

## Hebrews 1:1-4, 13:20-25

### “Jesus, the Last Word and the First”

The Letter to the Hebrews is written by an unknown author at an unknown time to an unknown audience. Scholars agree that it was written as a sermon to be read aloud and that it was most likely written to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Christians. But one thing about it is apparent. It is written to a weary people. They were tired! And I don't just mean that they were sluggish or that their early enthusiasm for Christ is waning.

In his commentary on Hebrews, minister Tom Long writes: “The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere.” (1) He goes on to be more specific and tells us that they were tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about behind their backs. They were tired of the struggle and the mundaneness of their own prayer life. They were even tired of Jesus!

And I wonder how many of us have come to this point either in our corporate life as the body of Christ or in our personal walk with God. When school is out for the year and we are worn out with the constant schedules, do we still want to participate in the life of the church? Or does summer seem like a good time to take a break? How about when we become empty nesters? Do we really still need all that church? Or when we are retired. Is it okay just to think – I've done my part – let someone else handle it now?

And speaking of one's prayer life! Sometimes I can't help but wonder if God reads the paper when I am praying because he has heard it all before. Even I get bored with my own redundant petitions and confessions!

Perhaps that is why the Holy Spirit chose this particular book of the Bible for us to spend the summer in. Because in the end, it is a book of encouragement and a reminder that, once Christ has made a claim on our lives and we have responded, there is no turning back. We will always be serving as ambassadors for God, making disciples for Christ and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. EVEN in the summer! EVEN on vacation! Even when we are retired. And the writer eloquently begins and ends his sermon with the same thought: God's revelation of love and grace through Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's constant and Jesus is ours too!

If the writer of Hebrews were an Old Testament prophet, he would have begun by saying: "Remember the Lord your God, the father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." In fact, he or she writes: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets."

But this letter is to those who understand the New Covenant of Christ's blood shed for our sins. So the writer clarifies: "But in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son." This is a reminder that God spoke the world into existence and continues to speak to us now. God is not a silent or distant force in our lives, not a god who created the universe and then stepped back passively to see what would happen. Indeed, the creative power of God's voice is like a great bridge that spans the past and the present, the Heavens and the earth, the beginning and the end. God spoke to us and speaks to us still. So let's consider how this takes place.

In this passage we are told that God speaks to us in many ways. In Greek, the word is actually "in many fragments". Tom Long describes this as "episodes of speech punctuating seasons of silence." Of course, in order for this to happen, we must first be silent. I am the worst at thinking that prayer is only a monologue – my concerns, my joys and my needs. Yet all throughout Scripture we are told about the importance of listening in prayer.

Think about your own lives. When and how has God spoken to you? Consider this: How many times has someone called at just the moment when you needed a friend? How many times have you heard a song on the radio that expresses your feelings so well that you have to pull off the road and cry? How many times have you picked up the Bible, read a passage that you KNOW you have read before, and have felt God tapping you on the shoulder? And how many times have you heard the still, small voice in the silence telling you exactly what you yearned for? Might these times be God working in our lives?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told about a time when he faced a personal crisis of confidence. Hard to imagine but things were going badly in the Civil Rights movement. Numerous threats had been made against his life. He was growing tired and scared. He was worried about the future and what might happen to his family.

Unable to sleep, he got up in the middle of the night and went to the kitchen. And in that moment, he knew that the *only one* he could turn to for help was God. So he prayed earnestly, confessing his weaknesses and his loss of courage. He wrote: “At that moment, I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even to the end of the world.’”

The writer of Hebrews reminds us all that the voice of God can speak a word of power when we are weak. The voice of Jesus can speak a word of promise when we need comfort. The voice of the Holy Spirit can reassure us when we are torn. God still speaks in fragments, but we must listen.

We are also told that God speaks in many fashions – through many avenues and mediums. Often, we will have flashes of insight that we know cannot be our own. The absurdity of politics or the shaking up of power can remind us of what is really important in life. Many of

us have been spoken to in dreams and visions. The wisdom of a child can break through our confusion, or the questions of someone who does not yet know God can cause us to examine our own beliefs. I have even heard God speak in a committee meeting!

Sometimes we are spoken to when nations or families make peace. Sometimes God speaks in ways we could never imagine. Two brothers, living on adjoining farms, fell into conflict. In forty years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, providing mutual support and assistance whenever needed, it was their first rift. Yet, when either of the brothers was asked what happened, they would both say, "I have no idea what happened, but I know it wasn't me."

So a conflict that began with a small misunderstanding grew into a major fracture. Weeks spilled into months of hostile silence followed by the exchange of bitter and spiteful words between the brothers. One morning there was a knock on the older brother's door. Opening the door, the brother encountered a man with a carpenter's toolbox, eager to do odd jobs around the farm.

