of his faithful ones. Not a quiet death at the end of a faithful life, but a violent death *while* being faithful and *for* being faithful. These faithful ones had the faith and integrity to remain faithful through their suffering, faithful unto death. They were not saved *from* death; they were saved *through* death.

In the first half of our passage, the faithful had success. The Lord's prophets even raised the dead. In those days it was the faithless and disobedient who suffered God's wrath and judgment. But the tide turned. The wicked prospered while the faithful suffered, even unto death. Indeed, it was the prospering wicked who killed the suffering faithful.

This paragraph (32-38) is like a big wave. Through the first half (33-34) it builds and builds, carrying us along. The wave reaches its peak with resurrection (35a). We are high up atop the crest of the wave. But then we go over the top (35b) and the wave crashes down upon us (36-38). Again we can attach names to actions at various points along the wave, but if we focus too much on that we lose the overall impact of the passage.

The death of the martyrs, of those who have been violently killed while and for being faithful, is a problem. It has been a problem ever since Abel. He suffered death for doing what was right. He sought God. He oriented his whole self onto God, bringing both his offering and himself. His spilt blood has been crying out from the ground for justice: "by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead" (Heb 11:4).

The key lies at the turning point, at the point where the wave starts collapsing:

There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. (11:35b)

There was a resurrection for the sons of the widow of Zarephath and the Shunammite woman. Just as there would be for Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:41-42) and the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:14-15), whom Jesus raised. These were all raised back into this life, to die again.

But the martyrs died in the confident hope that they would gain a better resurrection. They were looking ahead to the reward for being faithful.

This language of suffering is true of Jesus. The Jews of Nazareth attempted to throw him off a cliff and stone him. He wandered in desert places. He had nowhere to lay his head. At his trial he was mocked and flogged before being handed over to be crucified. He refused to be released from his tortuous death: a death that conferred maximum pain and suffering, shame and humiliation, degradation and dehumanization. He resisted the calls to come down off the cross.

Jesus is the supreme martyr in his faithful witness, through his faithful death. It is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that this all makes sense. He was the first to be raised in the better resurrection. He was raised into the new creation, given the power of an indestructible life. He has entered into his reward. He has passed through the heavens into God's presence. There he has offered his own blood for cleansing and for the sealing of a new covenant. In this new covenant sins are forgiven. And he has sat down at God's right hand.

We are called to follow him. The first Christian martyr was Stephen, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Acts 7). His witness started so well as he "performed great wonders and signs among the people." But after his speech the Jewish leaders turned against him and they stoned him to death. As they were doing so, Stephen asked God to forgive them. There would be many more such martyrs.

Hebrews is addressed to a Christian community that is suffering, a community that is living in the second half of this passage. This Hall of Heroic Faithfulness is set within a call to endurance through suffering:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (10:32-34)

Some of their friends were still suffering. The preacher exhorts them:

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. (13:3)

They have shown solidarity with those who are suffering for their faithfulness.

Martyrdom became a regular feature of the early church under the Roman Empire. The Christians honored the martyrs, whom the world looked on as losers. The *Te Deum* is a Latin hymn of the early Church. It starts:

Te Deum laudamus: You O God we praise…
The glorious company of apostles praise you.
The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.
The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.
Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you:
Father…Son, [and] Holy Spirit.

The white-robed army of martyrs. We read of them in Revelation. They have come through great tribulation and their robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14). They are an army, but they have no conventional weapons. They have no power of their own. Their only weapon is their faithfulness. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Rev 14:4): in faithful witness, through death, and into resurrection life in the new creation. The army of martyrs waged a nonviolent passive resistance, following the pattern set by Jesus. They refused to be released at the cost of their faithfulness.

The development of the printing press enabled the wider dissemination of books. Since then the most widely printed book has been the Bible. For a hundred years the second-most popular was *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1563), until displaced by *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678). It remains the third-most popular book.

As a boy I read stories of heroic explorers and adventurers. I read

about the heroes of Greek mythology. But for much of church history Christian have read accounts of the martyrs. These are the heroes of faith and faithfulness. These accounts have dropped out of favor in the Western church. The best-sellers now are about great acts, great success, successful ministry, growth, and so on. People want to be in the first half of this paragraph. Individual Christians and churches in the West may feel that they are being besieged or persecuted or discriminated against. But this is not what the martyrs endure. In many parts of the world today Christians live in the second half of this paragraph.

Around the world there are plenty of places where the church is genuinely suffering for its faithfulness. Each week in the e-news we draw attention to the persecuted church in some country. This week it is Laos, where Christians have been suffering for the past fifty years. We provide links to Open Doors and Voice of the Martyrs so you can learn more about the suffering church.

Following Christ is not necessarily costly for us, living here in the comfortable West. But in past times it has been, and in other countries today it still is. These people don't have much power. What they have is their faithfulness.

Growing up in OMF I heard and learnt a saying attributed to Hudson Taylor:

A little thing is a little thing,
but faithfulness in little things is a great thing.

This saying actually goes back to Augustine:

What is a little thing, is (just) a little thing.
But to be faithful in a little thing is a great thing.

