

Enter Light and Hope

Before I can start drilling down into that longish reading, some words of explanation are needed regarding both the Letter to the Hebrews and how I come to be preaching from it during this season of Advent. As most of you know, even before I came to Good Shepherd as your pastor I developed the habit of preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary, a three-year cycle of Scripture readings based on the ancient Roman Catholic practice of a daily schedule for reading through the Bible over a three-year period. As the Revised Common Lectionary, devised for and used by many Christian denominations, is a weekly schedule, it cannot possibly cover all of the Bible, even with the inclusion each week of an Old Testament reading, a reading from the Psalms, a Gospel reading, and an Epistle reading. Indeed, one of the complaints about the RCL over the years has been its lack of completeness. Although I do not confine myself to the lectionary, as I've just demonstrated in the last few weeks by tackling the entire book of I Thessalonians, after preaching four complete cycles, I was feeling the need to move on.

Fortunately, in 2012, a young (well, younger than me) Presbyterian scholar named Timothy Matthew Slemmons published his book, Year D: A Quadrennial Supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary. Rev. Slemmons has attempted to answer the complaint that too much of the Bible was left out of the RCL by adding a fourth year to its ABC cycle and I think he's done a good job of it. In fact, he suggests that ultimately a lectionary cycle should be seven years to match the Biblical Sabbath cycle but he leaves it to others to continue that work. Since I rarely preach from more than one passage at a time, I figure it will take me a couple of years, at least, to work through his suggested "Year D" by which time I'll be able to either return with refreshed insights to the three year RCL or take us in another direction entirely.

So, that is why most of my Advent preaching this year will be from the Letter to the Hebrews, from which I've only preached a handful of times in the last 12+ years. Perhaps because it is in the Revised Common Lectionary so seldom, many preachers avoid Hebrews. Of course, there are other reasons, too. As Calvin Theology Seminary professor Stan Mast writes in his on-line commentary on today's passage, "In all the Bible studies I've been part of for the last 40 years, I can't remember anyone exclaiming, "Let's study Hebrews!" Hebrews is so... impractical, so theological in an Old Testamenty sort of way. I mean, who cares anymore about all these sacrifices and priests and ceremonies and rules? How can we possibly relate all of this Old Testament stuff to the 21st century?" Clearly, I think we can, so with your indulgence for the next fifteen minutes or so, I'm going to give it a shot.

As I almost always do, I want to start with the context of this peculiar book so that we can understand how the concerns of its author and original audience actually do line up with our own situation. The book is peculiar in one way in that it does not have even a legendary attribution. Nobody has ever claimed to know absolutely who wrote it. Although there have been some attempts over the centuries to attribute this epistle to Paul, the earliest witnesses to the book and its inclusion in the canon offer no clues as to its authorship. Had those who ultimately set the canon of the New Testament believed Hebrews to be Pauline in origin, it would have taken its place between Romans and I Corinthians as one of Paul's lengthier letters. Instead, it falls after his shortest, Philemon, and takes pride of place among the epistles from other writers. There have been various guesses by scholars over the years as to who wrote Hebrews. Paul's companions, Barnabas and Silas, have been popular candidates and so have been Luke, Philip, and Clement of Rome. A much shorter epistle known to have been by Clement, Peter's

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successor as Bishop of Rome, just missed the cut for the New Testament and is perhaps the oldest of the writings by the men known as “the Church Fathers” still studied today. In it, Clement actually quotes from Hebrews. But I have in my library a copy of a book by Ruth Hoppin which makes a pretty good case that Priscilla is the mysterious author of Hebrews. Priscilla, or Prisca, was the wife of Aquila mentioned in several of Paul’s letters as a co-worker and in Acts as the teacher of Apollos, Paul’s rival as the greatest preacher of the time. I’ll leave the argument for another time but for the purposes of this morning, I’ll ask that you humor me and allow me to refer to the author of Hebrews as “she.”

There is more agreement among scholars as to the original audience for the book. Consensus is that Hebrews was written for a congregation of Jewish Christians somewhere in the great Diaspora of Jews across the Mediterranean and Near-Eastern world. One of the most popular suggestions of locale is Rome, which would explain why the author says in closing, “Those from Italy send you greetings.” We know that many Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius Caesar in A.D. 49 and that among them were Priscilla and Aquila. It is possible that Priscilla was writing to her former neighbors, formerly the core of the Christian community in Rome but now an uncomfortable minority, as we can tell from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. The letter may also have been written during the persecution of Christians in Rome under Nero between A.D. 64 and 68.

This “word of exhortation” as the author herself calls “Hebrews,” comes to a group who are no longer sure of their place in the world, no longer sure that the Good News of God through Christ is sustaining for them. I find this very contemporary. While, as I’ve said before, I disagree with those who say that Christians in America are persecuted, no one can doubt that the centrality of Christians and our faith in our society either has passed or is passing. If we seek to impact our world, we must recognize that we do so from a position of minority. That does not mean that we are incapable of making new disciples for Jesus or of succeeding in our ongoing work of working within the will of our Loving Creator to heal the Creator’s world. But we must go about our tasks of loving the world and making a difference in it from a standpoint of weakness and not strength. To me, that sounds an awful lot like the strategic choice already made for us by God in Christ. As a small church seeking to do big things in South Snohomish County, we have a great deal in common not only with those who first heard the words of exhortation known as “Hebrews” but also with that humble manual laborer from an obscure village in Galilee.

