

“Gathered In” Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 Rev. Michele Ward

October 3, 2021 World Communion Sunday

Habits of Faith Sermon Series: Gather

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

Today’s reading comes from the epistle to the Hebrews.

Listen now for a word from God.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom God appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the worlds. Jesus is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and sustains all things by his powerful word. When Jesus 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 Creator. 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.”

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

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PRAYER

Our stewardship series begins today and continues for the next six weeks. Andrew and I will be preaching on habits of faith. We were inspired by the different movements in worship--gathering, listening, proclaiming, responding, celebrating, and sending. After spending so much time apart from one another during the pandemic, we wanted to focus on the habits of our faith that we practice together. Because it is in our unity in these practices that we draw closer to God and to one another.

We also celebrate World Communion Sunday, our annual practice with churches around the world, to remind us that God is with us wherever God's people gather to proclaim God's glory and grace. This is why our sanctuary is covered in various representations of our global partnerships--Camajuani in Cuba, Pejuhutazzizi in the Dakota Presbytery, and San Salvador in El Salvador. We honor and celebrate our partnerships this morning, too.

So, in the midst of celebrating our life together as a church and our life together around the world as Christians, it seems fitting that we turn to the book of Hebrews, a letter written to second generation Christians in the Roman Empire. This book captures the spirit of an electrifying faith, one that draws people together across social, political, and economic differences--the kinds of differences that marked the lives of believers then and now.

For the majority of my preaching life, I have steered away from the book of Hebrews. I admit that I have dismissed it because of its exclusive and graphic explanation of what happens on the cross. But I hear the words of the author of Hebrews differently after 18 months of pandemic living. I am encountering Jesus in these verses in new ways, and I hope the same may happen for you too this morning. Jesus is described as “the exact imprint of God's very being” in verse 3. This image of Jesus can point us towards how to polish and reflect the image of Christ within ourselves and within our gathered community.

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Pastor Roger Nishioka researches the departure of young adults from mainline churches. He says that young adults are looking for a “palpable, passionate Jesus.”¹ I would argue that the author of Hebrews is looking for Jesus, too, and wants to draw his readers back into a relationship with a Jesus who they can touch, see, and hear. It is through the suffering of the human experience that a passionate Jesus is made perfect--the paradoxical ways of being human fully on display. Jesus embodies contradictions--fully human and fully divine, fully suffering and fully resurrected--all the precise image of God in human flesh. Jesus is nothing if not authentic, the author of Hebrews would argue.

To the Hellenistic Jews of this era, this description of Jesus would have been scandalous. God is a mystery, with a name so holy no human being may utter it. People could never see God because God’s presence is too powerful for us to behold. To the Hellenistic Greeks and Romans, this description of Jesus would be absolutely absurd. A God who lives the full human experience--feels, suffers, grieves, dies--undercut all they understand about the gods being above the human experience and arbiters of the universe’s power. A god who becomes fully human is not God at all. But to the author of Hebrews and the second generation Christians he addresses, a fully human and fully divine Jesus embodies the contradictions of grace and suffering, embodies a God who loves without conditions.² This is the Jesus that the author points us to desire.

The language in this passage may seem a bit extreme, and it would be very easy to think that Jesus is far removed from people and the experience of being human. The author compares Jesus to heavenly and earthly powers to demonstrate how Jesus relates to them both. Not to create distance between Jesus and humanity, but to show

¹ Rev. Dr. Roger Nishioka, “Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 4: Season after Pentecost 2*.

² Rev. Dr. Roger Nishioka, “Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 4: Season after Pentecost 2*.

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how Jesus connects to all peoples in all places--that Jesus gathers us in and brings us into relationship with God through his life, death, and resurrection. We, too, can grow into the Jesus Way--the way of suffering and grace, the way of resurrection and hope.

What makes the Christian life unique is the particular way God invites us to embrace paradox. We are people of grace and truth, light and darkness, life and death, joy and service. These paradoxes flow through the being of God into the incarnate Christ, and Jesus shows us the way to embody these contradictions. In this passage, Jesus represents “authority and servanthood, power and suffering, glory and humiliation, grace and obedience.”³ In all of these balanced opposites, the God of the universe comes up close and personal --into our world, into a human body, and into our lives.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to the generation of Christians after the disciples--the ones who did not see, touch, or hear Jesus themselves, but heard testimonies of his life and ministry, his power and presence. They did not experience the passion or the intimacy of walking with Jesus in ministry. With the pressures of living in the Roman Empire and the persecution of believers around them, they had become apathetic and afraid. Their spiritual exhaustion and anxiety might sound familiar to our ears. Many people I speak with are tired--tired of pivoting at work and at home, tired of pandemic living, tired of trying to maintain some normalcy in the midst of so much uncertainty. It is almost like we are experiencing a type of ‘spiritual chronic fatigue’ --out of sync, weary, unable to muster the discipline or the joy that once flowed from our lives so easily. Hebrews can serve to gather us into a deep and meaningful relationship with God again--one that reminds us of the imprint of God’s image within us and others--one that reminds us that suffering and joy is God’s power within us.

³ Rev. Dr. Roger Nishioka, “Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 4: Season after Pentecost 2*.