

God Stands Ready to Help
Smyrna Church
Sunday Evening, July 20, 2008
McGarvey Ice

Text: Hebrews 4.14-16 - 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 weakness, 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.” [NRSV]

Introduction¹

God has been gracious to us in blessing us with such a welcoming church family as we have found here at Smyrna. Our family feels very comfortable here because of your Christian hospitality. Not long after we placed membership our elders made a statement to the congregation in the morning assemblies. In it they affirmed their commitment to us as our shepherds and cast a vision that this congregation will be a safe place: a place where people may experience the redemptive grace of God. Laura and I looked at each other while Steve read the statement and we knew we had made a good decision coming here. I consider it an honor to fill-in for Tim while he is away. Since you have been so encouraging and so generous to us my desire this evening is to bring you an encouraging word.

Read text: Hebrews 4.14-16.

<<SIGH>>

Sigh.... Frustrated. Downtrodden. Irritated. Beset, tempted and seduced by sin. Hardened, persecuted, mistreated, misunderstood, “cynicized” and wearied by the world. Tempted to give up. Worn-out, used-up and burned-out. Sigh...

If any of that resonates with you in your own experience of living as a disciple of Christ, and I dare say it certainly does resonate with me, then are we ever in the right place.

I understand from my reading of Hebrews that *this* is the situation of the original recipients of the letter; this is just the sort of occasion to which our author responds. He has a congregation being pulled in several directions. Certainly a good number of them are from a Jewish background and are tempted to find safety—religious safety, if not personal safety—in Judaism. Others are tempted by sin or weariness. Persecution of some kind is also a fact of life for this Christian community. So our author/preacher applies *Jesus* to their situation so that he can inspire them to persevere in their daily walk with Christ. Our author, whomever he may be, writes to encourage, and he encourages by presenting to them *Jesus*.

¹ This sermon was preached in a similar form at Central Church, Nashville, Sunday morning October 6, 2002.

Text

We have already read this text, but take a closer look at its structure. First of all, it depends on what has been said in chapters 1-4 (therefore, since then, etc in vs. 14). The author has spent a few chapters laying a foundation for the teaching in the remainder of the letter. Our paragraph is a transition of sorts from that groundwork into a major teaching section: Jesus as High Priest.

Our text is structured in a fairly straightforward way: two exhortations, wishes or 'oughts' (the "let us" statements in vss. 14b and 16) surrounding vs. 15 like a sandwich. Vs. 15 concerns the identity, temptation, and ongoing ministry of Jesus.

Read Vs. 14: "passed through the heavens" nearly certain a reference to the ascension of Jesus; but also it is linked back to 1.1-4. Not just a mere reference to the fact of the ascension, but to Christ's overcoming to which the ascension itself bears witness. Victory is his; all glory is his; all power is his!

Exhortation 1: "Let us hold fast to our confession (KJV: profession)." It seems likely that the confession the author here has in mind is not only something made with the lips, but a confessing way of life. Of course to confess with the lips that Jesus Christ is Lord implies a life of Christian faith and discipleship. Our readers of Hebrews are in danger of giving up on the way of Christ; they are in danger of abandoning a confessing lifestyle. The exhortation/encouragement is since we have such a High Priest as Jesus, let us hold on all the more tightly and faithfully.

Read Vs. 15: "sympathize" (so in KJV as "who cannot be touched with our infirmities"); an equally valid translation would be "empathize." Empathize is to experience with someone the same things they experience. Empathy is shared experience. Jesus doesn't merely feel sorry for us as we face temptation, but he feels temptation as well.

"Tested/Tempted" is verbally the same thing we find said of Jesus by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The word used is the typical and ordinary term for any kind of temptation or testing. (Pharisees and Jesus). Our author uses it in 2.18 of Jesus' sufferings; of Abraham in 11.17 of his testing in offering up Isaac.

Here we have the only place in scripture, outside of the gospels, that treats the temptation of Jesus. We have narrative accounts in Matthew and Luke; and a mention in Mark. But only in Hebrews do we find the meaning of the temptation of Jesus applied to an early community of disciples. Think about this: when faced with difficult circumstances, the Hebrews need to understand the meaning of a tempted Jesus.

