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

Grounded in Hope: God Has Spoken Through Christ

Our worship throughout October and November will explore how we live as a people grounded in hope, when winds of turmoil swirl around us. Using texts from the Letter to the Hebrews we will reflect on the gift of Christ and themes of grace, faith, faithfulness, witness, service, and love. Hear now these words of promise from Hebrews Chapters 1 and 2:

Hebrews 1:1-4

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, 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. ...

Hebrews 2:5-12

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere,

“What are humans that you are mindful of them or mortals that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them siblings, saying, “I will proclaim your name to my siblings in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Fear and anxiety. Loss of enthusiasm for practicing their faith. Waning commitment to being a disciple of Christ. That was what was driving the communities to which the author of Hebrews was writing. While scholars are not sure of the specific community to which the letter is addressed, the text makes clear that some in the community were abandoning their faith and

had stopped worshipping with other believers. And those who were not actively deserting, were drifting, not growing and deepening their faith, rather becoming sluggish and disillusioned. When I think about this community, I get a sense of heaviness – more than concrete words, a feeling comes to me - a sense that these were people who had invested a lot of energy and passion into following Christ in the early days following his death and resurrection. They had worked at understanding how the stories of their Jewish heritage fit with Jesus Christ, the long prophesied Messiah. They had endured public abuse and persecution and stood up for their faith. They had given generously of their resources to other Christian communities. And now what?

To quote Bart Simpson, their faith had become “meh.”¹ They had become apathetic and indifferent. They were weary and beleaguered. Does it really matter? Into this sense of “meh”, the author of Hebrews writes a letter of encouragement and revitalization - well it is more than that really. One of my study Bibles describes it this way: “People in this condition need more than a pep talk. They need a deepened understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. By means of an innovative, intellectually challenging food for thought, Hebrews aims to rekindle their vision. If they can catch a glimpse of what God has accomplished and made available in him [Christ], they will no longer be drifting in their faith.”²

More than a pep talk. I find myself in need of that lately. Maybe you do too. It is hard not to look around our world and feel overwhelmed by the enormity. The divisiveness of the election season. Language that is pulling people down and tearing families apart. The anniversary of the attack against Israel by Hamas and continued deaths in Gaza. The escalation of the tensions in the Mideast into Lebanon. The ongoing war in Ukraine. The humanitarian crisis in Sudan. And here in our own country, communities being destroyed by water, wind, and fire. With more on the way. Superimpose on that, your own personal and familial challenges. It feels heavy and fatigue-inducing. And into this simmering cauldron, a whiff of hope emerges. More than a pep talk, a reminder to whom we belong. And that we are grounded in hope for the future because God has spoken through Christ.

We hear in the opening of Hebrews “Christ 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.” These metaphors of radiance and imprinting are making the tightest relationship possible between Jesus and the God the Hebrew people knew. “Jesus is what the rays of light are to the sun or what the wax impression is to a signet ring.”³ For the author of Hebrews, there is no God apart from Jesus. The author alludes to Psalm 8, which we heard Jack read a few minutes ago, that humans, while made a little lower than God and God’s messenger angels, are crowned with glory and honor. And that Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the

¹<https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/09/meh-etymology-tracing-the-yiddish-word-from-leo-rosten-to-auden-to-the-simpsons.html>

² The Book of Hebrews. *The Discipleship Study Bible - NRSV* :Westminster John Knox Press; 2008. p2039

³ <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-hebrews/>

angels, is now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God Jesus might taste death for everyone.

And it is this grace that we Christians – all Christians reside. This is a unifying belief, a unifying hope for believers of Jesus. That Jesus' death was not the last word. That through Jesus' death we are all – everyone of us – covered by the grace of God. The Letter to Hebrews continues with one of the most important theological statements in scripture – one we especially lift up on World Communion Sunday: “For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father.” To be sanctified is to be made holy – to become more sacred – to draw closer to vision of who God has called us to be. Through Jesus we are sanctified – we live out our life of faith. And those who are sanctified all have one Father. All followers of Christ are siblings, all children of the same parent God. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them siblings.

