

Confidence, Hope, Prayer

If you could have read my mind this week, here are a few things you would have heard. *It seemed like such a good idea. What have I gotten myself into? What am I going to say?* These thoughts crowded my mind each time I attempted to work on this sermon.

Two weeks ago I told you that I was beginning a three part series on Hebrews, a book I had never preached on during my twelve years as a pastor. I looked at the lectionary texts, referred to some resources, and decided the first seven chapters would divide rather well into a sermon series. It seemed like a good plan. It's turned out to be quite a challenge.

One of the commentators I've been consulting had this to say, "I have to admit I both love and hate Hebrews because I find it intellectually fascinating. Everything is so nicely laid out in a logical argument. But inspirationally I find it dull."¹

Oh my. Hebrews is highly intellectual and theological. It's difficult to find inspiration, timeliness, or application for today's audience. *It seemed like such a good idea. What have I gotten myself into? What am I going to say?*

So here we are, kind of stuck in the middle of Hebrews, trying to make sense of what we've read and continuing on with chapters 5-7. The discussion will be intellectual and theological. I hope we are able to find some inspiration along the way.

Recall the overall purpose of this book. In a sermon to a weary congregation, the writer, or more accurately, the preacher, of Hebrews seeks to elevate Jesus as superior to anyone or anything else. He challenges this group of Jewish Christians to remain faithful to Jesus even when they are discouraged.²

In the first two chapters, 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 God's laws 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, then it is much more important for us to pay attention to the message that was delivered by the son of God.

In the next two chapters, the preacher announces that Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, one of the heroes of the Jewish faith. He warns the congregation to remember the past. Remember what happened when the Israelites rebelled against Moses in the wilderness. They weren't able to travel on to the land of rest promised to them. 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.

As the writer of Hebrews makes his points, he repeats the story of Jesus, demonstrating that Jesus is more than a mere human. Thomas Long refers to this as the parabola of salvation. "Jesus the Son traveled from the heavenly throne of God down into the earthly realm, moved through history as a suffering pioneer, becoming a full participant in human experience, and then swept triumphantly back up into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of God."³

The preacher introduces this parabola in the first four verses of his sermon. We read from the *New Revised Standard Version* two weeks ago, let's read them from the *Common English Bible* this morning.

In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors in many times and many ways. In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son. God made his Son the heir of everything and created the world through him. The Son is the light of God's glory and the imprint of God's being. He maintains everything with his powerful message. After he carried out the cleansing of people from their sins, he sat down at the right side

¹ Pulpit Fiction, recording from October 25, 2015, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper25b>

² This sermon draws from Pulpit Fiction, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper24b> and <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper25b>; The Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/hebrews/>; and Thomas G. Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 62-112.

³ Long, p. 27.

*of the highest majesty. And the Son became so much greater than the other messengers, such as angels, that he received a more important title than theirs.*⁴

Jesus was with God from the beginning. He came to earth and lived among us. After his death and resurrection, he returned to his place in heaven. According to Thomas Long, “The first time through the parabola, the Preacher’s goal was confidence; he wanted to reassure the congregation that the shifting currents of human affairs, seemingly so random, chaotic, and hazardous, are in truth presided over graciously by the divine son, who is seated at the right hand of God and who ‘sustains all things by his powerful word.’”⁵

The Hebrew preacher goes on to talk more about where to find stability in the midst of the chaos. Is God in control? Is Jesus? Are the angels? Are we? Here’s another passage we read two weeks ago, Hebrews 2:5-9, 17-18, again from the *Common English Bible*.

God didn’t put the world that is coming (the world we are talking about) under the angels’ control. Instead, someone declared somewhere,

What is humanity that you think about them?

Or what are the human beings that you care about them?

For a while you made them lower than angels.

You crowned the human beings with glory and honor.

You put everything under their control.

When he puts everything under their control, he doesn’t leave anything out of control. But right now, we don’t see everything under their control yet. However, we do see the one who was made lower in order than the angels for a little while—it’s Jesus! He’s the one who is now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of his death. He suffered death so that he could taste death for everyone through God’s grace.

*Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way. This was so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, in order to wipe away the sins of the people. He’s able to help those who are being tempted, since he himself experienced suffering when he was tempted.*⁶

Jesus was with God when human beings were created and given the task of caring for the earth and everything living on it. When we demonstrated that we weren’t up to the task, Jesus came and lived among us, showing us how to be faithful, dying and rising to new life. Now he is present with us in a different way.

Thomas Long states that the Preacher’s goal the second time around is hope. “He comforted the congregation by reminding them that Jesus, on the downward sweep of the arc, joined himself fully and mercifully with human suffering and, therefore, ‘he is able to help those who are being tested.’”⁷

According to Hebrews, Jesus is the ultimate high priest. The preacher introduces this concept in chapter 4, expands on it in chapters 5 and 6, and then gives an advanced course on the high priesthood of Jesus in chapters 7 through 10.

We read the last six verses of chapter 4 last Sunday. Let’s read them again.

Therefore, let’s make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following the same example of disobedience, because God’s word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It’s able to judge the heart’s thoughts and intentions. No creature is hidden from it, but rather everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of the one to whom we have to give an answer.

Also, let’s hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God’s Son; because we don’t have a high priest who can’t sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin.

⁴ Hebrews 1:1-4, *Common English Bible*

⁵ Long, p. 27.

⁶ Hebrews 2:5-9, 17-18, *Common English Bible*

⁷ Long, p. 27.

*Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.*⁸

Jesus, God's word, was with God at the beginning when everything was naked and laid bare. Jesus, God's son, can sympathize with our weaknesses, because he experienced our humanness. Jesus, our high priest, offers mercy and grace from his heavenly throne.

Quoting from Thomas Long again, "On this third pass through the parabola the Preacher's goal is prayer; he seeks to encourage the congregation toward a bolder and more vital prayer life by emphasizing that when Jesus the divine Son was traversing the parabolic arc he was filling the role and performing the function of a 'great high priest.'"⁹

In Hebrews 5-7, the preacher expounds on the high priesthood of Jesus. Let's read two passages that give us a taste of what he says. First, from Hebrews 5:1-10.

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

*"You are my Son,
today I have begotten you";*

as he says also in another place,

*"You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek."*

*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*¹⁰

Next, from Hebrews 7:23-28:

Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

*For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*¹¹

The preacher compares Jesus to Israel's priests that come from the line of Aaron. Their role was to represent Israel before God and to offer sacrifices that atoned for or covered over the sins of the people. But, he points out, the priests themselves were morally flawed people so they constantly had to offer sacrifices for their own sins as well as for everybody else's. And eventually each of them would die. Something more was needed.

He then argues that Jesus is that something. He's the ultimate priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, and eternal. But Jesus did not come from the line of Aaron. Rather, Jesus was a priest in the order of Melchizedek, that mysterious priest-king from ancient Jerusalem. Melchizedek appears briefly in the stories about Abraham.

⁸ Hebrews 4:11-16, *Common English Bible*

⁹ Long, p. 27.

¹⁰ Hebrews 5:1-10, *NRSV*

¹¹ Hebrews 7:23-28, *NRSV*

Reading from Genesis 14:18-20 when Abraham, then still called Abram, returned home after rescuing his nephew Lot who had been held captive by four rival kings.

And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said,

*“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”¹²*

In Hebrews 5:6, the preacher quotes a line from Psalm 110. The psalmist, in referring to the future messiah from the line of David alludes to the priest-king Melchizedek as a prototype of this messiah. This leads the author of Hebrews to translate the name Melchizedek as “king of righteousness” and Salem as “peace,” so that Melchizedek is made to foreshadow Christ, stated to be the true king of righteousness and peace.

The Hebrew preacher is comparing Jesus to a competing understanding of atonement, the way by which people’s sins are forgiven and their relationship with God is restored. For the Jews in the time of Jesus this involved sacrifices and prayers offered on their behalf by the high priest in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Recall the history. After the exodus from Egypt, the laws Moses received from God included the building of a tabernacle and a system of sacrifice that the Israelites followed in the wilderness. The first Temple, built by King Solomon, was destroyed by the Babylonians as many Israelites were taken into exile in Babylon. When some of the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem, they rebuilt the Temple.

