

Isaiah 8:16-18 and Hebrews 2:10-18

“The pioneer made perfect”

There is something about the Olympics that makes me a bit more excited for the days to come. The whole competition between other countries, and even though I am a US citizen, and have been my whole life, my time spent in Portugal and in Italy makes me root for those nations as well. I don't normally watch ski jumping all that much, even though when we lived in Russia we lived right by Sparrow Hill which was right where the ski jumping took place for the Olympics in 1980. I would look down that hill and simply think: no way, there is no way I would ever do that.

Norway was the pioneer of the sport of ski jumping, they started it, they have perfected it, but lately there has been some controversy in ski jumping. Did you know that if you add half an inch of fabric to your ski jumping outfit you can get up to 9 more feet in distance in the air? The Norwegians discovered that if you add fabric to a particular area of your body you can get even more distance. Well, this is illegal and they were caught red handed adding fabric and the coach was fired a couple jumpers were banned for a few months.

I guess there is a fine line between being a pioneer, an innovator, and a cheater. Jesus cheated death, our reading this morning we read that Jesus was the pioneer of our salvation, the originator of our new life without sin because he was the pioneer of our salvation. That word pioneer in the Greek can mean many different things and they all apply to our Savior: Author, Champion, the first to do it. Let's read.

READ

Welcome back to our journey through Hebrews, a letter for us today. There is a phrase that caused me some trouble this week as I worked my way through these verses that we are sharing today. This term of the pioneer made perfect stuck with me as something that could potentially be problematic. We begin in Hebrews with the statement by the author that God who was present and was the author of all creation, is synonymous with the Son, Jesus who was also present at creation and through whom we read in John that all things came into being.

We need to take a step back to last week to understand where we are as we discuss the Son and as we speak about our Savior Jesus who was one of us. Let's pull out that parabola of faith again. So the author says that it makes sense, it is fitting, that Jesus had to suffer and go through what he went through on the cross and in captivity as the pioneer of our salvation, as the one who brought about our salvation. This suffering makes sense.

What is problematic is often the concept that God and suffering seem almost incompatible. How can God suffer? God is God, and he can just choose not to suffer, so why would he choose to suffer? Divine normally means not human, but that is not the paradigm that we are working with when we talk about our pioneer, our originator of the faith, Jesus. But the author states that it was necessary that Jesus, fully God and fully human be one of us. It wasn't an option for any other scenario to play itself out.

But this term "made perfect" is also problematic when we are using it in relationship to God. How can God who is perfect in all things, be made any more perfect than he already is? Well, the author of Hebrews is really trying throughout this entire book of the Bible to get this point across because he uses it 7 different times in Hebrews in relationship to God and to us that God is made perfect, and we are made perfect through God.

So how does this apply to Jesus, the Son, being made perfect. The author is saying that through his suffering, it brought Jesus to a full understanding of who we are and what we go through in our lives in our suffering. Jesus was honed both for humanity through his sufferings, as well as his deity through his sufferings. We have one who lived and died just as we did and so understands all that we go through. Who doesn't want God to understand us? We can say with certainty now that He does.

This was so important for the community who is receiving this sermon back in the 1st century to hear this. They were going through unthinkable sufferings, seeing their loved ones tossed to the animals in the Colosseum, watching their children and their parents slaughtered before their very eyes. The barbarism that they were experiencing in life needed an ally who understood what they were going through because he went through it himself. Since Jesus was tested and this community is being tested, then he can help lead and guide because he understands and has been through it.

Jesus is being made perfect in both directions. Suffering made Jesus perfect by testing his will to be obedient and faithful, remember Philippians 2, obedient even to the point of death on a cross. Sometimes we find ourselves in life saying something like: no one understands what I've been through. No one can understand what I'm going through. I come to church and everyone seems perfect and the problems that they have are inconsequential compared to mine. We've been there.

We hear in this Scripture that the pioneer of our faith, the one who went before us, he fully understands what you are going through. God's love does not protect us against suffering, but it does protect us in all suffering. The next time that you feel that voice in your head that you are better off by yourself in your suffering, hear and believe that Jesus wants to walk with you. And I can speak on behalf of all of us gathered here today, we want to walk with you. We also are able to be made more mature through our sufferings and through our trials and tribulations, and when we try to do it alone we don't understand that surrounding you today are people who have been through it just like you have, you just may not know.

Sometimes in the midst of our suffering there is connected a sense of shame as we are going through. This is a terrible combination, suffering and then add shame to it. Look at vs.11, Jesus is not ever ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. To hear that as we suffer God proudly claims us and envelopes us with his love is something that we need to hear. That then is tied together with shame that maybe we feel with each other, not wanting to share and not wanting to journey with others around us because they won't understand what we are going through or what we have been through.

Jesus, the pioneer made perfect, is the only one who can free us from this shame, and he has created his church in order to work all things out together for good for those who trust in him. Jesus' encounter with sin and the suffering of death equipped him, as nothing else could have done, to help ordinary, sinful, suffering men and women.

In vs.14 the author continues along and lifts up death as that which Jesus experienced, along with suffering, and like suffering, it is something that Jesus was able to face head on and destroy. Jesus is our champion who like during WWII when the allied troops landed and went into those concentration camps they were able to liberate the Jews from their suffering and death, so Jesus broke through the gates of death and killed the commandant, the devil, and liberated those imprisoned by fear and sin and death.

The point is that the author reminds us that Jesus was one of us even in this action. Only a slave, we read, could free slaves. Jesus as one of us was a slave to sin, but he broke that and gave us freedom from it as well. All if this talk about death and Jesus conquering death is highlighted by a real fact that the author lifts up. He speaks very directly about a fear of death that we all have as humans. There is something that wires us to fear death.

Now, in our relationship with Jesus we are taught not to fear death, and some of us are able to do that better than others. I know when my mom passed she did not fear death, not at all, she was looking forward to it and she told m that. But there are some who, look at vs.15, all their lives live in fear of death. When we live in fear of death we make decisions that are short sighted and not God inspired. When we live in fear of death we do things that are only for our good and not for those around us. When we live in fear of death we are imprisoned to the present and have no desire or understanding what it means to live for the future by risking our own lives and our own livelihood, which arguable provides the richest life in Christ we could have.

We find ourselves on a communion Sunday today, which is good because at the end of these verses the author completely changes the metaphor to that of a high priest. We know that Jesus' body and blood was the necessary sacrifice to wash clean the sins of all people. We are the recipients of that. Jesus is our pioneer who was tested and who died and who understands us and is our champion. What God promised, to be the champion over death, Jesus has done.