

Psalm 110 and Hebrews 1:1-4

“Jesus, hope for today”

There are certain Sundays that we, as Presbyterians, and honestly pretty much because you go to a church where the pastor actually cares about these things, there are certain Sundays that as Presbyterians we recognize and we celebrate because we feel like they were important in the life of Jesus and should be important in the life of the church that he established and built and created and sustains. God uses the work that we do for His kingdom, but God's kingdom doesn't come crashing down if we are not a part of it, we just miss out, God will find someone else to establish his kingdom. Mordecai made that very clear to Esther.

Today is a Sunday that very few churches even recognize. It is called worldwide, the baptism of Jesus. If you wander into a Lutheran Church, or a Roman Catholic Church, or an Orthodox Church you will know that today is Christ the king Sunday, but pretty much that's it, I would guess. It is a day in our church calendar when we recognize that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist as an announcement to the world that God's Son, Jesus, had arrived. That the Messiah, the anointed one, had come to earth.

Immediately after his baptism he goes off into the wilderness and there he is tempted by Satan, which he withstands after more than 40 days without food or drink. This all takes place before he performs a single miracle, before he teaches a single lesson, before he begins his ministry at all. He is probably 30 when all of this takes place. That is the day that we celebrate today. Like Easter we celebrate his resurrection, Christmas his birth, Good Friday his death. Today, we celebrate Jesus' baptism.

Our baptism, whether it happened when we were an infant or when we were an adult, is a welcome into the family while at the same time a sign and symbol of the washing away of our sin by the blood of Jesus as he died on the cross. In his death, we receive forgiveness, and that forgiveness comes through the shedding of Jesus' blood. Today we begin a new sermon series and we begin going through a new book of the Bible.

Let's look back: 2011 I did a sermon series on Walking in His Footsteps and went over all the places in Israel where I had led groups and Jesus words there. 2012-2013 the Gospel of John. 2014 the Apostles' Creed and James. 2015 Genesis. 2016-2017 Romans. 2018-2020 Acts of the Apostles. 2021 Philippians. 2022 a Read through the Bible, whatever came upon that Sunday as we read through the Bible. 2023, January, the Gospel of Righteousness. Today we begin in Hebrews and it is entitled a letter for today.

Honestly, the more I read in Hebrews and the more I read about Hebrews it was less of a letter written to a church and more of a sermon that meant to be preached and heard and acted upon. So maybe next week we will change it to a sermon for today. As we begin this word that I believe is directed just as much to us as it was to the first century church, we are called to remember our baptism and ask the question: what difference has my baptism, or the baptism of my child made in my life, if any at all.

Jesus' baptism prepared him for his ministry and got him ready to face the great trials and temptations in the wilderness. What the baptism that we experienced over these last five years? Has that approached at all how we change our life now that we have asked Jesus to be a part of it, now that we have made promises to God and to this congregation? Hebrews was written in a way that was meant to provide answers and insight into the faith that we have as disciples of Jesus.

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So when you begin a new book of the Bible it is helpful to ask the question of who wrote and to whom was it written. Those answers are easy for the letter, or the sermon of Hebrews, we don't know when it was written, and we don't know to whom it was written. It isn't named after a town where there was an active church like Romans or Philippians. It's name, Hebrews, came after the first century when it was clear that it was written to those who believed in Jesus and yet had come from a fairly strong Jewish upbringing. So their ethnicity, their identity was Hebrew, but their belief was that of being a disciples, a follower of the Way, of Jesus himself.

It is the best written book of the Bible. It has the most complete and comprehensive Greek out of any other book of the Bible, so maybe it was a scholar, certainly someone who was well educated who wrote it. Even though the themes and subjects were very much speaking to the every day man and woman, the writing is sublime and pretty impressive.

It is written in a time of the life of the church that was probably the most difficult time in its history. The persecution of Christians was rampant and so as a result many Christians, as we saw in Matthew, were turning away from Jesus, cursing him as Peter did, and denying that they ever knew anything about Jesus at all. The term used for that is apostasy, which is meant to define someone who has denied the faith. Hebrews covers that, what do we do with those who have turned their back on the church and ultimately have turned their back on the church?

Hebrews begins by describing how God had revealed himself to his people in the past. Long ago, God used to speak to His people through the prophets. Remember Isaiah and Jeremiah and how God would speak to the people and to the rulers of that day telling them what he expected of them and what he wanted them to do. This was true in the Old Testament with Moses, and Abraham, and the Judges and the Kings, when Israel was a nation. Well, Hebrews states, that is no longer the case now. Look at vs.2, one of the most important words in the Bible, how does it start?