God will not necessarily ask us to do great things. We may hanker after doing great things. Christian leaders especially hanker after doing great things. We are called to simply be faithful where we are. God has been faithful to us. Through his Spirit he empowers us to respond in faithfulness to him and to Christ. Living faithful lives where we are is itself a great thing.

By faith (in faithfulness), we believe that God exists, that he sees us, and that he will reward those who earnestly seek him.

ONE PILGRIM PEOPLE

Hebrews 11:39-40

#41, 2026.07.26

Last weekend saw the release of Christopher Nolan's latest movie, *The Odyssey*. It is already a blockbuster, playing to packed theaters, even in the middle of the night. In preparation to see the movie myself, I have been reading Emily Wilson's recent poetic translation of Homer's epic poem. This is the one which Nolan used for his movie.

Odysseus was the king of Ithaca, an island off the west coast of Greece. He had sailed with his men to fight in the Trojan War. Troy finally fell after a ten-year siege. *The Odyssey* recounts the long journey home by Odysseus. Quite a journey it was. Indeed it was an *odyssey*. So much so that this word has entered the English language. It took him ten years to get home. Throughout those ten long years he yearned for home. He longed to see his people again, for he was still the king of Ithaca. He longed to see his son Telemachus, whom he had left as an infant and was now a young man. He longed to see his still-faithful wife Penelope. He longed to be home. He longed for a homecoming.

Where is home? Many of us have come here from elsewhere, and have faced this question. Is home somewhere we are trying to get back to, like Odysseus? Is it where we are now? Are we settled? Do we feel at home here? Or does home lie elsewhere in either time or space? Do we long to move and make a home elsewhere? Or is home on the far horizon of time ahead of us? As we have worked our way through Hebrews 11, the Hall of Faithfulness, home has been a recurring theme.

Once upon a time, in the distant mists of time, the world was filled with the descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, "by their clans and languages, in their territories (lands) and nations" (Gen 10). Each of these seventy peoples was in its own homeland, rooted in and distinguished by these four parameters.

Then God called Abraham to leave home, to leave behind everything that rooted him:

> **"Go from your country [land], your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation." (Gen 12:1-2a)**

This is often considered to be *the* promise of the OT: a people and a land. Both promises were sealed by covenant under God's blessing: the land (Gen 15) and the seed (Gen 17). It would be a fresh start for humanity.

By faith Abraham left home for Canaan, but this land did not become home. His descendants went through the land and out the other side, down to Egypt. There God multiplied them into a great people. But Egypt was not home. The Hebrews became slaves in someone else's homeland.

Moses grew up as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, but he left home when he identified with the Hebrew slaves, renouncing his Egyptian identity. He later left Egypt behind when he led God's people out. They were bound for the promised land, but Moses didn't get to enter that land. Nor did the people he led out Egypt. They fell in the wilderness because they wanted to turn around and go back home, even though Egypt was not home. Instead, it was their children who entered the land, their new homeland.

Today we come to the end of chapter 11, the end of this long list of people who lived by faith, those who were faithful:

> **[39] These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, [40] since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Heb 11:39-40 NIV)**

These all encompasses all the people listed in vv. 4-38. It includes those in the eighteen sections that begin *By faith* (4-31). It includes the three from primeval history: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. It includes the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. It includes Moses and Rahab. It includes those who were victorious t*hrough faith* (32-38): the four judges, and Samuel and David. It includes those unnamed ones who by faith did heroic deeds, and those who heroically and faithfully endured suffering even unto death, the martyrs.

All of these were commended or attested through their faith, or better, through their faithfulness. They were faithful to God. This is an echo of v. 2: "Faith…is what the ancients were commended for" (1:2). *Commended* is a divine passive: it was God who attested their faithfulness, and now it is the Scriptures that attest to their faithfulness.

But none of them received the promise. None received what was promised in *the* promise. Yet the list of nine heroic actions that we looked at last week (33-34) states that they did receive the promises. Did they or did they not receive the promise? The chapter seems to be somewhat ambivalent.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did live in the land God promised. So did they look around Canaan and say, "It doesn't get any better than this"? The Israelites under Joshua did enter into the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. Did they look around the land of Israel and say, "It doesn't get any better than this"? The resounding answer of Hebrews is, "It does get better than this."

Abraham lived in tents as a nomad because "he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:10). He and the other faithful ones "were longing for a better country—a heavenly one" (11:16). So of Abraham and and his clan it is stated:

> **All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. (11:13)**

They saw from afar? How did they see? They saw with the eye of faith? And what is faith? We have been told at the beginning of this chapter:

> **Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for… And without faith it is impossible to please**

God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (11:1-2, 6).

Faith sees the unseen and is confident that the things unseen do exist. To repeat what I said last week, faith has two axes. On the spatial axis, we cannot see God, but with the eye of faith we know that he exists in realms beyond our physical perception. He is there and he is also here with us now. We may not see him but he sees us. On the temporal axis, we believe that there is a future outcome to our present seeking of God. He rewards those who earnestly seek him. What is that reward? As people of faith, we look up and we see God. We look ahead and see that there is a reward. Faith is not simply believing these two axes, but living appropriately with what we believe. Living such a life is faithfulness.

