

Entering God's Rest

This is the second week of a three-part series on Hebrews. Actually, we'll be reading only half of the book. Perhaps one of our guest speakers in November will pick it up again.

You may remember from last week that Hebrews is more of a sermon than a letter, delivered to a weary congregation of Jewish Christians who were tempted to leave their faith behind. In his sermon, the preacher seeks to elevate Jesus as superior to anyone or anything else, showing that Jesus is worthy of all their trust and devotion. He also challenges the readers to remain faithful to Jesus despite persecution.¹

In the first two chapters of Hebrews, the preacher states that Jesus and his message of good news are superior to all previous messengers of God's word, including the angels who delivered the Torah and words of God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. He warns his listeners that if Israel was called to pay attention to the Torah which was delivered by angels, how much more should we pay attention to the message that was announced by the son of God. Given Jesus' status high above the angels, how remarkable is it that he gave up that high status to become human, to suffer, and to die.

What will the writer of Hebrews say next to support his thesis that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God? Let's begin with Hebrews 3:1-6.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also "was faithful in all God's house." Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later. Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.²

This is amazing – maybe not to us who have been hearing about Jesus all our lives, but certainly to these early Christians steeped in the Jewish faith. Not only is Jesus more important than the angels who delivered God's word to Moses, Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses himself, who received God's word, led the children of Israel through the wilderness, and built the tabernacle so God could be present in their midst.

The preacher refers to this group of Christians as brothers and sisters united in a heavenly calling. They aren't brothers and sisters "because of blood, or race, or even because they are fond of each other and share common opinions and interests." They're joined as one family because of their common relationship with Jesus, who shared their humanity and wasn't ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.³

We who are part of Salina Mennonite Church aren't nearly as diverse as the group to whom Hebrews was written, but we do have our differences. When we expand the view and consider the other Christian congregations in Salina, the diversity in lifestyle, thought, and belief increases substantially. Is it possible for us to think of these people as brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, with Jesus drawing us all together? How would our attitudes and relationships change if we concentrated on our common goal of following Jesus rather than on the beliefs, practices, and politics that divide us?

As he did with his discussion of Jesus and angels, the preacher follows his point about Jesus and Moses with a warning. Let's read the rest of chapter 3.

*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,
"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,*

¹ This sermon draws from Pulpit Fiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper23b>; The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/hebrews/>; and Thomas G. Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 46-65.

² Hebrews 3:1-6, *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ Long, p. 46.

*as on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors put me to the test,
though they had seen my works for forty years.
Therefore I was angry with that generation,
and I said, 'They always go astray in their hearts,
and they have not known my ways.'
As in my anger I swore,
'They will not enter my rest.'*"

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

*"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."*

Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.⁴

When the Hebrew Christians hear this warning, they know immediately what the preacher is talking about. He's retelling the familiar story of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into the wilderness on the way to new life in the land God promised to them. But the journey in the wilderness was difficult. The Israelites got discouraged and rebelled against Moses. They lost their chance to enter into the rest that God offered them in the promised land.

Once again the preacher uses familiar quotations to support his point. Other than a brief reference to the creation story in Genesis, all the quotes in Hebrews 3 and 4 come from Psalm 95. Let's look at this psalm. Note that it begins with praise and ends with the words of warning that we read in Hebrews.

*O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your ancestors tested me,
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways."
Therefore in my anger I swore,
"They shall not enter my rest."⁵*

⁴ Hebrews 3:7-19, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁵ Psalm 95, *New Revised Standard Version*.

After a hymn of praise to God, the psalmist warns the people to remember the past. Don't forget what happened at Meribah – which means quarrel – and at Massah – which means test. Don't do what the Israelites did, complaining and longing for the “good old days” in Egypt. As a result, they weren't able to travel on to the land of promise where they would have found rest and safety from their enemies.

The writer of Hebrews builds on this warning. If Jesus is greater than Moses, how much higher are the stakes if the followers of Jesus rebel against him? Be careful not to fall into the same trap. Don't fall away just because it's difficult.

We also are in a wilderness like environment where we have to trust God, so let's make sure that we don't rebel like Israel did in the wilderness and lose out on God's gracious offer to enter the new creation. Remember that we are partners with Jesus and with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In him, we can find rest.

In the fourth chapter of Hebrews, the preacher continues to talk about the rest that God promised. Let's find out what he says.