But...whenever you hear that word but in the Bible, it has that powerful effect of telling us that what has gone before will not be able to hold a candle to what comes next. This conjunction is the harbinger of some of the most amazing things that are about to come. But now, says the Lord, I am doing something new. Remember that in Isaiah 43. Or what about this one, you have heard it said...but I say to you and then Jesus reorders all of human history by establishing a way of life built around righteousness.

We have that here, God used to speak through the prophet, but now, God speaks through Jesus. God chooses and chose to reveal himself today through Jesus. All that we need to know about our life of faith is given to us through Jesus, how to act, what God expects of us. This should answer the question of whether or not God has anything to say to us today about the world, about culture and society, or not. Whatever he has to say about who we are and what we follow is seen in who Jesus is. The fullest revelation of God that we have today is seen in Jesus. Don't let anyone lead you astray.

We read all of this in vs.2, that Jesus is our hope for today. In vs.3 he goes on and says that Jesus is the reflection of God. How are we reflections of God in our own lives? Our baptisms, or the baptism of our children ought to raise the stakes for us as we realize that while Jesus is the reflection of God, we made a promise to be a reflection of Jesus. There is so much theology and so much to think about and act on here in Hebrews.

The point of intersection in our lives and the words of Hebrews is various. What happens in Hebrews is first and foremost about God. God in these verses through Jesus moves the powers, God causes the sun to shine, God shakes the foundations, God breaks the chains, God labors in the world. What Jesus is doing for us and how he is our only hope, is seen in Hebrews as what we find God at work finding us, as opposed to us spending our whole life looking for God. God is the primary actor here and it is God who makes it happen.

But as we look at the world today, the senseless killings which seem to be taking place on both sides of the aisle and both sides of the aisle claiming some sort of victory or justification. Charlie Kirk is killed and the narrative is that words matter and his death is a result of his words. Renee Good is killed and the narrative is that her actions caused her death. People on both sides of the aisle in this room are going to be angry because I used either of those names out loud. But this is all a result of sin and you have to call sin out loud. None of these things would have happened if the church took seriously the call of Jesus to be his disciples. You cannot kill a person in this manner and proclaim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We have a real problem with sin. We are afraid to name it, because when we do then it feel judgy. We are afraid to deal with it, because when we do then why do you pick out the sexual sins but the sins of greed and materialism are left silent. But we are living in a time when the church is okay with sin and allows sin, and even pretends that sin is just something that is a mistake and won't really have an impact on us.

But the way that we welcome the stranger in this nation is a sin. The way that we disrespect human life, all human life, is a sin. The way that we don't think how we treat the bodies that God has given us, is a sin. The way that we think anything goes and we are the only ones who can dictate our future, is a sin. Our sin is that which separates us from God. It is true in the church, it is true in your family, it is true in your work and in your hunting club. This sin, our sin, separates us from God. I say this as a sinner, let us be clear.

But look at vs.3 where we read that when Jesus made purification for sins. I had to read that, and reread that, and study that, try to figure out what exactly does that mean. I mean, I was in Italian public schools till I was 8 so maybe I'm not understanding that phrase well, but what does that mean? When Jesus made purification for our sins. How do you make purification? Is it like making pasta, or is it like making whoopie, or what is it?

The author of Hebrews, from the very beginning, tells us the basic fundamental truth about us, and about Jesus. We are sinners. Jesus, by his blood, by his sacrifice, his body was made purification for our sins. He was the object that made purification for our sins, through his death and resurrection. In baptism we see this reality come true. The effect of Jesus' death is cleansing from the sin. That is why Paul states that we have died unto Christ. The purification of the people of God was accomplished by the blood of Jesus on the cross.

The defilement of sin, our sin, not that of Adam, but our sin, erects a barrier between us and God. But by that one action, the defilement of sin was removed forever. Our sin was purged away by the death of the son. Jesus made purification for sins. Without that we would be without God. Calvin stated: The father, however unknown or infinite he may be, becomes known and finite in the Son.

Listen, I have some good news for you who are here today because the world and the nation is making you think God is not able to put things back together again. This world does not belong to the most powerful, it belongs to the one who created it, Jesus himself. Human beings don't end up stuck in their own meaninglessness, they end up the treasure of the beloved Son. The world belongs to the one who redeemed it. Jesus is the hope for today. Amen.