None of these faithful people in this chapter received what had been promised. Why did God delay in fulfilling his promises, in granting his reward? Verse 40 gives the reason:

since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (11:40)

This verse moves from *them* to *us*. Vv. 4-39 have been about the faithful ones who preceded Christ, all the way from Abel to the faithful martyrs. They were faithful but they did not attain the promise, they did not receive the reward.

Now v. 40 is about those who come after Christ. In the first instance it is the original audience of this book of Hebrews. It also includes us 2,000 years later. God has kept the faithful OT saints waiting for *us*, so that *together* we can attain the promise, *together* we can receive the reward. The OT saints are primarily the faithful from Israel, but include also predecessors such as Abel, Enoch, and Noah, as well as some from the nations such as Rahab. The NT saints are Jew and Gentile together who follow Jesus. And it is Christ that unites us all. It is in Christ that we are one family, one people.

Together, as one faithful people, we will be *made perfect*. *Perfect* is a problematic word because we immediately contrast it with imperfect, and think in moral terms. In grammar, the imperfect tense or aspect means an action is *not complete*, while perfect is *complete*. That is the sense here.

The actual verb used here is from the telos group of words. *Telos* is the goal or endpoint towards which something is moving. I think of it as an arrow that is pointing into the future. The telos is what lies at the end of the arrow, at the point of the arrow. It is at that point that something becomes perfect, completed. So what does lie at the end of the arrow? What is the endpoint that God has in store for us? What is his intended reward for those who earnestly seek him? What is the purpose for which God has made us? Teleology is the study of such matters of purpose. A teleology of humanity asks what we are made for.

God made various promises in the OT. Each promise had a telos, a fulfillment. God promised Abraham that his seed would become as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. That language was fulfilled in the OT. He promised a homeland, and gave various definitions of that land. But Abraham and his immediate clan did not take possession of it.

Four centuries later Moses led the people out of Egypt towards the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Under Joshua they entered the land and took possession of it. They enjoyed the produce of the seven species. It reached a climax under David and the early reign of Solomon. It looked like the telos had been achieved: the people in the land, their homeland. But before long God expelled his people from the homeland and went into exile himself. Had the promise failed? Perhaps the land flowing with milk and honey was not the ultimate reward, not the final goal. Perhaps the telos was something else.

The real blessing of the land was not that it flowed with milk and honey. It was not the bountiful yield of the seven species: wheat and barley; olives, figs, date palms, pomegranates and grapes. The real blessing of the land was that God was there. He put his presence there in the midst of his people. The telos is not about God's gifts but God himself.

God came to dwell among his people. God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt. He brought them to Mt Sinai to meet with himself. There he took them to be his people, his special possession, his treasure. There he entered into covenant with them: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." There he gave Moses instructions for building the tabernacle, the dwelling place in which he would dwell among his people. He allowed the tabernacle to be built even after the people had worshiped the golden calf. When Moses set up the tabernacle, the language is the same as God creating the cosmos in Genesis 1. It was a new cosmos in miniature. When it was complete, "the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod 40:34). God came down to dwell in the midst of his people. That is how the book of Exodus closes.

The next book, Leviticus, starts with God inviting his people to draw near to him. The tabernacle was not only God's dwelling place; it was also called the tent of meeting, where God met with his people. The tabernacle transferred God's presence to the Promised Land, to Jerusalem. There Solomon built a more permanent dwelling place for the Lord. The priests brought into the temple the ark of the covenant, the ark that represented God's presence. And "the glory of the Lord filled his temple" (1 Kgs 8:11). In Solomon's wonderful prayer of dedication he petitioned the Lord to hear the prayers of his people directed to him through this temple, no matter where they were and in what predicament they found themselves. The temple was the conduit to God's heart, ears, and eyes which were open towards his people at this place. His presence was at the center, in the midst of his people.

But, alas, the people ceased to listen to God and his word through his faithful prophets. Like the wilderness generation before them, they did not listen, they were not persuaded, and they became disobedient. God removed his presence from the temple and went into self-exile (Ezek 10). He allowed his temple to be destroyed by the Babylonians, for now it was just an empty shell. And he sent his people into exile. He expelled them from the land, just as he had expelled Adam and Eve from the garden.

We read no more of God's presence in the OT. But there were still some who were faithful to the Lord. It was in those dark days, as the Babylonians advanced towards Jerusalem, that the prophet Habakkuk wrote, "the righteous person will live by his faithfulness" (Hab 2:4). That verse is quoted at the end of Hebrews 10 (10:38), immediately before this Hall of Faithfulness. Yet we have seen that among the faithful of this chapter are the martyrs. They lived in

faithfulness but for that faithfulness they died. They suffered unto death, refusing to recant, refusing to renounce their faith. They died in anticipation of a better resurrection (11:35b). They died in anticipation of something beyond.