On this World Communion Sunday it is especially poignant that the words from Hebrews “those who are sanctified all have one Father” echo in our sanctuary. It is a day to remember that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. On this day, people draw faith and inspiration that we celebrate with our siblings who are celebrating and we weep with those who suffer. Today is a day when we remind ourselves that we are part of a global community bound together in Christ Jesus, at the table with those who reside in a storm's aftermath or where peace does not prevail. On World Communion Sunday, we collect the Peace & Global Witness Offering. Through this offering we commit to the work of peace in mighty ways. In times such as these, we are reminded that peacemaking extends to places experiencing both natural and human-caused disasters. And we are reminded that human-caused disasters are a significant factor in perpetuating our world-wide refugee crises. A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence.

The Greater Lansing area has welcomed refugees to become our newest neighbors for many decades. At PCO we have partnered with a number of organizations involved in supporting refugee resettlement, including St. Vincent Catholic Charities (now known as Catholic Charities of Ingham, Eaton, and Clinton Counties). They are the designated refugee resettlement agency for adults and families in Lansing and mid-Michigan. Through a federal government program, St. Vincent's Refugee Services assists with the basic essentials to welcome refugees to the Lansing community and help them reach self-sufficiency. During the month of September we at PCO collected blankets for our newest neighbors, most hailing from countries that are much warmer in the winter than Michigan. In a few minutes we will dedicate these blankets and hear from Chelsea Lafferty who has been serving as the Executive Director of Refugee Services about the impact we make by supporting the refugee community.

The way we welcome new neighbors from around the world, those who are Christian, those who follow other faith traditions, or who are not a part of a faith community, speaks volumes

about our commitment to Jesus' message of love and grace, the message of welcome and inclusion, the message of reconciliation and redemption. The message that we are called to live as a people grounded in hope.

In a world which pulls us in so many directions, we are grounded in hope when we are reminded of what truly matters: God's deep and abiding love for us and our connection to each other as siblings in Christ. One way we are highlighting this connection is through the use of an ecumenical version of the Lord's Prayer following the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. This version uses the language of sins and sinners, rather than debts or trespasses. It also asks God to save us from a "time of trial" instead of asking God "not to lead us into temptation", which recognizes that God does not push us into temptation. It is we humans who fall and fail. This version with sins/times of trial has been in use in the PC(USA) since 1988⁴ and can be seen in the order of worship at the beginning of our *Glory to God* hymnal on p11. I invite you to try this version of the prayer this morning. Or I invite you share the words of the Lord's Prayer that are closest to your heart. Some might hear the various versions as discordant. I hear it a bit like Pentecost morning, infused with the Holy Spirit. It is testimony of "...an utterly majestic and cosmic God coming to touch us - up close and personal."⁵ This is the way the Dr. Rev. Susan Andrews, a former moderator of the PC(USA) describes the Letter to the Hebrews. A letter that is more like a creed about what we believe about Jesus than a reconstruction of Jesus' ministry. Hebrews does not cover healings, compassion for the marginalized or confrontations with religious leaders or Roman authorities. Instead, Hebrews, calls us to see Jesus as the very pioneer and perfecter of our faith. "I will proclaim Christ sustains all things by his powerful word." The word of love. The word of grace. The word of peace. The word of hope.

At PCO we live as a people of hope, because as our Mission Statement says, "We believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, we belong to God." As people of hope, our giving of time, talent and treasures makes an impact in our congregation, our community and the world. Our 2024-2025 Stewardship Campaign will focus on the impact of our hope lived out through our generosity and gratitude. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that our hope in Christ is an anchor – an anchor that has guided and nurtured the church through difficult eras and troubled times. It is a reminder to us that our best indication of what God will do in the future is to remember what God has done in the past. God has spoken directly through God's Son Jesus. God has been faithful through the ages. God has united peoples around the world as siblings, children of a loving parent. A parent who invites us to the table to share a great feast – the bread of life and the cup of the new covenant, sealed in Christ's love and grace. This is indeed good news for those mired in the muck and needing a word of revitalization and hope. May it be so. Amen. Join me in prayer.

⁴ <https://www.englishtexts.org/the-lords-prayer>

⁵ Susan R. Andrews. Pastoral Perspective. Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2* (Proper 17-Reign of Christ). Edited By: David L. Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor; Westminster John Know Press, 2013.