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Hebrews 1:1-4

October 6, 2024

***Hebrews 1:1-4***

***1******Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.***

Today we begin a seven week study of the book of Hebrews. I was very proud of myself for actually planning much farther in advance than usual. Choosing the book of Hebrews from the lectionary would give us perfect eight week lead-in to Advent and then Christmas. I read one commentator that says “the Book of Hebrews describes the supremacy of Christ.” Great, I thought. Let’s talk about the supremacy of Christ for seven weeks, then celebrate Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday; that will put us in a perfect place to start the Advent and Christmas seasons. I felt absolutely ready to roll.

But then I read these statements from other commentators.

* In all the Bible studies I’ve been part of for the last 40 years, I can’t remember anyone exclaiming, “Let’s study Hebrews!”  (Stan Mast, CEP)1
* “For most of my preaching life, I have avoided the book of Hebrews.” (Susan Andrews, Feasting on the Word commentary series)2
* An article about the book of Hebrews called, “The New Testament’s Most Dangerous Book for Jews” (CC article title)3

What is it about Hebrews that makes these commentators say these things about this new testament book? Should we let those comments turn us away from this part of the lectionary? What has shaped the opinions of those who have a complicated relationship to this book of the Bible? What do *we* think? During the next seven weeks we will have a look at some thoughts that come up for each of us.

Very little is known about the historical context. Hebrews is neither a book or a letter. It is more likely a sermon written by someone (doubtful that it was Paul) sometime between the year 70, right around the time of the destruction of the Temple, to about the year 120.3 The audience would have been both gentiles and new converts to following Jesus, written primarily to encourage them not to fall away from their new faith, despite any persecution they may be facing for failing to take part in temple activities. The whole of Hebrews does this primarily by comparing their new teachings from Christ to their Jewish past. Comparisons include forever and temporary; many and One; expectation and fulfillment; sinful and without sin; old covenant and new covenant; earth and heaven.5 It is these comparisons that lead to some of the controversy that leads to avoidance of this book of the Bible. We will see in the next weeks how the author presents these comparisons. We will notice places where the differences between Jewish temple practices and religious beliefs are worded in such a way as to say that the new belief that Jesus is the Messiah means that the old Jewish ways are no longer necessary or valid. Taking parts of Hebrews out of its own time context and cultural context has led to many antisemitic beliefs and actions. Christianity did not replace Judaism. We will take care to work against that during these next weeks, and we will offer a more wholistic and inclusive view of the texts.

This will be important and timely work as the Jewish High Holy Days are upon us, and given the tensions between countries in the Middle East. The Jewish New Year began last week with Rosh Hashanah October 2-4. Our Jewish brothers and sisters will spend the first days of their New Year seeking forgiveness from any they might have wronged, and from God before Yom Kippur on October 11th/12th, the highest of all of the holy days.

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Today we begin the study of Hebrews with just the first four lines. Importantly, the first statement is a relational statement. The assumption is that God still speaks to us. But long ago God spoke by the prophets – in these days, God has spoken to us by a Son. A Son is a much closer relationship than a prophet. A prophet might be an honorable role, a calling from God, maybe a job in a royal court. A son though is a relationship that includes love and trust. It is in light of this relationship that we get this beautiful description of who Jesus is. He is the reflection of God’s glory. He is the exact imprint of God’s very being. I feel most touched by descriptions of God’s closeness. Last month, from James, we hoped to gain the implanted word of God. Imagine loving the exact imprint of God’s very being. This is the relationship Jesus has with God. Although the concept of the Trinity does not exist in the Bible, this line from Hebrews might be the best place to begin understanding that concept. While words themselves are limiting, perhaps being the “exact imprint of God’s very being” is a good attempt at describing how three of the Trinity, but in this case two, can actually be one.

After declaring the relationship, the next lines “declare the identity of Jesus Christ.” The text of Hebrews as a whole has a view to the entire cosmos, rather than only our worldly cares. The text is more like a statement of faith about Jesus and God’s purposes. There will not be talk in Hebrews of Jesus’ particular actions, his compassion for the poor and marginalized, his miraculous healings, or his dramatic encounters with authorities, although a major point in Hebrews is that God’s work in Jesus did not occur above the world and disregard the pain and brokenness. The author of Hebrews wants our faith to take us beyond time and space, into the realm of the imagination. For example, the author tells us that Jesus, the Son, is “the one who is one with God from the foundations of creation to eternity.” How can Jesus have been with God at creation, and yet have been born of Mary also? Much like the author of the gospel of John, this author too is painting larger pictures of God’s work through Christ. We will see in other places throughout Hebrews where the author enlarges space and time and seems not to be concerned with how anything could logically happen. It’s *supposed* to be mind boggling!

Just imagine people hearing or reading these words. The author is saying, “I know you knew Jesus as a man, but I’m telling you that he is more than that.” One commentator says, “Angelic beings, and even human beings, may claim superiority, but Jesus is greater than all created beings, and he is the embodiment of God (verses 1–4); he reveals the essence of God and sustains all things by his powerful word (verse 3).”4

I invite us to keep in mind these outlandish, mystical, and seemingly impossible descriptions of Jesus during the next several weeks. If our minds our truly boggled, we will arrive at Advent with an expanded sense of awe at just what is being birthed into the world.

Let us pray,

1Center for Excellence in Preaching, 10/6/2014, Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12, [Stan Mast](https://cepreaching.org/authors/stan-mast/)

2Andrews, Susan, Feasting on the Word Commentary, Year B

[3](3%20https%3A//www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/new-testament-s-most-dangerous-book-jews) [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/new-testament-s-most-dangerous-book-jews](3%20https%3A//www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/new-testament-s-most-dangerous-book-jews) **The New Testament’s most dangerous book for Jews** Reading and preaching Hebrews without supersessionism, Christian Century, September 2021, Jesper Svartvik

4<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-2/commentary-on-hebrews-11-4-25-12-6> Dr. Israel Kamudzandu

5Erdmann, Dictionary of the Bible