



Advent/Christmas Worship Series: “Hope is on the Way”

Sermon Title: “We Are Family”
Scriptural Text: Hebrews 2:10-18
29 December 2013
First Sunday after Christmas Day

A problem with being a thinking being is that there always seems to be at least two sides of every issue. In philosophy a method of getting at the truth we sometimes call “the dialectic” or the “Socratic Method.” It sounds complicated I suppose, but this method of truth finding can take the form of one of those good news/bad news types of jokes. For example: The Good News for the pastor: Church attendance rose dramatically the last three weeks. Bad News: You (the pastor) were on vacation. Ouch! Finding the truth always seems to have a point/counterpoint element to it.

A vital doctrine of our faith is one addressed during Advent/Christmas. It is the doctrine of the incarnation. This doctrine states belief in (Christian theology) the embodiment of God the Son in human flesh as Jesus Christ (*Oxford on-line Dictionary*). Thus on this First Sunday after Christmas we find ourselves in a twelve-day celebration of the incarnation. Our attention has shifted from the manger, the star, the shepherds, and the baby. Now we immerse ourselves in the mystery of the incarnation. As John puts it most clearly: “The Word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Our lesson, the Letter to the Hebrews, does as much as any text to help us to understand the several parts of the meaning of this holy mystery:

- In Christ, God became one of us.
- In Christ, God is with us in our suffering.
- In Christ, we have been freed from the fear of death.

Let us hear the lesson for the day, Hebrews 2:10-18:

10 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.



11 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, 12 saying, “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” 13 And again, “I will put my trust in him.” And again, “Here am I and the children whom God has given me.” 14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Hebrews 2:10-18).

Let’s look at each of these three components from Hebrews 2 that describe the incarnation. **First, in Christ, God became one of us.** We hear Jesus calling us brothers and sisters. This is a theological way of saying that Jesus becomes our brother and “is not ashamed to call us/them brothers and sisters.”

Many of us know the distinctive relationship that siblings can have. Not always, but often siblings are particularly close. You might have a best friend or spouse with whom you share everything. Yet often no one understands us like our brothers or sisters. Few people know all our good and bad qualities, or our accomplishments or our faults, quite like a brother or sister. Often, it is comforting to know that there is someone just like you, someone who went through the things you did, someone who lived like you. For this reason Christ became one of us and as Hebrews puts it: “It was fitting that God . . . should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings . . . [and] . . . Jesus is not ashamed to call them [us] brothers and sisters.” Thus, theologically speaking, Hebrew tells us that Jesus becomes our brother.

A second aspect of this lesson reminds us that **in Christ, God is with us in our suffering.** Hebrews says: “Therefore he had to become like his brothers



and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.” What this means is that Jesus can only experience what human beings experience—both joy and suffering—if Jesus is indeed a human being. In the church’s history this identification with us makes some of the faithful nervous. This is why when Jesus is tempted the text quickly says “has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Trying to find a balance in the phrase “fully human/fully divine” has been formidable and this controversy has spawned a number of Christological heresies:

Docetism, Sabellianism, Ebionitism, Nestorianism, and Arianism among others. In one way or another, these heresies considered Jesus to be a man, but not God.

Hebrews depicts Jesus as a pioneer for people and one who opens the way to God. Jesus leads us toward a vision of a better life. That is what Jesus the pioneer does, he opens the way to life with God. We understand what a pioneer is from living on what at one time was a frontier of America. A pioneer frequently suffers during the journey through rugged terrain. And to complete the analogy, Jesus the pioneer indeed suffers on his journey. Hebrews says that Jesus was made “perfect” through sufferings. We base the word for “perfect” on the Greek word *teleos*, which means to accomplish a goal or purpose. The *telos* for a hammer is to hit a nail, for example.

The idea is that Jesus reaches God’s goal through his sufferings. His suffering is unique in that it is done on our behalf, since it conveys the love



and grace that create a relationship with God. His suffering also provides assurance that although those who follow the Pioneer will also encounter suffering, it is not God's final word. Jesus has made a future for his followers. By grace, they too move through their suffering and into a future where resurrection has the last word.

