

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, NC
October 7, 2012
Rev. Pen Peery

God's Word for the World
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
(World Communion Sunday)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but 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. He 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, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere,

'What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet.'

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.'

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I am a member of a group of preachers that gets together once a year to trade sermon ideas. The group is called "The Well." I have no doubt you will benefit from

their insights and scholarship in this next chapter of our church's life through the way my dear colleagues contribute to my sermons!

One of those colleagues helps prepare us to hear our second scripture for today. The book of Hebrews is full of high and lofty language...such that it is quite easy to get lost in the words. "But don't forget," says my friend Dan Lewis, "to keep The Big Idea in mind." "The Big Idea in today's passage is to remind us what is so special about the one we call the Lord, as well as to sustain in us a willing spirit to continue in the faith as we await the coming of God's kingdom."¹

Keep that in mind as we listen for God's word from the first and second chapters of Hebrews...

READ SCRIPTURE

Before reflecting on the scripture we just heard, first a word about the feel of today's service. Today is a "special Sunday" in the church – one that we call World Communion Sunday. For this reason, we have music from Zimbabwe and _____ to enrich our worship.

The tradition of World Communion Sunday started in a Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg in 1936. Since then it has taken on more significance around the country and the globe as a Sunday on which the Church universal celebrates communion and the common identity we have as Christ's body in the world.

Sometimes it is easy to forget how connected we are to the rest of the Christian family. After all, congregations have identities and mission and challenges and joys of their own. We often get busy tending to our own shop...nurturing and discipling and caring for our own members. It is good to be reminded every once and a while that this faith we practice and treasure is shared with billions of people across the face of God's world. It is good to be reminded that when we gather at tables like this one we join with believers of every nation and color and age and stage as we partake of the heavenly gifts of bread and wine which are Christ's body and blood for us.

Probably the most concrete way that I have experienced what it means to belong to the global church is through my participation in mission trips to various countries. In my life, I have seen the church alive and active in Great Brittan, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Malawi, Mexico, and Jamaica. I know our congregation has partnerships or connection with ministries in Mexico, Russia, Haiti, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, to name a few.

¹ I am grateful to the Rev. Dan Lewis, pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Statesboro, GA for his paper on today's text which shaped the thoughts for my sermon.

Like anyone who has been on one of these mission trips, I was profoundly affected by my experience. Transformed, even. It makes sense. We often have our most powerful experiences of God when we connect – person to person, neighbor to neighbor. The God we worship chose to relate to us through the person of Jesus the Christ. We meet Christ in our relationships and connections with one another.

To see and meet and work with people from other countries who have such incredible faith even as they live amidst such incredible need is inspiring. A common response that I hear – and have shared – in the wake of mission trips is often captured by the phrase “everyone seemed so happy!”

And it is true.

To witness happiness and joy in the face of hardship and struggle is striking. Yet when we say that – everyone seemed so happy – what I think we are acknowledging is how hard it is to witness the sufferings of another.

My last experience of the global church was in Malawi, Africa. Our group spent about eight days in a village near the center of country – helping to build a medical clinic and scouting out possible sites for much-needed deep-water wells. Everywhere we went – throngs of children followed, enamored by these strange looking, tall “muzungus” (white people) who drank from a never ending supply of plastic water bottles.

Our group was treated to the finest of Malawian hospitality. On our final day in the village, some of the women pooled what little money they had to buy a small goat that would become our dinner. That night, as we feasted with our hosts in a fenced-in back yard, I was acutely aware of the children who were huddled on the other side of that fence. Children who never had the luxury of eating something as expensive as goat. Children who – statistically – would not be likely to live past the age of 40 because of malaria, or HIV/AIDS, or diseases caused by drinking unsanitary water. Children who had spent most of their week playing with the plastic water bottles that we considered to be “trash.”

If I am being honest – what I am wondering beneath my “they look so happy” commentary is this: how can these people not be weary in their suffering? How can they not be weary in their life? How can they not be weary in their faith? How could they not be weary of holding onto the gospel promise of abundant life in the presence of unending scarcity?

Because I would be weary.

And – let’s not romanticize it – the truth is, they probably are, too.

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Okay, preacher...what does this have to do with the scripture?

Scholars believe that the letter to the Hebrews was not a letter at all, but a sermon. It was a sermon preached to a people who were weary. Preached to a congregation who were a little removed from the immediate excitement and joy and hope that surrounded Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Hebrews is a sermon, preached to second or third generation Christians...some of whom were being persecuted, some of whom were wondering if what they had heard about Jesus was true, some of whom were losing the focus on their faith and giving themselves to other things.

When you are weary and heavy laden, you need a reminder. This sermon reminds those who hear it of the truth – the magisterial truth – about Jesus: God's Word, who was present with God the Creator when the foundations of the world were laid; who is exalted – sitting on the right hand of the Almighty; but who also came to us in the flesh.

How does the sermon say it?

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...

This is a sermon that reminds us of the truth – that Jesus experienced what we experienced; that he was persecuted; that he suffered; that he tasted death...so that we might have life.

This is a sermon that reminds us that where there is suffering – there we will see Jesus. Our eyes cannot conceive of the Jesus who was with God in the beginning...nor can our eyes strain to recognize the Jesus who stands at the end of this age. But we can see the broken parts of this world...we can see evidence of suffering...and when we do, we know that Jesus entered into that space and redeemed it.

Because we know Jesus was raised, we know that suffering is not the last word.

That the power of suffering is muted.
Temporary.

Let's be clear: Suffering is not to be glorified.

Suffering is not God's will.

Yet – as my colleague says – knowing that God in the person of Jesus Christ has been and will go to the places of suffering gives us the courage to enter those places, too. Because, in his words, “the startling hope and humanity one often sees in places of deepest distress is a kind of down payment the new age to come.”²

We often think that it is only people “over there” who suffer. We measure our comfortable lives against those of people in developing nations or housing projects. And, certainly, there is something to be pondered in why those discrepancies exist.

² Lewis, Dan (The Well, Montreat, 2012)

But, at least today, let's be honest and stop pretending that we are strangers to suffering. Sometimes the cruelest of pains hides just beneath the glossy veneer of "having it all together."

Addiction.

Depression.

Deep wells of grief.

Joblessness.

Brokenness.

Like the rest of God's creation – we have tasted the sour cup of suffering...and if you taste it long enough, it leaves you weary.

So this morning, the preacher speaks a word. This sermon is a reminder.

Though we may be weary...Jesus is not weary of us³ – of any of us.

In fact, he claims us – as brothers and sisters. And he welcomes us to partake of the feast which is but a foretaste of the holy banquet in the age to come.

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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

³ Again, with gratitude for Dan Lewis (and Tom Long).