In the fullness of time,

> **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)**

He tabernacled among us. God returned to dwell among his people. John writes that in Jesus we have seen his glory: God's glory on earth not in the temple in Jerusalem but in Jesus. John, James, and Peter saw that glory when Jesus was transfigured before their eyes. The Word came "full of grace and truth." He was the manifestation of God's covenant loyal love and his faithfulness.

The Word, "by whom God created all things" is God's Son "through whom also he made the universe" and "whom he appointed heir of all things" (Heb 1:2). He is the beginning and the end. He came to share our humanity. He took on flesh and blood to be like us. As we recited in the creed, he "became truly human." He suffered like us, unto death. He suffered while being faithful and for being faithful. He is the supreme martyr. God has raised him into the new creation. He is the firstborn of the better resurrection. God has raised him into his presence. Jesus has entered into his reward. The risen and ascended Son has drawn near to God, has entered his presence, not just as the Son returning to the Father, but as a human being drawing near to God. And we are invited to draw near through him our great high priest. This invitation is given twice in Hebrews (4:14-16; 10:19-22).

In faith we believe that God exists. But why do we exist? God existed before the beginning of time or space in a communion of perfect love: Father, Son, and Spirit. As an act of self-giving generosity he created a cosmos to experience his loving care. He created humanity to be in loving relationship to him as rulers and priests of creation. More than that, he desires that we be in relationship to him as beloved sons and daughters. Jesus is bringing many sons and daughters to glory (2:10). The Son became like us so that we might become like him. Our status as God's beloved is possible only because of our union with Christ. We die to our old self, and rise into newness of life, as symbolized in baptism. *In Christ* we have a new identity and a new allegiance. We belong to a new family. In Christ we draw near to God.

The telos of our odyssey is God himself. God drew near to Israel and he bid them draw near to him. God has drawn near to us in Jesus, and now bids us draw near to him in Christ. Our destination is God. Our home is in God's presence. As Augustine so famously wrote in the opening sentence of his *Confessions*, which is addressed to God, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." God himself is the reward that awaits those who earnestly seek him. So how shall we live our lives now?

First, we earnestly seek God. This is a lifetime activity. We don't stop seeking when we find Christ. Indeed, finding Christ should impel us to a life on ongoing seeking. We cultivate an appetite for God. C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*, "our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak… We are far too easily pleased." We are best satisfied when we are most satisfied in God. True contentment comes not from the things we have, but from who we are and whose we are. When it is God we are seeking we become secure and satisfied in our identity. Contentment has little to do with possessions. It often seems to be the reverse: the more possessions the less contentment. Our true possession is God. Spiritual formation is about finding our true home in God, so that we are satisfied in him alone. He is the reward for those who seek him.

But there are many things that distract us. Many things that compete for our identity, loyalty, allegiance. Because we are far too easily pleased we can drift away to other things. Such drift is imperceptible at first, until it is too late. We discover that the mooring or attachment to Christ has been lost completely. This was a danger for the readers of this letter, the hearers of this word of encouragement (2:1-4). They were neglecting or ignoring so great a salvation. They were inattentive and began drifting. The preacher also warns of the danger of abruptly renouncing our allegiance to God (6:4-8). Altogether there are five warning passages in Hebrews. Five warnings of the danger of losing our attachment to God in Christ.

So, first, we pay attention to earnestly seeking God. God rewards those who earnestly seek him. But, secondly, what reward are you wanting? Is it the reward of sitting by yourself on a cloud in heaven, playing a harp. Many Christians don't have an attractive vision of what heaven will be like. There is a harp and a lyre in the last panel of our window, but they are in a community of people gathered together in God's presence.

In Psalm 63, which we recited as our call to worship, David bared his soul:

> **You, God, are my God,**
> **earnestly I seek you;**
> **I thirst for you,**
> **my whole being longs for you. (Ps 63:1)**

David was pleased and satisfied in God. He was hungry for God. He had an appetite for God. He found God. When we, like David, are pleased and satisfied in God, we can live lives of abandon, we can live in freedom. We are not still trying to find our significance in the world. We have already found it in God. We are his beloved.

We are residents on earth but citizens in heaven. We live betwixt the two worlds. We are at home everywhere and nowhere. But, fundamentally, we are at home in Christ among his people, wherever we are. These are our brothers and sisters, gathered from all around the world.

At the center is Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (12:2), as we will see next week. He is the one in whom past and future meet, in whom heaven and earth meet. So we fix our eyes on Jesus: on Christ before us.

We cultivate our attachment to God, our affections for God. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a profound thinker and theologian. One of his best-known books is *Religious Affections*. It was recently republished under the title *Faith Beyond Feelings*. I think this new title got Edwards' thought completely backwards. For him it started with faith. In faith, by faith, he sought God, and he found him. His pursuit of God was not simply an academic exercise, a theological inquiry. The pursuit and study of God developed his deep affections for God. In faith he earnestly sought God, and he found God. This developed deep affections for God in the core of his being.

Now I understand why the current publisher changed the title. There are many today who pursue the feelings without pursuing God. What they want is the emotions but not necessarily God himself. They want the feelings and not necessarily the deep faith.

