

THRONE OF GRACE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Hebrews 4:12-16

My sermon today is the second of a seven-week series on the book we know as The Letter to the Hebrews. Although we call this book a letter, and when we look for it we will find it tucked away in the back of the New Testament among other letters, it is not properly a letter. It is more likely an essay or a sermon (a very long sermon). We know nothing about the identity of the writer. The congregation he is addressing is probably located in Rome. The name of the book “Letter to the Hebrews” is given because the congregation to which this book is addressed is likely a congregation of Jewish converts. They would have been known as the Hebrew congregation, in the same way that we refer to the Sudanese church in Gallatin, which is made up of Presbyterian refugees from The Sudan.

As best we can tell, this Hebrew congregation in Rome began as a mission church and it got off to an exuberant start. But over time, the people faced some setbacks and their commitment to the faith diminished until they reached a point of complacency with some of the members eventually drifting away. A feeling of malaise settled in over the group.

It is into this situation that the writer of Hebrews inserts himself. His sermon is an attempt to stoke the fires of faith and help the people push past their discontent and alienation.

As I discussed last week, in the first sermon of this series, the writer begins the book with four powerful verses proclaiming Jesus’ role in God’s cosmic plan of salvation. He argues that Jesus is not simply a talented preacher or a wise rabbi, he is in fact much more. The writer reminds his people that God first addressed God’s people through the prophets but ultimately spoke to the world through God’s Son. This Son is more than human. He is *the reflection of God’s glory*. He forgives sins. He sits at God’s right hand.

As the writer of Hebrews understands the situation, the people in the Hebrew congregation have lost their faith because they never were adequately instructed about Jesus. They were undersold. They weren’t fully educated in the gospel. The stories they were given about Jesus were not enough to sustain them through the challenging times in their lives. I like to image that their knowledge of Jesus was at the Vacation Bible School level and not much more. Vacation Bible School is great for kids, but it is not enough to sustain an adult, especially through periods of adversity.

Last week, Hurricane Michael savaged the panhandle of Florida.

You no doubt have seen the photos from Mexico Beach in Florida where the hurricane landed. There is one house left standing on the beach. This house is brand new. It was just completed in April and was constructed by a family from east Tennessee. Their intent was to create a house that was hurricane-proof. The house is built on pilings that are set 40-feet deep into the sand. The walls are made of poured concrete. The roof and walls are secured with steel cables that connect to the pilings. Some would say all that is overkill. But when the storm hit, the house is about all that is left standing in the neighborhood.

Our lives of faith are like this. The more we invest into building our lives of faith, the stronger we will be. Jesus tells the parable about the house built on sand and the one built on rock. When the storms came, the house on the sand washed away. The house with the firm foundation remained. We build our faith through the gospel, through the entirety of scripture. We become stronger through study, discipleship, service, sacrifice, and fellowship.

The Hebrew congregation appears to be build largely on sand. Some members of the group have wondered off and others are barely hanging on. The book of Hebrews is an attempt to construct a stronger foundation by teaching the people the full nature of Jesus.

With some in the church contemplating leaving the church, our reading for today begins with the reminder that the secrets of our hearts are not hidden from God. God's word is able to *judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*. He goes on to say that God's word, which is *living and active*, is sharp like a sword. In fact, it is *sharper than any two-edged sword*. This sword is like a scalpel and has the ability cut the *soul from the spirit*; it can even divide *joints from marrow*. This language may sound unnecessarily graphic but it is making the point that God's word is formidable. God is aware of our thoughts and plans. If, for example, you are thinking of abandoning the church and relinquishing your belief in Christ, God is already aware of it. That is not something you can hide. No one can hide; all are naked before the Lord. God is the one to whom we must explain ourselves.

In verse 14, the writer shifts from God and over to Jesus. The argument he is making is that yes, God knows your plans but there is indeed a good reason to maintain your beliefs, to stick with the church, and that is Jesus. Jesus is more than you may realize; he is more than you've been led to believe. He is not just a prophet or a teacher or a miracle worker, he is, in fact, a *great high priest*.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for us to grasp the role of a high priest given that we do not have that office in the Presbyterian church. You might think of a bishop or even the pope as being like a high priest. In Jewish life at the time, a high priest would have ruled over all the priests and the people. He would have been the ultimate authority. The high priest would also have had civil authority. But a high priest is not someone that the people would have had much contact with any more

that I have any contact with the governor of Tennessee. Yes, I may see the governor at public events, but I certainly don't have any relationship with him and he certainly doesn't know me.

But Jesus is more than the typical high priest. Unlike the governor, he does know us—everyone. The average high priest, on the other hand, is, as the writer puts it, *unable to sympathize with our weaknesses*. The high priest, in his power, cannot empathize with the feelings of the lowly and the lost.

But Jesus as high priest does sympathize with our weaknesses precisely because he has been there. He is the son of God but he is also human, and through his human experience and especially his human suffering is able to empathize with us. Jesus has been tempted but with one difference, he is completely devoid of sin.

A key component of the work of recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous is the role of the sponsor. When someone becomes part of AA and starts on the road to sobriety they are appointed a sponsor. This sponsor serves as a mentor, a guide, a teacher. Generally, that person has been sober at least a year or two. The key to being a sponsor is they are someone who has been there, who has walked the shoes of alcoholism. They understand; they sympathize.

Jesus is the one high priest who, because of his suffering, has walked in our shoes, and yet at the same time he is the one who has never sinned.

Because of Jesus' familiarity with us we therefore are able to approach him freely. As I mentioned, the governor of Tennessee doesn't know me. I may be a citizen of the state but I can't walk into his office anytime I wish. But, as the writer of Hebrews insists, Jesus not only invites us to come to him, we are urged to so without fear, or as we read, we may *approach the throne of grace* with boldness. Yes, boldly may we approach the throne of grace *so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need*.

It speaks to us all on our individual journeys as well as our journeys as congregations. Sometimes we feel that there is no one there for us. But we are wrong. There is always someone there for us. It is our Christ, it is our savior. He is always there. Not only is he the great high priest for us all, but he is also our friend. Amen.