

Hebrews 1:1-4  
Jesus is the Greatest  
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell  
2-14-16

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This morning, we begin a new series of messages that will take us through the next forty days and up to Easter. We will, in an even more direct way, reflect on who Jesus is and what he came to do. And to do this, we will read and reflect upon the book of Hebrews.

Now for this series, not only have we given this series a title—which I particularly like—but we even have symbols that describe the theme of our time together. I've asked Kari to create a graphic for us, which as usual she did a superb job. Each week, we will identify what Jesus is greater than, AND therefore, what that means for our lives.

Reading the book of Hebrews offers a unique challenge. We don't know who the author of Hebrews was. Unlike other letters of the New Testament, the author isn't named in the opening greeting. What becomes immediately clear, though, as we read is how deeply rooted in Old Testament tradition and theology the author is. Drawing numerous comparisons between the Patriarchs and Priests from the Old Testament, and Jesus of Nazareth, the author is constantly reminding us that Jesus is Greater than... Jesus is a more perfect... Jesus is the great high... In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is placed in such a high regard that scholars have called the Christology (the theology of Christ) of Hebrews “nose-bleed Christology.” Christ is so high and lofty, in the mind of the author, that we're likely to get a nosebleed when we read Hebrews together.

So turn to your neighbor and ask, “Did you bring tissues?” Throughout this Lenten series, Hebrews is going to take us up into the stratosphere of the holiness and greatness of God. More importantly, though, Hebrews is going to draw us closer to gracious offering of the Messiah.

This morning, I want to begin by asking us to reflect briefly on priorities. Think about the equation of your life, each one of us has that greater symbol between us and the stuff of our lives. What direction is it facing? What's on the left side of the equation? Is that equation flip flopped for you, are there things that are more important, greater than Jesus in your life? Instead of giving something up for Lent, I want to invite you to consider the way in which you might ask God to help you reorder that equation.

That's where Hebrews begins. Right out of the gate, Jesus of Nazareth holds the primary position in the cosmos. These first four verses do this in a few ways. Verses 1-4 tell us what Jesus brings; why he brings it; and how it is meant to change us.

Now, there is no denying that Hebrews is a challenging book. When people think about teaching Bible Studies or hosting small group discussions, Hebrews is not always high on the list. It's dense stuff, which is why we produced a study guide for you. If you choose to use it, I think it will drive home the stuff of Hebrews and make it readily usable to you. The other thing I would encourage: bring your thinking caps, and a pen and paper for notes. It's ok, I give you permission to take notes during the sermon. And if you're passing notes, well, I'll never know.

Hebrews opens with this beautiful and majestic phrase: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors.” Already, the author of Hebrews is setting apart Yahweh as unique and distinct. God spoke to our ancestors, God speaks, God had/has conversation partners. But in these last days, which is God speaking from the end of time, in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son.

God is not only the one who spoke the cosmos into being with a Word, but spoke and created humanity, and even now speaks to us through his Son. How amazing, how wonderful. The God of the universe wants to have a relationship with you and me through a person. The way he does it is in the person of Jesus Christ. God is not a divine impersonal force. We have an intimate, personal God who speaks and wants a partner in conversation.

But Hebrews doesn’t stop there. It’s not just that God speaks, but God speaks with finality. What I mean by this is, God’s speech, God’s word to us is both intimate and definitive—which means sometimes it’s going to say things we don’t want to hear. It makes a difference who’s driving and who’s sitting shotgun. No doubt you’ve all heard the quote that if Jesus is your co-pilot, he’s sitting in the wrong place. When God is in charge, it means that his word has special significance and authority over us, and that means there are times when God will say things we might not want to hear.

Think of it this way: those of you who are married, do you remember what it was like with the other person before you were married? Everything was gumdrops and lollipops, right? Then you got married and eventually you realize that something had changed, right? This person, who before now, was only and always pure undiminished bliss, now has a will that on occasion opposes your will, tells you things you don’t want to hear. They say “this is the way it is.” And you don’t like it. And for a while you can adapt, you think, “Well, if I just give it time, pretty soon he or she will bend to my will, I’ll get them to change.” But then you realize that there are some things that are final, these are just the way things are going to be. And you face a choice: I can either continue to resist, digging my heels in—in which case your intimacy and relationship won’t last—or I can accept that, in order to be in a relationship with this person, I accept these finalities. Otherwise, there’s no relationship.

