

## HIGH, LOW...AND BACK AGAIN

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

October 4, 2021

Psalm 8 New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Churches

I don't know about you but I like things in order. My wife and others who have seen my space and things around our house might say otherwise, but I truly appreciate order and finding things in their place.

Our New Testament reading today seeks to set down in order some important words about God, Jesus Christ, and the order of creation and the Church. Not that the writer of *Hebrews* doesn't wander from time to time later in this book of the Bible, yet here at the beginning he wants those who hear (and read) this sermon-document to know what he's talking about and who is the focus of all he's writing.

In these days and times it's fairly easy to get distracted. Television, radio, the various ways the Internet pulls you in; with mobile phones pinging notifications left and right, even regular calls are tugging more insistently at our attention. Yes, we want to know all that's going on, but it's hard to stay focused on what's really important.

The writer of *Hebrews* wanted his original listeners to focus on God and His Son Jesus the Christ. Realize that by the time this document was circulating through the churches, the great initial growth of Christianity was winding down. Paul was imprisoned, and may even have died. The original apostles were likely all dead as well. Clement of Alexandria, acknowledged as the first Pope after Peter by the ecumenical Church (i.e. the world church) had yet to take up his duties and to write his famous theological treatises. For those who are numerically minded about history, *Hebrews* was written sometime between 60 AD and 90 AD

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and as such represents a second generation of believers who, probably inspired by Paul's letters about the immanent return of Jesus, are struggling in this interim, transitional time between Jesus' ascension and His return.

We too struggle in the *between-times* as the late Paul Acketemeier called it. In the ebb and flow of life, when things and events seem to crash all around us, we wonder who is in charge; to whom can we turn; does God provide "something better" than what we see and experience every day.

Our verses this morning point to that hope of “something better.” They’re not couched in easy to grasp terms but in more poetic and theological phrases.

But, the purpose is fairly clear, as Dr. Mark Powell puts it:

to “proclaim the superiority of Christ as the divine Son of God, and the superiority of faith in Christ over all other confession.... It does so...to persuade Christians not to abandon their faith and...to encourage perseverance appropriate to receiving the favor and benefits of God bestowed on those who are faithful. Such perseverance is justified in light of what the earthly Son has done to bring believers into God’s favor, and it is sustained through the intercessions that the exalted Son continues to offer on [our] behalf.

Whew! I must admit that last bit was a theological mouthful! There’s no doubt that *Hebrews* is all about Jesus the Christ and about God sending His only Son to save us and the world and to usher in the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. This plan of world salvation and transformation can’t happen unless God comes Himself and gets things started, OR sends someone who is so close to God that we humans will listen to all that God’s emissary says. Hence, Jesus...

Dr. Andrew Purves now retired from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary put it this way: Jesus comes from God on high to give us here below God’s own promises; then returns on high to bring God our lives, faith, and love.

It is through Jesus’ existence in heaven, His life among us fully human, and His return to live at the right hand of God in heaven again that our hope in all that we know and believe and trust in God is fulfilled. This path from high to low and back again sustains our faith. We know that God, by way of His Son, knows our trials, our troubles, our joys, and our hopes, And therefore, we believe.

I’ve said it before — sometimes we all are from Missouri — that is, it’s hard for us humans to believe anything that we can’t see, touch, taste, smell, or hear with our own two ears. And it seems to me for a lot of people, it’s hard to believe in God, in angels, in Jesus Himself. I’ll go out on a limb and say that I doubt any of us have seen God or Jesus. But, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit and through the Spirit, the witness of Scripture; and through Scripture, the words recorded of what God spoke through the prophets and apostles, and angels and, most importantly, through His Son Jesus, we know the promises and the love of God that sustains and comforts us in times of trouble and that makes our joys greater than we think possible

possible.

And it is through those words in Scripture spoken by Jesus that we **can** see Him. We see Him in following His commandments to love one another, to care for the lost, the least, and the last, to seek out those who are oppressed and who are in sorrow, to pray for our enemies — even to give them a cup of water...By the actions we take to show others the love of God, the rituals we repeat to remind us of God's love, and the invitations we offer others to join us in this journey of life

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together in God's sovereignty, peace, hope, mercy, grace, and love, we see the visible signs, even the manifestations of Christ Himself.

We are interconnected to the world with Christ, and through Christ to God. This communion is important.

As the apostle Paul puts it in writing to the Ephesians:

*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to humankind." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God...*

NT Wright, a bishop and theologian in the Church of England, tells the story of one of his children at Christmas. The family had thoroughly decorated the house with all the tinsel and trappings, the presents were ready in glittering wrapping, ribbons and bows, all waiting for something wonderful to be uncovered. This particular Christmas, Dr. Wright's daughter was so excited by the wrapping and the beautiful box inside that she almost ignored the present itself. Oh, she seemed pleased enough with the present, but later in

the day, her parents found her behind an armchair playing with...the box. She was using it as a tiny dolls' house for some of her smaller toys. It worked so well, and was after all very pretty. She had laid out the wrapping paper around the box, to be kind of a stage set, a backcloth, for the game she was playing. Dr. Wright says that as hard as he's tried to recall what was in the box itself — the real present to his daughter that Christmas — the fact that he can't remember makes the point about the importance of knowing who Jesus is and what Jesus is all about. We can get too wrapped up in the wrapping and forget the gift God has given.

Again, my former professor, Dr. Purves, puts it this way: "When we know who Christ is, we will know what it is that he does and what that means." As we come to this Table on World Communion Sunday and hosted by Christ Jesus, we need to take things in order, and firstly, remember that God so loved the *world* that He gave His only Son....

Let us pray:

Ever-present, ever-loving God of all, You have given the world the greatest gift in, through, and as Your beloved Son, Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray. We thank you for reminding us of such a wondrous gift, a gift that is to be shared throughout the whole world; beginning in our own neighborhoods and city and state. Help us to live in Jesus' example, to be imitators of who He was here on earth and of what He did and taught and lived in loving obedience to You. For it is in His name, we pray. Amen