

I Got Kin
Genesis 2.18-24, Psalm 8, Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12
Sunday, October 4, 2015
World Communion Sunday
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Jesus is not our first choice. Let's go ahead and get that out of the way. We're here in worship. We meet like this a lot. We sing and pray and confess and bless. That's why it's all the more necessary for us to tell the truth: Jesus is not our first choice.

Oh sure, when the sun is shining and people are kind and the sky is that rich October blue, the Jesus Way seems effortless. Love your neighbor as yourself, seek first the kingdom of God, throw open the doors and invite everyone (without exception) to the banquet.

But when that first storm cloud appears, and we are challenged with the complexity and darkness of life...well, Jesus is not our first choice. When our hackles are raised, and we dig our heels in for a fight, and we begin to anticipate an attack...then we're back to the lessons we learned in our families of origin or from that bad break-up or just somewhere along the way. Protect, defend, fight, push back.

The writer of Hebrews knows some things about us and our predictable human nature and invites us into a story this morning. We love a story.

The writer will ask us, "What's the guiding story of your life?" Everyone lives by a narrative of how we think the world works and how we think our lives fit into that world. Or maybe our story tells us we are the actual world and everything around us is scenery and supporting cast. Our guiding story influences the way we lean—we lean into those raised hackles or we lean into loving invitation.

A wonderful part of this role I get to play in your lives is listening to your stories. We meet for coffee, visit in my office, correspond by email. We get to start at the beginning as you tell me where you're from, what the family who raised you looked like, how you ended up right here at this time, this moment, in this place.

You tell me about spirituality. You've given up on faith, you're finding faith for the first time, you're returning to faith. You're carrying wounds and baggage and struggling to make sense of it. You've had a pretty good life and are relatively joyful in all things. Our stories are varied, and they shape us every day. The word in Hebrews this morning is

that we have access to a better story than all the ones we've known. We have the stories we carry and then we have the story of the Way of Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews seems to be a preacher, and it's thought by many scholars that this was a sermon passed around among the early church to be read aloud. It's significant that this word was meant to be shared aloud rather than individually read because of its intended goal for hearers. Walter Ong studies the differences between privately studying a written word (even looking down at a sermon manuscript in worship as opposed to receiving that same word by ear) and "observes that 'the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker.'"¹ This thing that we're doing right now is as much about the formation of a people as it is about the transformation of individual lives.

The preacher behind the Hebrews sermon wants that unity. In sharing this word among early churches, the hope is that listeners both hear a better story for their individual paths AND find themselves knit together by a common theme; a story that God has been telling for a long time and will continue telling through their lives. The preacher begins:

"Going through a long line of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end. This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature. He holds everything together by what he says—powerful words!

So, my my brothers and sisters, holy partners in following this call to the heights, take a good hard look at Jesus. He's the centerpiece of everything we believe, faithful in everything God gave him to do."²

And then the preacher points back to Genesis chapter 2 reminding us from our own stories of creation that it was never good for humans to live in isolation. From the very beginning of all things, God gave us each other for community, partnership, stewardship. The writer reminds us that we belong to each other, and our stories are intertwined. The writer then moves to Psalm 8 and the poetry of God's invitation for humans to partner with the divine in the care of all the world.

¹ Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, p. 6

² Hebrews 1.1-2; 3.1-2, *The Message* with NRSV phrasing in 3.1

This old sermon is weaving well-worn passages of scripture together to make a point: you have this old story you keep holding onto as the guide to your life. And yet there's a better one—a story of relationship, loving partnership with the divine, transcendent awareness and possibility. Christ will carry you to the Heights! Why aren't you living into this better Way?

This question applies to the Church at large and not just us individual believers. Remember that this sermon was, by design, read aloud to multiple faith communities. One of the challenges to them is that they were giving up too quickly on the Jesus Way and returning to what they had known of faith, culture, and spirituality in the 1st century. So we ask, have we given up too soon, too? What old story are we holding onto as the Church? How do we let go of that one and welcome this better story of higher partnership with God?

In the conversations you and I are having about what it means to be church and what it means to follow the Jesus Way, we talk about the "ticket punch" Christianity most of us have known. Believe this precise, handful of things about who Jesus is and what Jesus did, then your ticket is punched for eternal security. And the unspoken part of "ticket punch" Christianity is that the rest of this life doesn't really matter that much. Being known by the way we love each other, caring for the earth and everything in it, seeking justice for those who are ignored and oppressed are nothing, in the old story, compared to that ticket we have secured for ourselves.

Many of us are tired of that narrative and find it lacking. The choice then is to give up on the Jesus story altogether or to release what the Church was teaching for much of the 20th century and hear the better story from the whole of scripture. And the better story tells us truths about ourselves—we are made in the image of God, called very good, beloved from the beginning, welcomed into God's family, created with purpose and invited into partnership.

Mercer University's Bryan Whitfield writes, "Our lives and the lives of our sisters and brothers are not ordinary lives because we follow in the steps of the Son who...claims us as his own kin."³ We discover the Way of Jesus is invitation to not only live like Jesus but to fully become partners with each other and with God as intended from the beginning of all things.

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=422

The Jesus Way has nothing to do with waiting out this old broken world until we get to the perfect one. The Jesus Way has everything to do with making, discovering, fostering heaven on earth here and now. This is the better way not just for those of us who want to live in peace, love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. This is the better way for those of us who want to transcend our old stories that allow us to hold grudges, give quickly into our anger, take up old battles. This better way empowers us to turn belief into practice, to carry our best hopes for ourselves and for this world into the ordinary actions of our lives.

“The reader does not come to the end of Hebrews exclaiming, ‘...that proves it!’” writes Thomas Long, “but rather, ‘Amen! I hear this, I see this in the eye of faith, I believe this, I will live this!’ When faith sounds in the ear, then it reverberates in the heart.”⁴

We will live this! And we will fail. And the preacher of Hebrews knows this. He points back to our originating stories from Genesis and whispers to us from the poetry of the Psalter. He reminds us to keep looking at Jesus. Remember the story that you want to guide you.

I have said and will continue to say: we will get this Way wrong sometimes. There will be weeks when we try to express our pain and our grief and just end up yelling at the very people who awkwardly but sincerely want to love us and support us. There will be weeks when we try to make things right, but words fumble and we fail and only make things worse. We will disappoint each other. We will let each other down. We will not live up to the standards of the kingdom of heaven. Will will not live as people who know the story of Jesus.

And then a miracle happens. A new week will begin. And we will apologize. And we will straighten out our words and confess our sins. We will look each other in the eye and whisper words of great affection. We will remind each other of the story that guides us. We will remember we are on this Way together, and we will make amends. We will return to grace and lovingkindness. We will expand in our awareness and in our gentleness. We will live as sons and daughters, full partners in all things, of Jesus the Christ.

⁴ Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, pp. 6-7

And that old story will slip away as we fully inhabit a better one. We will live out the words of the great poet Hafez:

"I Got Kin"

Plant
So that your own heart
Will grow.

Love
So God will think,

"Ahhhhh,
I got kin in that body!
I should start inviting that soul over
For coffee and
Rolls."

Sing
Because this is a food
Our starving world
Needs.

Laugh
Because that is the purest
Sound.

May it start in this very moment, my friends. May it be so.

Amen.