And so to the lesson of our Scripture for this morning. If we, like the Jewish Christians of first century Rome, are feeling a bit marginalized, if we, the Euro-American members of Good Shepherd, are recognizing that our ethnic place of privilege is no longer and really never was valid, if we, the moderate-to-liberal mainstream Protestants known as American Baptists, are beginning to feel that our time of national leadership has passed, then there is something in the first chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews that is good for what ails us. No, our presumed superiority will not be authenticated, our particular heritage will not be celebrated, and our unique theological stances will not be consecrated. We can, however, rest assured that in that carpenter from Nazareth, we follow the one who is the Son of God, incarnated. Listen again to the glad words that Priscilla, if it was she, uses to lift the hearts of her friends: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...”

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That's a pretty good start but we need to remember that these Jewish Christians knew what we call the Old Testament better than most of us do. They would have been well aware that in certain translations, such as the Greek Septuagint, which they would have used, angels were also referred to as "sons of God," in Genesis, in Deuteronomy, in Job, and in the Psalms. So, what made Jesus unique as "Son?" The writer goes on to tell us: "...whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs."

As we move through this season of Advent and particularly on this Sunday when we focus on hope, it is important for us to remember that we are not simply celebrating the birth of a tiny baby, as hopeful an occasion as that always is. In that infant of Bethlehem was contained, as John's Gospel puts it, "the Word... He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." In Jesus, we celebrate not just another creation of God, like the angels even though we are told in the Psalm 8 that they, spiritual beings as they are, are higher, closer to God, than humankind. But Jesus is "the exact imprint of God's very being," Creator, Sustainer, and Purifier. How can any of us feel marginalized or inferior to anyone other than God Godself when we are told that God is for us, as Paul put it, that we are joint heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God?

I will not take the time now to walk you through the blizzard of scriptural references which Priscilla uses to substantiate her argument. This is, as many commentators note, good Jewish Midrash, a time-honored technique of rabbinic writing intended to make the Scriptures come alive for a contemporary audience. It is a technique much used in Hebrews. Edgar V. McKnight, writing for the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary reports: "A recent commentator makes a conservative judgment that in all there are thirty-one explicit quotations, four implicit quotations, thirty-seven allusions, nineteen summaries of Old Testament material, and thirteen instances of a citation of a biblical name or topic without reference to a specific context." For a Jewish Christian writer in the first century, this would have been a natural approach. Edgar McKnight writes, "The writer used a form of the verb "to say" instead of "to write" when introducing a quotation from the Old Testament, and he generally omitted specific references to biblical books, for the authority of the biblical text is the ultimate speaker, God. The way the writer interpreted the Old Testament as well as the way he introduced specific texts indicate that God not only spoke in the text but continues to speak." McKnight reveals another reason why post-modern preachers find that Hebrews makes such problematic material. He continues, "The writer did not first of all determine what a text meant in a given historical situation in order to apply that meaning to a contemporary situation. The author began with the contemporary situation and discovered a relevant word from the ancient text." That's pretty much the opposite of what preachers are taught to do today.

Technical considerations aside, the first four verses of chapter two are where the rubber meets the road. Given the Son-ship of Jesus, given the authority of the Son and the superiority of the Son to the angels, what should be our response? "Therefore we must pay greater attention to

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what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.” Again, I find this word remarkably contemporary. Let us consider again the linkage between ourselves and the Jewish Christians of Rome in the first century. After rushing home after hearing the Good News of Jesus, possibly at Pentecost or on some other pilgrimage to Jerusalem, they had established a new church in their adopted city and, presumably, lived lives of faithful excitement. In our congregation, we still have two of those who answered the call to plant an American Baptist church in the new city of Lynnwood and who have served faithfully for 52 years. As the Christians in Rome spread the Gospel with word and deed, so many Gentiles joined that they became a minority in their own congregation, especially following the edict of Claudius which caused most of them to flee the Imperial City, at least for a time. Here at Good Shepherd Baptist, we have watched with sadness as our own congregation dwindled after the heights of the late 60s and early 70s and then as our sister churches and even the strong church which adopted Lynnwood as a mission field have closed their doors. The parallels are not precise but like those first century sisters and brothers, we, too have found ourselves adrift in a strange sea. Modern psychology tells us that those who have been traumatized, who are depressed, who have lost their life bearings, have trouble concentrating and paying attention. The author of Hebrews calls out to us, “Pay greater attention!”

I love the metaphor used here by our anonymous author: “do not drift away...” It is a nautical term in Greek, the opposite of a word meaning “to hold a ship on course.” Both the metaphor and the context of difficult times are used in a hymn written by Ruth Caye Jones and made popular by George Beverly Shea, a member of Billy Graham’s team. Perhaps you remember it:

“In times like these you need a Savior,
In times like these you need an anchor;
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!
This Rock is Jesus, Yes He’s the One,
This Rock is Jesus, the only One;
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!”

The hymn, like the verse that inspired it, is a reminder that when we face uncertain times, we can maintain our life’s bearings through a focus on Jesus. If we cannot tell what to do, what to think, how to be in the world, the answer can be found in renewing our intent to follow in his way.

Our hope, in other words, lies in Jesus. Our hope is in the only begotten Son of God, the One whose throne is forever and ever, the One who founded the earth and who will endure when the heavens are rolled up like a worn out garment. The baby whose birth we will celebrate just three weeks and one day from now and who comes into our hearts again and again, as long as we will open ourselves to him, that one is our hope and our light. Christians, all, your Lord is coming! Let us lift the cup, for we are forgiven of our sins. Let us eat together his bread of solidarity with those who suffer and prepare for celebration, too. Jesus is our hope; thanks be to God!