So: **1—In Christ, God became one of us. 2—In Christ, God is with us in our suffering.** And third, **in Christ, we have been freed from the fear of death.**

If you need convincing that people fear death and are anxious about the future, then all we need to do is watch how people are continuously grasping to control the things about us. Simon Critchley wrote last summer an essay in the *New York Times* that read in part (*The Gospel According to Me*, June 29, 2013):

The booming self-help industry, not to mention the cash cow of New Age spirituality, has one message: be authentic! Charming as American optimism may be, its 21st-century incarnation as the search for authenticity deserves pause. The power of this new version of the American dream can be felt through the stridency of its imperatives: Live fully! Realize yourself! Be connected! Achieve well-being!

Hebrews and the gospel message tell us that we need not fear—and thus control our lives—for Jesus has gone before us to open the way to God. So this third feature of Hebrews is an image of Jesus the liberator (2:14-16). The clashes in which we find ourselves are revealed in the nickels and dimes of our daily life. Occasionally the drama takes the form of addiction—sometimes we see it in dysfunctional family systems. This image of our clashing worlds identifies that we are not always free agents. We are dragged into circumstances where evil twists our wills. Despite the fear, we cannot break free—at least not of our own will.

It is at this point, Paul calls it our weakness that Jesus interrupts the



status quo to bring us liberation and freedom. The defense Jesus uses against evil is simply the love of God, which Jesus bears through his own suffering and death. Jesus' crucifixion is challenging. It shows that God is not willing to let the world remain under the dominion of other powers. In Jesus crucified and risen, God provokes evil with love and evil's fraud with truth. It is in this divine scenario that we are set free.

When God wanted to reveal the divine personality in a most tangible, reasonable, and persuasive way, then God became a human being. John's Gospel writes of the divine logos becoming flesh. In his newest book in a 7-volume series, Thomas Cahill mulls over one of the major theological differences between Eastern and Western Christianity. A major theological difference was how East and West each grappled with the question of Christ. They asked who is the Christ and why has he come?

To oversimplify Cahill's argument, as the Eastern Church approached these questions their answers generally emerged from obscure Greek philosophy and mysticism. By contrast, the Western/Roman church gravitated toward a more corporeal understanding God's revelation—that is a more physical conception and construction of revelation. God condescended to become human and thus the incarnation of the deity into humanity became the focus for Western theology. Cahill puts the point this way:

Despite the aspirations of so many mystical Greeks, human beings are not disembodied spirits. What should matter to us is not so much the inner life of God—and whatever *that* may be, the truth is that not one of us knows squat about it—as the impact of divine revelation on our own lives. The only point at which we can sensibly connect with the Trinity is the point at which, as John's Gospel puts it, “the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us” (*Mysteries of the Middle Ages: The Rise of Feminism, Science, and Art from the Cults of Catholic Europe*, Doubleday, New York, 2006, pp. 46-50).



Thus, if we accept Cahill's suggestion as credible, we Western-types are much more given to the practical, down-to-earth ways the gospel intersects with authentic human life. Clearly there are many theologians in the West, and many of them write and talk much, but there is a plain and unpretentious aspect to our Western theologizing that keeps us grounded on earth.

Because Christmas Eve is so much about the incarnation here is a story that speaks to divinity becoming humanity. In the heart of London is a place known as Trafalgar Square, a memorial to England's great naval hero, Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson. Specifically, it memorializes the battle of Trafalgar off Spain's southern coast. There, on October 21, 1805, the British fleet under Nelson defeated the French and Spanish fleets.

Although it was one of the greatest naval battles in history and gave England undisputed control of the sea, Nelson was wounded and died during the battle. He was brought back to London and buried in a crypt in St. Paul's Cathedral.

In the middle of Trafalgar Square stands a tall column with a giant statue of Horatio Nelson on top. But Nelson is so high above the passers-by that his features are indiscernible from the pavement. In 1948 something was done to remedy this situation. An exact replica of Lord Nelson was placed at eye level where it could be seen, touched, examined, and appreciated by the people walking in the square. This brought Nelson down from his colossal column where common men and women in the streets could see him (unpublished sermon, Rod Wilmoth, *The Extra in Ordinary*, Omaha, NE, 24 Dec 1990).

This is how God incarnated the divinity into Jesus—he brought him down.