How do we cultivate our religious affections? How do we continue pursuing God? How do we keep pursuing this call to earnestly seek God? How do we keep reminding ourselves of the right reward for pursuing God? The author of Hebrews, the preacher of this word of encouragement, gives two main exhortations. Look to Jesus, Christ before us. And don't neglect meeting together.

We meet together to do a number of things. We gather in worship to turn our attention to God. Each week we start the worship service with a psalm. Whether a psalm of lament or a psalm of praise, the psalter is focused on God. The psalmists were oriented onto God. We recited the Nicene Creed which is centered on the triune God. We reminded ourselves that it was "for us and for our salvation" that the Son "became truly human" like us. We affirmed "the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." A new heavens and new earth that will be completely infused with God. As we look to Jesus we continue to be satisfied in the reward that is Jesus himself, the gift of God himself. We know our true identity and where we belong.

The odyssey of Odysseus involved ten years of wandering. He had little control over his itinerary. But he had a clear destination in mind. He longed to get back home. He left Troy to go back home: back to his place in Ithaca, back to his son Telemachus, back to his wife Penelope.

Christians have long used the idea of pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is different than the odyssey. A pilgrim departs from somewhere, often from home. The pilgrim may wander, but has a clear destination in mind. It may be a particular cathedral or a shrine. There are many pilgrim ways throughout Europe. One of the most famous now is the Camino de Santiago across northern Spain; the *Way* to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. A half-million people now walk it each year. In the cathedral are housed the relics of Sant' Iago, that is St Jacob or St James.

Pilgrimage is used as a metaphor for a Christian's journey through life. The second-most published book of all time after the Bible is John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Bunyan wrote this while he was in prison for his faith. Unable to travel outside his cell, his mind traveled an imaginary route between two cities, from his home in the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, which would become his forever home. It was a pilgrimage to God himself. At the end of the journey the pilgrim is welcomed into God's presence.

Abraham left home. Moses left home. They and all the other faithful ones of Hebrews 11, who lived before Christ, together with all those who are in Christ, Jew and Gentile together, are one pilgrim people. The destination is not ultimately the Promised Land. It is not the land flowing with milk and honey. The destination is God himself. We are all earnestly seeking God because by faith we believe that God exists and he rewards those who earnestly seek him. We seek him because he himself is our great reward. He has created us for himself, to be in relationship to him, and ultimately to be in his presence. God and his people together. Our pioneer Jesus is already there. He has opened the way for us.

LOOKING TO JESUS

Hebrews 12:1-3

#42, 2026.08.02

Songs that we sing regularly when we are young tend to stay with us for a lifetime. The same is true for poetry. They are formed into our memory. A few days ago, as I was thinking about what I would say today, a hymn popped into my mind, unbidden. I sang it often when young, but have not sung it for probably near fifty years.

Onward, Christian soldiers,
marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
going on before!
Christ, the royal Master,
leads against the foe;
Forward into battle,
see his banner go!

I am sure some of you grew up singing this. I don't know if this hymn is still sung. Its language might be considered problematic today. It refers to soldiers, war, the foe, and battle—and that's just the first verse! This is militaristic language.

There have been plenty of times when armies have gone into battle against the foe under the sign of the cross, led by the cross going before. On the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine, then a Roman pagan, had a vision in which he saw a sign in the heavens and the Greek words *en toutō nika*, "by this conquer." The Latin version is *in hoc signo vinces*, "In this sign, you shall conquer." It is unclear what the sign was: whether a cross, a staurogram, or the Chi-Rho symbol.[1] The next day Constantine went into battle with that sign emblazoned on the shields of his army. He won a great victory, which he attributed to Christ. The next year he issued an edict recognizing Christianity as a legal religion. By 324 he had defeated all his rivals and become sole ruler of the Roman Empire. He was its first Christian emperor.

His mother Helena soon went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In Jerusalem she discovered the True Cross, indeed all three crosses, and the tomb of Jesus. Here Constantine built the first Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

In 614 the Sassanid Persians captured Jerusalem and took the cross back to Persia. In 629 the Byzantine emperor Heraclius defeated the Persians and recovered the cross, restoring it to Jerusalem. Just a few years later, in 638, the Muslim Arabs conquered Jerusalem and its cross. In 1095 the Byzantine emperor appealed to the Western church for help. In response the Pope called for the First Crusade, declaring *Deus vult*, "God wills." The word crusade derives from *crux*, the Latin word for cross. The crusaders went into battle with the cross emblazoned on their garments and shields. They took Jerusalem from the Muslims, then took fragments of the True Cross into their further battles. So, many battles have been fought over the cross and under the sign of the cross.

There are still those today who want to crusade under the banner of the cross—either the Jerusalem cross or the crusader cross—and with the rallying cry *Deus vult*, "God wills," whether on clothing, weapons, and banners, or tattooed on their bodies.

This is not at all what the author of the hymn had in mind. Sabine Baring-Gould was Anglican curate in a small Yorkshire community. It was the custom at Pentecost for the Sunday School children to walk a mile to the parish church in the main village for a celebration. He wrote this hymn as a marching song to keep them going for it was an uphill climb. The "cross of Jesus going on before" was literally carried at the head of the procession.