This sermon in Hebrews makes sense to those who are accustomed to, and lived a life dedicated to, Temple practices. The second Temple was destroyed by the Romans around the time Hebrews was written. Either the preacher is showing how it’s okay that the Temple is gone, because now they have something better. Or he is confirming that the people no longer have to consider themselves tied to Temple practices. He’s building the case that Jesus is greater than the High Priest and Temple.

The author’s whole point is this. Jesus is the ultimate priest-king. He’s morally flawless. He’s eternally available for his people. His vulnerability and his ability to identify with us and walk beside us during our trials and tribulations makes him perfect. He’s superior to any other mediator between God and humans.

As in his discussion of Jesus and angels and Jesus and Moses, the preacher includes a warning in his discussion of Jesus and the high priest. This is found in Hebrews 5:11-14. Let’s find out what he says.

About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.¹³

The preacher seems impatient with his audience. They aren’t brand new Christians, just beginning to learn about Jesus. They’ve taken the first steps toward becoming mature Christians but have slipped back to where they started. In his opinion, instead of progressing in the Christian life, they have become spiritually sluggish and mentally lazy. Some have abandoned the faith altogether.

The preacher’s warning is this: To reject Jesus is to reject one’s best and only chance to be wholly reconciled to God. Don’t do that.

The parable of salvation – Jesus with God at the beginning; Jesus coming to earth as a human to live, teach, heal, and die; Jesus coming back from the dead and returning to glory with God – is the basis of the Christian faith.

This is what our Mennonite Confession of Faith says about Jesus:

We believe in Jesus Christ, the Word of God become flesh. He is the Savior of the world, who has delivered us from the dominion of sin and reconciled us to God by humbling himself and becoming obedient

¹² Genesis 14:18-20, NRSV

¹³ Hebrews 5:11-14, NRSV

*unto death on a cross. He was declared to be Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead. He is the head of the church, the exalted Lord, the Lamb who was slain, coming again to reign with God in glory.*¹⁴

And this is what it says about salvation:

*We believe that, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God offers salvation from sin and a new way of life to all people. We receive God's salvation when we repent of sin and accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In Christ, we are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community of God's people. We place our faith in God that, by the same power that raised Christ from the dead, we may be saved from sin to follow Christ in this life and to know the fullness of salvation in the age to come.*¹⁵

This how we as a denomination interpret what the writer of Hebrews is trying to teach his congregation. I'm glad I wasn't part of the group that wrote the confession of faith. It seems impossible to explain these concepts clearly.

This is what one person said in a podcast I listened to this week. "God in his fullness is stupid hard to understand. Us trying to understand God is a bit like a cat trying to understand the stock market."¹⁶

This podcaster goes on to point out that some of the earliest Christian communities had a letter to guide them – think of the churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, or Rome – or they had an evangelist that stopped by and told them about Jesus. "They didn't get a manual. They had to figure out their relationship with God, what it looked like, how they could be guided by what they were learning together."

That's what we do as a community of faith – try to learn together. Each week I wonder what God might be teaching us through the passage we're reading together. The podcaster's advice was this, "Maybe we're not going to fully understand the relationship among the trinity as described in Hebrews or the character of Jesus as the great high priest. Maybe the relationship between us and him is more complicated than we can imagine. But what draws people to Jesus isn't the complexity that we don't understand. What draws people to Jesus is the simple welcome, the simple love. Stick to these simple truths."

I'll take his advice and state it as simply as I can. I'm confident that Jesus, through his birth, life, death, and resurrection, did something for us that we couldn't do for ourselves. Because of Jesus, I have hope – hope that God will always be with us in difficult times, hope that we can have right relationships with God, with others, with ourselves, and with all of creation. And so I pray, sometimes with fear and trembling, sometimes in despair, sometimes with great joy, sometimes with boldness, always confident that God is present, that God is listening, that God is love.

To God be the glory! Amen.

¹⁴ [Article 2. Jesus Christ | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](https://www.mennoniteusa.org/article/2-jesus-christ)

¹⁵ [Article 8. Salvation | Mennonite Church USA \(mennoniteusa.org\)](https://www.mennoniteusa.org/article/8-salvation)

¹⁶ Pulpit Fiction, recording from October 17, 2021, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper24b>