The incarnation (the en-fleshing, the becoming-human) of Jesus has far-reaching implications for how we go about our ordinary, every-day lives as human beings. For you see, Jesus was just as human as we are. He is like us in every way; we are like him in every way. One commentator² suggests that too often we see Jesus of Nazareth as something other than human, as if he is “Teflon.” As if he is immune to the human experience. Why the very thought of God being like us???

But the teaching of the incarnation and the fact of Jesus’ temptation says that God has not gazed upon us from a distance, but he has entered our world and our experience: (cf. 1.2: in these last days he spoke to us through his Son and John: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...). The doctrine of the incarnation and the temptation of Jesus, even the doctrine of the Trinity, tells us that God does not like distance. God is not a God of distance, rather He desires community, intimacy and closeness. Jesus of Nazareth has drawn near to us--just as human as we are—and so he is sympathetic, he is empathetic. Since he understands, he is compassionate and he is merciful and gracious. He knows us because he was one of us. Our experience is Jesus’ experience...but with one and only one difference, *and that difference makes all the difference.*

Our author says, “yet he was without sin!” In fact, the author will spend the better part of chapter 5 discussing how Jesus is a superior High Priest precisely because he does not first have to make offerings for his own sin before he makes offering for the sins of the people who worship.

Read Vs. 16: The language of “approaching with boldness” has a unique connotation. It is court language. It is speaking freely with boldness, frankness, outspokenness in a court-room setting. Here you approach the judge boldly because you know what the verdict will be. You are unafraid, unencumbered, concealing nothing and holding nothing back. Our author will use the same word again in 10.19 (since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus...).

Exhortation 2: “Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace (NASB).” The exhortation is this: instead of being burdened with your temptations and struggles, and trials, and subsequently running from God or being resentful at God or hardening your heart toward God or and giving up on God, the best place to turn is toward God. The exhortation/encouragement is this: because God has drawn near to us in Christ, don’t be afraid to draw near to him.

This exhortation is for weak, tempted people and it is an invitation of good news! Because of what Jesus has done we need not choose distance or alienation. We can entrust ourselves to a God who stands ready to help us, not to a god who is eager to punish us. This exhortation is firmly rooted in the incarnation of Jesus: God did not sit imperially on the throne and watch from a distance as his children suffered, were tempted, and experienced hardship. Instead he entered our world, he suffered, he was tempted, he faced hardship without sin. His is victorious over it and is now standing ready with mercy, grace, and empathetic help.

Blessed be the name of the Lord! That is good news!

² Gary Holloway

Conclusion

The author of Hebrews applies Jesus to his situation; I want to do the same for us. What is it that makes you sigh, that tempts you, that burdens you, that wearies you, that encumbers you, that scares you, that persecutes and mistreats you, what is it that competes for your allegiance to Christ and his kingdom and tempts you to renounce your confession that He is Lord? Whatever it is, lift up your eyes from it and see Jesus. Take your eyes off of it, and place your focus on Him. In this text we have a dual exhortation, centered in the identity and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Lift up your eyes! And hold fast your confession, approach the throne of grace with plainspoken boldness and our great God will give you grace and mercy.

My brothers and sisters, we can resist the temptation to give up and throw in the towel of discipleship, to renounce our citizenship in the Kingdom of heaven for some petty lesser allegiance, to embrace again a life of sin, a hard heart and a calloused mind not because we are so competent, or so resilient, or so strong, or so creative but because God is so faithful. Not because we have it together but because God through Christ Jesus gives mercy and grace just when we need it. Indeed, I have good news tonight: God isn't standing at a distance. He is close and he stands ready to help. It is entirely appropriate to ask for help with boldness and frankness and openness.

This text invites us. It invites us to hold fast in our hearts and lives the truth we confessed with our lips. It invites us to come to the Father with our every need. Will you go where this text leads? Will you respond to its invitation? Will you trust God in humility and faith and service? Will you join us on the journey of faith as a disciple of Christ? Perhaps the word of God has pricked your heart this evening and you wish to come for prayers or to rededicate yourself to Christlikeness. You will not be refused or turned away at this church. We are willing to receive you now.