After thinking for a quick moment, the brother said, "Yes, I do have a job for you." Pointing toward the creek separating the two farms, the elder brother said, "Last week there was a meadow between our two farms until my brother bulldozed his way to the river levee, leaving this creek to divide our land. I want to go him one better. I want you to build an eight-foot fence between our properties. I won't need to see him or his farm anymore." The carpenter responded, "I think I understand the situation. Provide me the wood, the nails and a post-hole digger, and I'll get started."

The older brother had errands to take care of, so after gathering the supplies, he left. All day, the carpenter measured, dug and built. At just about sunset, the farmer returned home to see the carpenter completing his task. The farmer's jaw dropped! The carpenter had not built a fence

at all. Instead, he has created a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other. It was a fine piece of work, complete with handrails, but not at all what the older brother had asked for.

Imagine the older brother's surprise when he saw his younger brother standing on the bridge, his hands outstretched as he said, "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge, after all I've said and done. I'm amazed. Thank you." The two brothers met in the middle of the bridge, embracing in a spirit of reconciliation. Turning, they saw the carpenter hoisting his toolbox on his shoulder. "No, wait!" said the older brother. "I have many other projects for you." "I'd be glad to stay," the carpenter responded, "but I have many more bridges to build."

So the writer of Hebrews reminds us that God has spoken through plagues and prophets. In Exodus and Exile. Through slavery and silence. But finally, God speaks a new word. An entirely different word. And that word is Jesus. God's only Son. The exact imprint of God's very being. And it is as if all of creation breathes a sigh of relief and utters, "Ah! At last! The word we have been waiting for!" Jesus is the word that is our inauguration of hope. He is the culmination of all that God has spoken before.

Although this is Trinity Sunday, I decided to go ahead with my plan to begin our journey through the Letter to the Hebrews, hoping the passage would be Trinitarian. Well it is and it isn't. You see, one of the important themes found throughout this letter is that Jesus had three offices. Jesus was sent to be our prophet, our priest and our King. So, let's look at the Trinity of Jesus that God sent us when God spoke this beautiful word.

By these few verses, we are reminded that Jesus is our prophet. He reveals to us everything about the nature of God. We can see and hear and learn first hand about God's wisdom, compassion, fairness, and inclusivity. By observing Jesus' interactions with God's

people, we can learn about God's will for our lives. We can finally understand that God wants every part of our being to worship and adore Him.

Then we are told that Jesus is our priest. In Jesus' day, the people went to the priest in much the same way we seek out our pastors. We do this when we are happy or hurting, when we are in doubt and fear. When we need help or want to help others. We want our priests, our pastors, to be the shepherds who will care for us.

When my mother-in-law died of Lou Gehrig's disease 18 years ago, the minister at our home church had many gifts. But being a pastor was not one of them. No church will EVER find a minister who excels in every area of ministry, except Jesus himself. So by default, I became the family chaplain during her illness and death. This is a gift that God thankfully DID give me and at the time, I was glad to be of help. But what happened is that it prevented me from being able to grieve, because I was so busy caring for everyone else. Over time, that unattended grief took a physical toll on me. As a result, it took a lot of intentional work and much more time to process in my heart what life was going to be like without Marilyn, whom I loved like a mother.

A few weeks ago, when my father-in-law had some hard decisions to make and the family gathered in the hospital, I MYSELF called his pastor, knowing that I did not need to be the shepherd this go around. When the meeting was over, my husband said, "Well, let's have one of these preachers pray for us." And I quickly pointed out that I was the daughter, not the preacher. We ALL need a priest – a confidante, shepherd and encourager. So God gave us Jesus.

But Jesus fulfilled the office of priest in another way, too. Before God revealed the perfect imprint of God's self to us, the people had to go to the priest to intercede in prayer. But

now Jesus is our priest, our intercessor. That is why early in this letter, the writer of Hebrews reminds us all: “he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” That is why we end our prayers in Jesus’ name, knowing that, as our priest, Jesus takes everything right to the Heavenly Father on our behalf.

But finally, Jesus is the King. The exact imprint of the one who created, redeemed and sustains us. He is the **first** word – the most important word in our faith. But Jesus is *God’s last and final word*. Nothing that God spoke before he revealed Jesus Christ can ever be more majestic than a savior who can even conquer death. And Jesus is the last image that God leaves in our hearts, until he comes again.

That is why, when my friend Allyson and I spent time working out these summer sermons for our respective churches, we knew that we had to preach the last word with the first. The ending verses with the beginning. Our God of love and peace makes everything complete when he sends the great shepherd into our lives. God’s covenant is at last eternal, whether we do our part or not, because we have been washed in the blood of his son.

So, the writer of Hebrews tells the worn-out Christians in Rome and Roebuck, in Greece and Greenville, in Lystra and Lyman that Jesus will bring to completion every dream, every gift, every good thing that God intends for our lives. May that promise keep us from being weary of witnessing for Christ as we share God’s love in the kingdom on earth. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(1) Interpretation: Hebrews, Tom Long, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1997, pg.3

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