

## 10. Hope

### CHRIST ENCOUNTERS

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March 23, 2005 — Wednesday of Holy Week

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### Introduction to the Evening Lesson

Even though we haven't done detailed study of Hebrews, those of you who have been here the last two nights are probably starting to get a feel for how the writer thinks. By the way, you may have noticed that I always refer to the "writer" of Hebrews but never call him by name. That's because we don't know who wrote it.

At one point some thought that Paul wrote it. But the scholarly consensus has long been that too much of Hebrews is unlike Paul's writing and too much of Paul's writing is unlike Hebrews.<sup>1</sup> So, many other authors have been suggested including Priscilla, an important leader in the early church. If Priscilla wrote Hebrews, her gender might explain why no name was attached with certainty to it. But probably the most likely candidate is Apollos, a friend of Priscilla and her husband Aquila, and someone even Paul trusted and commended.

In any case, whoever wrote Hebrews contrasts the stipulations of the Old Testament covenant with what Jesus did. In the old covenant, the high priest would pass through the curtain into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the people. Hebrews speaks, quite mysteriously, of a heavenly or spiritual or true sanctuary through which Jesus passed — in tonight's text this curtain is even said to be his own flesh. Therefore, we have full access to the presence and grace of God.

We encounter Christ in *mystery*. We encounter Christ in *redemption*. Tonight, we encounter Christ in *hope*. To ground that hope in God's Word, the writer of Hebrews turns to the scriptures and quotes the great prophet Jeremiah who promises that God will make a new covenant with his people.<sup>2</sup> So let's turn to the evening lesson in Hebrews 10.

Hebrews 10.16-25 (NRSV)

"This is the covenant that I will make with them  
after those days, says the Lord:  
I will put my laws in their hearts,  
and I will write them on their minds,"

he also adds,

"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Harrelson, ed., *The New Interpreter's Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) 2151.

<sup>2</sup> The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31.31-34)

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

### ONE: Have hope

So far the writer has taken us on a long theological tour of the nature of Christ. Now he answers the question that readers, or if he were preaching this, listeners would have. “So what? If what you have said is true, how should we live?” The answer? Have hope.

The text says, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope.” One of the best ways to do that is worship. That’s why the text is full of worship references.

- Only Jesus makes it possible to genuinely worship, not just sit in the pew or go through the motions. In the old covenant, only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies. But now, all of God’s children enter the Holy of Holies for Jesus has opened up a “new and living way” and, as the text says, “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary.”
- We worship as community. True worship is together as brothers and sisters, belonging to each other because we belong to Jesus. And as brothers and sisters of Christ, we are welcomed into the place the human heart most longs to be, at home in the very presence of God. The old covenant left us with guilt. But the new covenant brings grace and, as the beloved hymn puts it, grace “will lead me home.”<sup>3</sup>

In a book called *Amazing Grace* there is the story of Anthony, a 12-year-old boy growing up in the South Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the United States. Anthony has been exposed to more street violence, crime, and poverty than we can imagine but also to the tender ministries of a local church. The book’s author noticed that Anthony often spoke of “the kingdom of God” and he asked the boy to write down what that meant to him. Anthony didn’t want to do that but a few days later showed what he had written in his little notebook.

“No violence will be in heaven. There will be no guns or drugs or IRS. You won’t have to pay taxes. You’ll recognize all the children who have died when they were little. Jesus will be good to them and play with them. At night he’ll come and visit at your house.”<sup>4</sup>

The writer of Hebrews would agree. Jesus is our brother and with him we are no longer a stranger or guest but like a child at home.

Another image of worship in the text is the allusion to baptism. We come into the “house of God” with “our hearts sprinkled clean” and “our bodies washed with pure water”: the outer

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997) 105.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 238. Quoted in Long, 105.

expression — pure water — a sign of the inner reality — clean hearts. Worship reassures us of God's acceptance and our hope in Jesus.

## **TWO: Encouraging one another**

So when we encounter hope we encourage one another and provoke each other to love and good deeds. One of the best ways to do that is to share stories of hope. Maybe that's what worship mostly is — sharing the story of hope.

One hopeful story that always touches me is told by Anne Lamott, perhaps my favorite author. Her life journey has often been messy but she encountered hope in Jesus through the tender ministries of a little Presbyterian church just north of San Francisco. In one of her books she talks about the hope that Jesus brings.

“One of our newer members, a man named Ken Nelson, is dying of AIDS, disintegrating before our very eyes.... Ken has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant. He looks like God's crazy nephew Phil. He says that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus, and us.

“There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She has always looked at him with confusion, when she looks at him at all. Or she looks at him sideways, as if she wouldn't have to quite see him if she didn't look at him head on. She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life — that he — was an abomination. It is hard for her to break through this. I think she and a few other women at church are, on the most visceral level, a little afraid of catching the disease. But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days.

“So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang ‘Jacob's Ladder,’ which goes, ‘Every rung goes higher, higher,’ while ironically Kenny couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing ‘His Eye Is on the Sparrow.’ The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen — only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap — and we began to sing, ‘Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?’ And Ranola watched Ken rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up — lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me ...

“Then both Ken and Ranola began to cry. Tears were pouring down their faces, and their noses were running like rivers, but as she held him up, she suddenly lay her black weeping face against his feverish white one, put her face right up against his and let all those spooky fluids mingle with hers.”<sup>5</sup>

Anne thinks Ken and Ranola were a little miracle of hope. So do I.

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts On Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999) 63-66.

## Conclusion

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” We don’t know how hope will be fulfilled. We can only tell stories that give us glimpses of it. And when we hear them it helps us hang on to the bold affirmation of the Nicene Creed that “we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” We don’t know how that happens. The great Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall, wrote, “While faith leaves to God the ‘how’ of such a consummation, it is never silent about the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of it. [We] profess faith in a God who wills to complete and fulfill the promises of a creation that has been visited and redeemed by the love that made it.”<sup>6</sup>

We have been visited and redeemed by the love that made us. In her book, Anne also reminds us of Eugene O’Neill’s line: “Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.”<sup>7</sup> We’re all born broken. But because of encountering Christ in hope, we can encourage each other and do good deeds. In other words, we can be the glue for each other of the Lord’s good grace. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 359.

<sup>7</sup> Lamott, 112.