For the first three centuries Christians were non-militaristic. Most declined to serve in the Roman army because of the required oath of allegiance. Christians were pacifists, devoted to helping others. They did use some military language but in a non-militaristic way. Two weeks ago my sermon title was *The White-Robed Army of Martyrs*. This is a line from the ancient hymn, *Te Deum*. The army of martyrs was militant, but their only weapon was their faithfulness to God and to Christ. They militantly refused to break their allegiance to Christ. They testified to him unto death. The early church honored these martyrs.

These martyrs are depicted with their attribute, that is the instrument of their martyrdom, the instrument by which they were tortured and killed. For example, St Bartholomew and his flayed skin and flaying knife, St Lawrence and his gridiron on which he was roasted, St Catherine and her spiked wheel. This is the army of martyrs, who responded in non-violence to the violence wreaked upon them. Their forerunners were the martyrs of the later OT and the Maccabean period, the martyrs of Heb 11:36-38.

We have now finished the Hall of Faithfulness in chapter 11, the long record of faithful people who lived by faith and who accomplished great things through faith. Now the preacher draws a conclusion:

> [1] **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,** [2] **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.** [3] **Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb 12:1-3 NIV)**

Therefore, since we: the preacher draws a grand conclusion *for us* from *them*, the faithful saints of chapter 11. Despite their faithfulness, those saints did not receive the promise as we saw last week:

> **These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (11:39-40)**

God has kept *them* waiting for *us* so that *together* we would all attain the final state: the perfect or complete state.

Verses 1-2 are a single sentence in Greek, in which the main clause is the exhortation, "Let us run the race" at the end of v. 1. The

preacher imagines his readers in a stadium. The NT world was very familiar with athletics. The ancient Greeks were keen athletes. Though Rome conquered Greece, the Romans absorbed much Greek culture. The Roman poet Horace quipped, "Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium."[2] Greece, though defeated, civilized the Romans. Hence we talk of the Greco-Roman world.

Every decent city had a gymnasium for training, and adjacent baths. There was a stadium for foot races. The early Christians themselves typically did not engage as participants or spectators, because athletes competed naked. But the NT uses athletic imagery to describe the Christian life.

The preacher imagines his readers on the floor of the stadium, engaged in an athletic event, a foot race. The stands are filled with a great cloud of witnesses. These are all the faithful people, named and unnamed, who are listed in chapter 11. They have all completed their events. They are witnesses. Firstly, they testified during their own lives, bearing faithful witness to God. Secondly, they were attested by God; he commended them, bearing witness to their faithfulness (11:2, 39). And now they are witnesses in the stands, observing the current contestants and cheering them along.

The contestants have to prepare before they start their event. They get ready by stripping down. In the ancient world they would completely strip and compete naked. Nowadays athletes strip off their warm-up attire.

So it is for the Christian life. The preacher includes himself in his counsel: "let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles." The language is of putting off a garment. For example, those who stoned Stephen took off their garments and laid them at the feet of Saul, to have unencumbered freedom of movement in throwing stones (Acts 7:58-59). But the preacher is using this language metaphorically. We are to put off everything that might hinder us in the event; anything that might weigh us down or trip us up; anything in which we might get entangled.

Changing clothing is a frequent metaphor in the NT. For example, Paul writes: "let us *put aside* the deeds of darkness and *put on* the armor of light" (Rom 13:12); "*put off* your old self…and *put on* the new self, created to be like God" (Eph 4:22); "you must *put off* falsehood" (Eph 4:25).

I think it best to understand "everything that hinders" as being especially "the sin that so easily entangles." Sin that is likely to trip us up. In the context of this book of Hebrews the primary sin is twofold: *unbelief* and *disobedience*. As I explained a couple of weeks ago, the root idea behind the Greek word for *disobedience* is *unpersuadedness*. Being unpersuaded by what one hears leads to actions that are not in compliance with that word, hence disobedience. *Unbelief* is a lack of trust in what one hears; a lack of faithfulness in responding. Lack of trust in God's word and lack of persuasion by God's word caused the wilderness generation to rebel against God. They had started on the course, the passage through the wilderness. But they lost faith in God, his promises, and his provision. They wanted to go back to Egypt, back to the start line. They fell in the wilderness without completing the course. They are a warning to future generations. The faithful saints of chapter 11 are the antithesis to the unfaithful wilderness generation of chapter 3.

What are our entangling sins? What are the sins that trip us up? In general our struggle is against the world, the flesh, and the devil. We succumb to "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 John 2:16). We have disordered affections and unhealthy desires. We have fears, doubts, and anxieties. We get entangled in the cares of this world. Clothing ourselves in Christ begins to bring reordered affections and healthy desires. We become more and more transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Cheered on by the cloud of witnesses, and stripped down to the essentials, now comes the main clause: *let us run the race*. The word translated *race* is Greek *agōn*, meaning a *contest* or *struggle*. The verb makes it clear that the contest is a running race. The course is laid out in front of us. For each of us it might be a different course.

