

Words from a Preacher
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Hebrews 5:1-10

Can I tell you something? I'm not bothered, not one bit, by the mystery of God. As a matter a fact, I am comforted by the idea that no matter how smart I become, no matter how hard I try, no matter how much money I spend, no matter how many do-it-yourself YouTube videos I watch...no matter any of these things...I will never, not ever, be able to fully grasp or explain the complexities of our Creator. God is just that big and that mysterious and full of that much love, and I scarce can take it in.

But as I speak these words to you, I hear aloud how drenched they are in fortune and privilege. I've never had to guess where my next meal is coming from. I've never been a refugee in a foreign land. I've never been on the wrong end of a natural disaster.

I've never lived in an occupied territory. I've never grieved the loss of a loved one taken in an unfair, or untimely, or unexplainable way. I've never had any real reason to doubt that the world could be anything but good in the grand scheme of things.

I've never had to worry, not once, not even for one second, if my presence in a professional, or social, or political situation might be compromised, even in the slightest, because of my skin color, or because of my sex, or because of the person I choose to love, or because of my health, or because of the God I choose to worship. And none of this freedom from worry is related in any way, not at all, to my righteousness, or to my giftedness, or to my deservedness.

I guess what I'm telling you is that I've never had a compelling reason to feel wronged by God. And I've never had a compelling need to have God explained to me in full. And I know with certainty, that makes me a very fortunate person. And in many instances, it makes me a naïve person. And it also means that mine is most likely not the prototypical spiritual experience.

Therefore, I often find myself flummoxed when confronted by texts like today. Unlike the author of Hebrews, I do NOT believe in the theory of substitutionary atonement. That's a fancy way of saying that God's plan to restore the universe was to offer the life of Jesus as payment for the sins of humanity. And Jesus having gone to the cross, the slate has been wiped clean for us in a manner similar to ritual sacrifice. Drive down State Road 74 East and you'll no doubt find a few billboards that say it more succinctly than I can: "His pain. Your gain." "He GoT up so we can, too."

Let me be clear. I don't believe in this kind of theology. I do believe that Jesus was of God. And I do believe that Jesus chose to live as God called him to live. And I believe that Jesus lived in such a way, that the cross was eminent. You cannot continually defy the emperor and expect anything less. And I do believe that because Jesus lived in the way that he did, you and me, and all of humanity have been fundamentally transformed. I do NOT, however, subscribe to the idea that God's world makes the cross inevitable. Caesar's does.

I often tell our Bible Study class to envision people like Martin Luther King, or Gandhi, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or any other dissenters of note. At some point, they lived into their callings so fully, and

their protests became so dangerous to the status quo, that if they kept going, a cross was going to be waiting for them. And yet they still chose to proceed. And I think the life of Jesus was the same way.

I am *wandering* a little bit this morning, and I'm sorry for that. But I wanted you to hear that part of my thinking, before I told you the next part of my thinking.

I don't believe in substitutionary atonement. But I do understand why our author might. If you were a Christian in late first-century Rome, or in the occupied territory of Palestine, it would not have been a fun time to be alive. The temple, and the city of Jerusalem had been sacked, or soon would be. Pompey would have suffered the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, or soon would. And accounts say the whole region was darkened with dust and ash for months afterwards. To be a Christian in Rome was to be marginalized. And the kind of chaos that existed made it rather easy to believe that these were the end of days.

If you lived back then, you also lived in an age of ritual sacrifice. We Baptists have it pretty easy – we have autonomy over our local congregations, and soul freedom – therefore we rarely rely on priests or other intercessors to help connect us with what is sacred or divine. Not so for folks back then. You needed a priest to connect you to God. Like it or not, life, especially spiritual life, was transactional.

In the life of Jesus, our author sees the metaphor of priest, one who intercedes for his people; one who humbly accepts his call; one who like those whom he serves, is not without fault – some say sinful, I'd just say human; and one whom God designates as worthy and whole. Jesus becomes the mediator for God and humanity.

Therefore, Jesus' death is not the senseless execution of another prophetic voice. Therefore, a life without the physical Jesus in a chaotic world, is not a reason to abandon one's faith. Therefore, something more lies beyond what's right now.

If Jesus is high priest, if Jesus is a sacrifice, if Jesus' life has made ours a little more bearable, if Jesus' life says: "This, THIS, whatever it is we call 'this;' If THIS, is NOT the final word, then God is!!! And that means there's hope. And God's got us. The bill's been paid, y'all.

I tried to read today's text with empathy for the person who wrote it. And it's a beautiful text, and a thoughtful text. But for me, the text still offers more questions than comfort. I am, however, able to see how it could offer comfort to others in a different place than me. Some of you sitting here today might be those people.

But I think that's the beauty of our scriptures. Pending our lection each week, we'll find a balance of certainty and mystery; happiness and sadness; justice and injustice; love and hate; calm and chaos; and God, in the middle of it all. And I think that's their purpose – the scriptures offer us multiple avenues to engage our God, to ponder our God, to invite our God into our lives.

Today's lection doesn't make me think of Jesus as a sacrifice for my own life. Instead, today's lection calls to me to think more clearly, and to strive to articulate more clearly, what it is Jesus means to me.

And here's what I came up with. The author of Hebrews wants to make sacrifice both a verb and a noun. Jesus sacrificed on our behalf and was a sacrifice on our behalf. But I cling much more closely to the verb. Jesus sacrificed. He chose to give up, to offer as sacrifice, all those things that prevented

obedience to God: power, material wealth, privilege, status, etc. And in so doing, he demonstrated for each of us, that our dependence is not on such artificial, life-draining pursuits, but is instead on God. In other words, Jesus freed us to be obedient to God, not obedient to Caesar and Caesar's trimmings.

And it occurs to me, that if I'm really paying attention to the life of Jesus, I ought not be so concerned, and so dependent on my ability to determine if God is a certainty or a mystery, or if Jesus' sacrifice is a noun or a verb, as much as I ought to be concerned about my dependence on God.

I am privileged. I am fortunate. I feel blessed by Caesar's standards. I'm guessing the author of Hebrews, and more specifically the congregation he/she preached to had another kind of footing. For me, Jesus is exemplar. For them, Jesus is a martyr and a sacrifice. For others, Jesus is a friend, or a victor, or even an innovator.

Regardless of how we see or know Jesus, one thing is certain: Just like me and you, Jesus was begotten of God. And in some way, explainable or unexplainable (you choose!), his was a life that transformed and still transforms each of ours. I need that force in my life. And the author of Hebrews needed it, too. Because, if Jesus, just like us, was of God, it means that me and you, and the author of Hebrews, we can all be Jesus, too! And this world needs Jesus!

And so the two of us bear witness. It'll never be identical in form, be it social, political, or theological. The author and I know Jesus in different ways. But our witness is identical in spirit: a declaration of our need for God, through the life of Jesus, to transform a broken past into a better present.

Hey Author of Hebrews, not a bad sermon! I'm pretty sure your text had its desired effect: to help us reflect on how God is shaping our lives. And to start a dialogue with one another.

May it always be so! Amen.