“Yikes!”

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Hebrews 4:12-16

October 13, 2024

***Hebrews 4:12-16***

***12Indeed, the word of God*** ***is living and active and 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. 13And 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.***

***14Since, 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. 15For 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. 16Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.***

“The author Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, writes about the dangers of meeting God in church.  She compares worship to “children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. “It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church,” Dillard writes.  “We should all be wearing crash helmets.  Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.  For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense; or the waiting God may draw us out to where we can never return.””1

Indeed, today’s text begins with words that make the word of God absolutely terrifying! “the word of God is living and active and 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.” That sounds painful! A sword that pierces and divides soul from spirit and joints from marrow! It reminds me of a butcher’s cleaver! That sword that can pierce us so God is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of my heart – makes me afraid! I much more prefer this other biblical reading when I think about God knowing everything about me:

From Psalm 139, “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. **2**You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. **3**You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. **4**Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. **5**You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. (this line always makes me picture a giant hug, embraced and held by God) **6**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

Can’t I have the poetic, comforting, gentle, words of Psalm 139, instead of the brutal sword-piercing words of today’s text? Both texts tell me that God knows everything and there are no secrets and there is no place to hide from God. Why can’t church just be soft and kind and loving and supportive? Where does imagery like a two-edged sword that pierces enough to separate soul and spirit have a place in our worship of God?

It's helpful to remember when and to whom most of our books of the New Testament were written. Many of them, like James, and like Hebrews, were written to people who were experiencing drastic changes in their lives as a direct result of their belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the long hoped for Messiah. They may have left their homeland due to government and society pressures caused by the divisions among neighbors. It may have been too dangerous to hold this belief. They may have been living where they were the outcasts now, or where they were now the distrusted stranger in their new land. There was danger and pressure and there would be suffering. It would not have been unusual to meet the danger of fighting nations with words of battle imagery and language. You may remember Paul did this, in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul wrote at the end of his letter to the Ephesians 6:10-17,

**10**Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power; **11**put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, **12**for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. **13**Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day and, having prevailed against everything, to stand firm. **14**Stand, therefore, and **belt your waist with truth** and put on **the breastplate of righteousness** **15**and lace up your sandals in preparation for the gospel of peace. **16**With all of these, take **the shield of faith**, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. **17**Take **the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit**, which is the word of God.

It is a source of great joy to me, that I was baptized as an adult, 33 years ago today. Like any new follower of Christ, I had a lot to learn. My life was moving along, I was experiencing new things in my new city, and going to church wasn’t a way to seek out something better or improve my life, and wasn’t a hail mary reaction to a crisis. It was undoubtedly something unexpected and profound even then, and only became a deeper part of my being as the years have gone by. But around the time the letters of Paul and these words from Hebrews, new followers of Christ then, would have been in grave danger. We learn from the gospel stories, just how threatened religious and government authorities felt by anything to do with Jesus. He spoke to people outside of usual cultural settings who didn’t have standing in the community, protected people who should have been disregarded, created havoc in religious circles, and spoke boldly to authorities. Jesus was a threat. And if you followed Jesus, your life would be threatened. The author of Hebrews knew this, Paul knew this because he experienced it, as did James and Peter.

All of the book of Hebrews is a reminder that the new life of faith would be difficult, but stay strong and don’t backslide. Psalm 139’s kind soft words are fine for someone without anything to hide – don’t worry, God knows where to find you, God knows what’s in your heart and what you need, and will always have your back. Hebrews 4:12 on the other hand is frightening if you *do have something to hide* – oh, God’s sword will pierce you and dig deep to find and judge the thoughts and intentions in your heart. Psalm 139 is fine if you are *lost*. Hebrews 4:12 is terrifying if you are *hiding*. Psalm 139 is fine if you have questions. Hebrews 4:12 is what someone who has already failed will hear.

As humans we need both. The first part of our text today is no fun if we don’t want a judgy God. A God who pierces you until your brokenness appears and then judges you while you stand naked bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account, is a bully God, a bad parent God, a humiliating God. No wonder no one wants that God for a Father. Fortunately this is not the last line of today’s text. This text as well as the text for next week continue the theme of Jesus as our high priest. *We* don’t have a high priest, but *in those days*, anyone coming to the temple would have presented offerings to a high priest. For followers of Christ, that sword that is the word of God is not a bully, nor is it humiliating because as high priests go, Jesus was different.

14 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. 15 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. 16 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.

The high priest of ancient times was limited by their role and their own humanity, and by their own mortality. Jesus as high priest was not the same – those limits don’t apply to Jesus. The high priest of ancient times would accept an offering on behalf of others, and then go behind the curtain in the temple, to the Holy of Holy’s where only he was allowed, and offer those sacrifices for you. We no longer need anyone between us and our offering and God. You and I share *that* Jesus. We have more options than a temple, or church or particular location to offer our questions and confessions and whole hearts to God. Jesus makes our approach to God direct.

It's a pretty simple argument that the author of Hebrews makes to the new followers of Christ. Don’t backslide he says, because with Christ it’s just easier! It’s like saying, hey, no commute! You don’t need to be where the high priest is, to be completely with God. There is no one place that will bring one closer to God, and there is no place where one can be away from God.

In a way, we need to think about how this changes things for us. When people stopped having to go to church to cleanse their souls, and the institution of the Church grew, different habits and theological requirements came and went. Without high priests, we have better access. As the different denominations grew and reacted to some of these different theological requirements, our habits changed. By now, churches as buildings are dying, personal access to God means that I can be in nature or with my family, or meditating at home alone, or in my church and experience and worship God. It’s as if we have too many choices now. The more energy we have to exert, the less likely we are to do something, especially something new. This is more and more true as the world gets more and more complicated, divided, and worrisome.

If the author of Hebrews were to talk to us now, he might say that it’s great that we have all of our freedoms and direct access to God as individuals, but don’t let that take the place of the most important thing the Church has to offer – community. Connection. The news tells us every day of the loss of connection that is everywhere. Young people are more and more disconnected and are suffering at higher rates than before from mental illness and anxiety struggles. It wasn’t just the pandemic. The pandemic was just a magnifying glass. Old people are more and more isolated and are suffering alone. More and more people of all ages need a place to feel grounded, to feel heard, to be themselves, to ask questions, to share struggles, to laugh and sing and dance.

We cannot let fear keep us from being people of the world as a society, not as millions of individuals. We cannot let exhaustion keep us from the next thing. I see these years of church attendance dropping, political divisions diving to new lows, communities breaking apart, isolation increasing – as a time of re-tuning. An orchestra does great things, takes a break, and comes back and re-tunes before they begin the next great thing. There are any number of analogies. We’re just finding our footing again. We’re not going to backslide.

Let’s pray,

1Center For Excellence in Preaching, Sermon Commentary for Sunday, October 14, 2018,

Hebrews 4:12-16 Commentary, Doug Bratt

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