The men of Stepford Connecticut didn’t like that, not at all. They decided to come up with another way. In the remake of the Stepford Wives, they didn’t like that their wives had wills of their own, and contradicted them and in some cases refused to be subservient, so they put little microchips in their brains. Now they were totally content to be in the home doing whatever the men wanted. But what they realized is that with this, there was no relationship. You can’t have a relationship with an appliance. When the other person has no will of their own, nothing that contradicts you, nothing that requires us to adjust to the other person’s finalities, there is no relationship.

The invitation to read and consider the God of the Bible is the invitation to encounter a God of finalities. With God, there are some things that are going to rub us wrong. There is going to be conflict, both internal and external, to having a relationship with this God because God’s will contradicts ours—that’s what sin is, our refusal to bend our will to God’s, and this leads to which leads to alienation and isolation.

When a person says, “I want to believe in the God of love, the God who openly accepts everyone and everything,” what they’re saying is I want a God who never challenges their will, who never contradicts you, who always does just exactly what you want God to do. And I want to suggest that you can’t have a relationship with that kind of God. What you’re actually looking for is a Stepford

god.

What Hebrews says, straight away, is that God, this God, speaks, and speaks definitively. And when God speaks His word is definitive, it has finality, it's trustworthy and true—even when it rubs us wrong, even when it crosses our will. Isaiah says, the grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord lasts forever.

Next, we come to why he brings it. Why does God speak with finality in His word? Verse three continues, and here's where we first encounter some of this nosebleed Christology. **He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.**

Last week, we talked about how the disciples saw Jesus, together with Moses and Elijah, and from them they saw the radiance of God's glory. In the book of Exodus, God's glory, God's presence led the people of Israel through the wilderness in a pillar of fire. It was so awesome and so powerful, that at one point it literally stops the Egyptian army in their tracks. When the pillar descended upon Mt Sinai, where God gave the law to Moses, it was so powerful, so palpable, that you couldn't even touch the mountain. Later, when the Temple of Solomon was dedicated, it came and was with them again. What is this cloud? It's the Glory of God. It's God's presence with them.

But this cloud is still sort of impersonal, it's still vague and elusive. It led the people at certain times and other times it was absent. What the writer of Hebrews says is that now we have something concrete, now we have something relatable, now we have someone that makes sense to us. Jesus of Nazareth is the embodiment of God's glory.

As humans, we have an innate need to know where things are going. Maybe you're like me, you like to be behind the wheel on every car trip. Even when I'm sitting shotgun, I'm driving—just ask my wife. That's because I'm a control freak. I want to be in control of where we're headed and how we get there.

Hebrews says that the ultimate end is known by Jesus. Does the one with the most toys really win? Does history flicker out with a whimper? Do the good guys finally come out on top? The writer of Hebrews says that in the end, it all belongs to Jesus Christ. He is the one who holds history, who holds time, who holds the story of creation and the story of you in his hands. And that story doesn't disintegrate into chaos or futility; it endures as a holy inheritance. We don't end up in meaninglessness, we end up as the valuable treasure of the beloved Son.

So what? What does this mean for us now? Well, it means we have a question before us: will I continue to resist God's will, or will I bend my life in obedience to his? Will we go on being our own gods or will we trust that Jesus is the greatest?

NT Wright has a great quote, he says: "How can you live with the terrifying thought that the Hurricane has become Human, the Fire has become flesh? That Life, capital L has walked into our midst. Christianity either means exactly that, or it means nothing."

I heard this illustration this week, and it absolutely stopped me in my tracks. If the distance between the earth and the sun is 92 million miles, and is represented as the thickness of a sheet of paper, then the distance between the earth and the next star would be a stack of paper 70 feet high; and the

distance across our galaxy would be a stack of paper 310 miles high; and our galaxy is just one little speck of dust in the universe as it is. And if there is a person who holds all that together with the word of his power, his pinky, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your personal assistant?

Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God. The question is: Will we acknowledge Jesus' rightful place not only in our lives, but in the cosmos? And will we listen to his word and know that his will for us is to bless and not curse, to give us hope and a life filled with promise? And will we set out on this Lenten Journey to discover, trust, and follow Jesus, Lord of the universe and Lord of our lives?