What does it mean to run the race well? How are we evaluated? The race is a struggle. It is not necessarily easy. There is a popular misconception that when we come to Christ all our problems should be resolved and life should be easy after that. But coming to Christ is just the beginning of a lifelong journey.

It is easy in an activist, productivity- and results-oriented Western Christianity to think that running the race well means accomplishing great things, growing the largest church, having the most successful ministry, the best programs. But this race isn't judged by today's metrics. There is a single metric and it is very simple: it is faithfulness. We keep moving forward, however quickly or slowly. The key thing is to finish, however long that takes. And we are not competing with each other. Instead we are helping each other along.

We run the race with perseverance or endurance. We need to take a long-term view and not run out of steam too early. We are to run faithfully and not take a shortcut.

The two key themes in this section of Hebrews are *perseverance* and *faithfulness*. The preacher began the section with the theme of *endurance* (10:32):

> **Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you *endured* in a great conflict full of suffering… You need to *persevere* so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. (10:32, 36)**

There *endured* and *persevere* are the same Greek word. The preacher then recalls Habakkuk 2:4:

> **But my righteous one will live by *faith*…we belong to those who have *faith*." (10:38-39)**

The endurance that is called for is not simply gritting our teeth and bearing it. It is engendered by faith. It is faithful endurance, persevering faithfulness.

Chapter 11 has detailed many who had faith; they were all faithful. Chapter 12 returns to the theme of *endurance* or *perseverance*. The word as noun or verb is used three times in these three verses and again in v. 7. All six uses in Hebrews bracket chapter 11. With persevering faithfulness we run the race until we finish the course. We run the race together, helping one another along, encouraging one another to remain faithful. We are not competing with one another to finish first.

Endurance is for a season. We endure because we know that the need for endurance will end. There is hope at the end of endurance. If there were no end in sight for endurance, there would be no hope.

There would be despair. Faith is the anticipation of that hope. Chapter 11 began with a definition of what faith is:

> **Faith is the confidence in what we hope for, the assurance about what we do not see. (11:1)**

Paul urged Timothy, "Fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim 6:12), where both the verb and the noun are forms of *agōn*, struggle or contest. At the end of his life he wrote again to Timothy, "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" (2 Tim 4:7-8a). The crown (*stephanos*) is the victor's wreath which the Lord Jesus will award to those who finish well. Finishing well simply means being faithful in whatever course the Lord has laid out for us, whatever course is ours to run.

As we run, we fix our eyes on Jesus. We turn our gaze away from other things and look to Jesus. We look away from anything that would distract us or intimidate us or make us fearful. There are plenty of things alongside the course that will make us fearful if we turn our gaze to them.

One night, just before dawn, Jesus came walking on the Sea of Galilee to his disciples. He bid Peter, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water towards Jesus. But he took his eye off of Jesus: "when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!' " (Matt 14:30).

There are plenty of things in life to make us afraid, to fill us with fear, uncertainty, and doubt. All the more reason and need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. We entrust all our fears and cares to him, and to one another, for we are running this course together. We keep our eyes on Jesus so that we don't succumb to fear and start sinking.

We give our full attention to Jesus. He was the first to finish the race and enter into his reward. He is there at the finish line ready to welcome us. Through his Spirit he is here with us now, accompanying us as we navigate the course. We keep our eyes fixed on him.

Jesus is described as the pioneer and perfecter of the faith. He is the Pioneer, the one who goes first. He is the Founder, the one who establishes the course. He is the Originator, the Initiator. It all begins with him. He has led the way. He has finished the course first. He has led the way for us, opening the way for us as we follow him. Elsewhere in Hebrews he is described as the Pioneer of salvation (2:10). He is the beginning.

He is also the Perfecter, the Completer. Here we have the *telos* concept again that we looked at last week. The Perfecter is one who brings people to their intended goal, fulfilling their intended purpose. In the context of the definition of faith at the beginning of chapter 11, the Perfecter is the one who brings us to point at which our hope becomes reality, when endurance is needed no more because our faith becomes sight.

We saw last week that the faithful OT saints did not receive the promise. God has kept them waiting for us so that together with us they would be made perfect (10:39-40).

Jesus is the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith. First, he is the supreme example of faithfulness, from beginning to end. He ran this race, he walked this path. He faithfully endured and completed the course. Secondly, he is the object of our faith. Through his Spirit he brings our faithfulness to completion.

Jesus pioneered the course. The rest of v. 2 details his race course. He endured the cross. We talk of the Passion of Christ, where *passion* means *suffering*. His Passion began in the garden of Gethsemane, where he wrestled to submit his will to his Father's will. We call this the Agony in the Garden. By *Agony* we don't mean that he suffered physical or emotional agony—though that was certainly present—but that he underwent a contest, an *agōn*, a struggle. Jesus did battle with Satan twice, at the beginning and the end of his ministry. Satan had tested him immediately after his baptism. He was tested in the wilderness to prove that he was faithful and obedient to God's word, unlike that wilderness generation in chapter 3. Emerging from the wilderness tested and proven, he embarked on his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. Now at the end of his ministry he was tested again. Would he submit to his Father's will? Would he take the cup his Father was holding out to him? Would he run the course laid out before him? Again he was faithful. In the garden he submitted to his Father: "not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). He was obedient to God's call, though he knew it was the way to the cross. Having won the struggle in the garden, Jesus faced his course with unshakeable conviction. This carried him through the betrayal by Judas, his arrest by the soldiers, his various trials. He had already won the battle, submitting his own will to his Father's will.