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

*“As in my anger I swore,
‘They shall not enter my rest,’”*

though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” And again in this place it says, “They shall not enter my rest.” Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day—“today”—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

*“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”*

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.⁶

Time after time throughout history, the preacher points out, God keeps creating and giving people a chance to enter “the rest.” And we keep denying it. First with Moses, then with Joshua who led them into the Promised Land, then with David who ruled over the kingdom of Israel. Now Jesus is giving us another chance to “enter the rest.”

The congregation to whom Hebrews is written is tired and discouraged. They're facing ridicule, persecution, and imprisonment. Some are abandoning the faith. The preacher's words to them are applicable to any Christian at any time in history. This includes us.

In these verses, “today” refers not simply to the current date on the calendar, but more generally to the present tense in human experience. Every day is “today.” In addition, “today” carries the sense of urgent time, the critical moment in terms of faith.⁷

The word “rest” also has multiple dimensions. There was rest at the beginning of time when God finished creation and rested on the seventh day. There will be rest at the end of time when the work of redemption is finished, pain and toil are ended, death is defeated, and the world is the way God created it to be. Meanwhile, there is the possibility of rest for the faithful in the middle of time. We can experience those Sabbath days now when we remember the work of God with thanksgiving and anticipate with hope what God will do.

Hebrews 4 ends with a discussion of Jesus as the word of God and as a great high priest. Let's listen to that now.

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

⁶ Hebrews 4:1-11, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁷ Long, p. 55.

*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*⁸

This section of the sermon delivered to the Hebrews – and to us – can be summarized in three parts. First, we cannot hide from God. God’s word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. There is no fooling God or putting on airs. God reads hearts and actions.

The phrase “naked and laid bare” reminds us of Adam and Eve who were naked and unashamed when they were created but tried to hide themselves when they broke their agreement with God. The level of vulnerability described in these verses can be troubling. It’s difficult because of the element of being judged. But there are also elements of comfort and rest found in the intimacy of relationship with someone who truly knows us and continues to love us.

So, let’s hold onto Jesus who knows us, who understands suffering, and who is the High Priest who offers us rest. Jesus was there at the beginning, came down to earth experiencing humanity, went through crucifixion and resurrection, and returned to glory. Jesus joined in the suffering in an intimate way, naked on the cross, open and exposed. We are invited into this journey of salvation. We who are created in God’s image continue to break our relationships with God and with each other, but Jesus came to piece us back together.

Because of this, we are invited – we are able – to draw near to God who offers us mercy and grace. Jesus’ glory in eternity was received through living on earth and suffering. While we suffer, we may draw from his strength and the glory he already has.

Suffering isn’t God zapping sinners out of anger. Suffering happens as part of the human experience. Some of it we bring upon ourselves because we created unjust systems, disorder, and broken relationships, instead of trusting God and caring for all of God’s creation. God is willing able to save us from us, to lift us out of it. We find in Jesus a person of grace who knows our weakness, suffering, and shame. Jesus sees us and wants to heal us. Jesus receives us with grace.

God’s word is one of judgment and grace. It’s important to remember God’s judgment. It’s more important to hold onto God’s grace.

Currently, many of us are finding it difficult to enter into God’s rest. Our lives are disrupted. The picture we held about the way our community, country, and world work is distorted. Relationships are changed, and maybe even broken, as we discover that we view events in greatly different ways. It seems difficult even to agree on what is true and what is false.

This sermon from Hebrews invites us to acknowledge our feelings of confusion and vulnerability. It challenges us to reconsider the sources from which we gain information and to disconnect from the addiction that social media companies build into their platforms. It offers a theology of inclusion and coexistence and emphasizes God’s design for a diverse world. It encourages meaningful community engagement in which we practice God’s love in action to help neighbors in need. The Hebrew preacher would want us to create spaces for belonging and shared identity especially during the personal catastrophes, global crises, and humanitarian disasters we face every day.

*There still remains a place of rest, a true Sabbath, for the people of God because those who enter into salvation’s rest lay down their labors in the same way that God entered into a Sabbath rest from His. So let us move forward to enter this rest, so that none of us fall into the kind of faithless disobedience that prevented [those before us] from entering.*⁹ Amen.

⁸ Hebrews 4:12-16, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁹ Hebrews 4:9-11, *The Voice*.