He endured the cross. We glamorize the cross as a religious symbol. Crucifixion was horrific. It was extreme in every respect: extreme pain and suffering, extreme shame and humiliation, extreme degradation and dehumanization. But Jesus scorned the shame. It mattered nothing to him. In the eyes of the onlookers, both Jews and Romans, he was shamed. But in his core being he could not be shamed. He was his Father's beloved, and he was doing his Father's will. The Father who had said twice before, at his baptism and his transfiguration, "You are my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." The path he saw laid out in front of him was not a path of shame but a path leading to joy: the joy of doing his Father's will.

Though shamed in the eyes of Jew and Roman together, he knew that he was honored in his Father's eye. A person honored in a higher level cannot be shamed in a lower level. His identity, his allegiance, his honor were securely fixed in God. He was secure in his Father's love, a security that could not be shaken.

He finished the course laid out for him. That course was to become human, to become like us. He took on flesh and blood to become like us in every way, truly human (2:14, 17). He suffered like us in every way, but without sin (4:15).

Having finished the course set out before him he has entered into his reward. He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Here is an allusion to Psalm 110:1 which has already been mentioned three times in this book (1:3; 8:1; 10:12). His session at God's right hand is his reward.

In v. 3 the preacher urges us to pay attention: *Consider Jesus*. Ponder his example of faithful endurance, of persevering faithfulness. He endured such opposition and hostility from sinners against himself. Draw lessons from this. When we face suffering and opposition it is easy to become discouraged, to wonder why God seems to be against us. We consider Jesus so that we don't become weary and discouraged. So that we don't lose resolve and courage, and then give up. Instead, we persevere. We are resilient, not in our own strength but in the strength of the one to whom we look.

A well-known symbol associated with Jesus is the *Agnus dei*,

meaning the Lamb of God. There is one in our window. The imagery is drawn from the book of Revelation. It depicts a Lamb, standing as though slain. Its breast is pierced by a cross. In some versions blood pours from the wound into a communion chalice. From the top of the cross flies a banner or pennant, a red cross on a white background. It is the same cross that was emblazoned on the robes and shields of the crusaders, but with a quite different meaning. This cross represents resurrection. Behind the lamb's head is a crossed nimbus: a halo signifying holiness, and a red cross again signifying resurrection. This form of halo or nimbus is used only for Jesus Christ.

Sometimes a text is added: *Our lamb has conquered, let us follow him*. In Revelation the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4): in faithful witness, through martyrdom, into resurrection life. The use of the word *conquer* conveys militarism to some. But the Lamb's victory is the antithesis of militarism. How did the Lamb conquer? The Lamb conquered by being slain. The Lamb conquered by being the faithful witness, par excellence. This is how Jesus Christ is first introduced in the opening greeting: he is the faithful witness, firstborn from the dead (1:5). Those 144,000 in Revelation have conquered through their faithfulness. In the world's eyes they were conquered by the beast. They were slain. They were failures. But in God's eyes they are precious, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. They enter into their reward: God's presence. The *Agnus dei* symbol is subversive. It is countercultural. Especially in a world that values power, success, growth, and victory.

The early church worshiped a crucified man. This was a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. For them his crucifixion was proof that Roman power had won. It was proof to the Jews that he could not possibly be the Messiah, for he was hung on a tree. But God in Christ has confounded the wisdom of this world. He has bestowed the highest honor on the one the world sought to shame to the utmost. We follow in his footsteps.

Last night I watched the movie *The Mission* (1986) again. I watched it because I wanted to see a particular scene that comes very near the end. Father Gabriel, played by Jeremy Irons, stands against the power and might of the Spanish and Portuguese, even against the leaders of the Catholic church. What does he have to offer in the end? In the name of peace and renunciation of violence, he faces his martyrdom holding forth the cross of Christ. I wanted to watch this scene because I had another hymn in mind:

> Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
> Till all the world adore his sacred name.

The Christians to whom this letter is addressed do not have much power. Some have been thrown in prison. Some have had their property taken. They are hanging out with the wrong people. They are showing solidarity with others who are in prison, visiting them, ministering to their needs. They are nothing in Rome's eyes. But they are God's beloved. They are on their way to glory. They are the ones who will receive the victor's wreath for finishing the course, for enduring. They are the ones on whom the Father will beam with pleasure and welcome into his presence. May we all find ourselves among them.

1. The *staurogram* combines the Greek letters *tau* (T) and *rho* (P). Early Christians used it as an abbreviation for the cross (Gk *stauros*). The *Chi Rho* (☧) combines the Greek letters *chi* (X) and *rho* (P), the first two letters of ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (*Christos*, Christ). Both symbols were used as Christograms: monograms of Christ.

2. Horace, *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio* (*Epistles* 2.1.156-157).