

Text: Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Title: The Imprint of God
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Roger Allen Nelson

We don't know who wrote what we just read. It reads like a sermon, but the congregation for whom it was meant is also a mystery. And, we don't know when it was actually written. Biblical scholars give it about a 50-year window. So, we don't know who wrote this morning's text, to whom it was intended, or when it was written. There's a lot here that we don't know.

But, by lifting out hints and implications, listen to how one scholar describes the congregation for which Hebrews was intended.

His congregation is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak, attendance is down at church, and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away.

Sound familiar?

A church consultant told me recently that he doesn't know a church that isn't exhausted, smaller, and frayed at the edges. Most are just trying to survive. Pandemic practices and politics, tribal boundaries, broken worship habits, uncertainty about the future, declining membership, deceased giving, and dissolving denominations have left congregations without enough energy to charge off anywhere. He worries about what will be left in a decade....

Dear friends, for the next month and a half we're going to work our way through Hebrews, because if this scholar and this consultant are right, then whomever the author was, he (or she) was writing to a congregation with whom we can identify.

If you're exhausted,
or anxious,
or thinking about dropping your end of the rope and drifting away,
then I hope that this sermon series about a sermon
has something helpful and hopeful for you to consider.

Now. What's interesting to me is that our author doesn't start with a congregational vision statement or the latest greatest church growth fad. He doesn't deal with worship styles, evangelism programs, or concerns about human sexuality....

He starts with proclamation about the nature of Jesus.
He starts with a highfalutin theological statement about Jesus.
He starts with a remarkable claim about Jesus.

Since Hebrews reads like a sermon, let's call the author "the preacher."

The preacher claims that God has been speaking through prophets.

Thomas Long writes that God has been communicating, "In many fragments and in many fashions in former times..." Or, in my words, the God of the universe is neither mute nor disinterested, but has spoken to his people through people. God chose prophets as vehicles for divine revelation.

But, while that was true then, now he has spoken through his Son. Frederick Buechner puts it this way:

He tried saying it in Noah, but Noah was a drinking man.... He tried saying it in Moses, but Moses himself was trying too hard; tried David, but David was too pretty for his own good. Toward the end of his rope, God tried saying it in John the Baptist with his locusts and honey and hell-fire preaching, and you got the feeling that John might have worked except that he lacked something small but crucial like a sense of the ridiculous or a balanced diet. So, he tried once more. Jesus is the mot juste of God.

Mot Juste, borrowed from the French, means exact right word or phrasing....

Jesus is the exact word or phrasing of God. But the preacher goes one step further than that; the preacher writes that Jesus is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

A lifetime ago while teaching and coaching at Chicago Christian High School I was responsible for chapel leadership. One year someone approached us about showing the newest Jesus movie in chapel. They were convinced that this celluloid representation of the life of Jesus would capture student's interest and speak to their hearts and minds. I was sort of indifferent to the whole venture, but the idea barely got off the ground because....

Because, news of this cinematic-chapel-crusade reached a group of decidedly more conservative parents and pastors. They were appalled. They called the superintendent, the principal, and members of the school board. They couldn't believe that a Christian high school would so blatantly trample the second commandment.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them....

They were worried that a movie depicting the life of Jesus was a graven image. They were concerned about the idolatry of making an image of God. If memory serves, my indifference and their offense ultimately shot down the chapel movie idea before the first screening.

First century Jewish-Christians would have been well aware of the second commandment. Their fundamental orientation would have been that God cannot or should not be captured by any image or art. In part because any image of God runs the risk of becoming an idol.

They would have remembered the story of the Israelites asking Aaron to “Make us a god who can go before us.” And Aaron in turn fashioning a golden calf, announcing, “This, O Israel is your God who brought you out of Egypt....”

In fact, Jews would have been so hesitant to approximate God by human creation that they avoid pronouncing the tetragrammaton – the four constants for the name of God. And instead of speaking God’s name they use other phrases like the Lord, or the Name.

Therefore, the claim that Jesus is an exact representation of God would have been met with consternation and confusion. How can anyone or anything be the likeness of God? Doesn’t that trample the first and second commandments?

And yet the preacher in our text is making the radical-revolutionary claim that Jesus is the “exact representation” of God. The word that is used here is related to minting a coin. It was used for the die or the engraving. Some translations have it as he “bears the very stamp of his nature.”

That’s more than speaking in fragments and fashions in former times.

That’s more than reflecting his glory.

That’s more than a graven image or a movie.

The preacher is proclaiming that there is no difference between the nature of God and the nature of Jesus. When you encounter one; you encounter the other – without dilution or hierarchy. Jesus corresponds exactly to God. To see or know Jesus is to see or know God.

To an exhausted first century church that was an audacious claim. And yet it was important enough that in 325 the church affirmed the same in the Nicene Creed by saying that Jesus is “the same essence as the Father.”

Now. Maybe that doesn’t seem like a big deal to you, or it doesn’t speak to the anxiety of today’s church. Maybe we should be talking about more edgy music or more compelling preaching....

However, that Jesus is not simply a messenger, or an imitation, or a cheap knock-off, but is the exact imprint of God, is still an audacious claim. That God didn’t simply speak through prophets or teachers or some written text, but spoke through one who was of his very nature is still a breathtaking claim.

Jesper Svartvik puts it this way:

The idea is that Jesus of Nazareth is God’s visible imprint in this world, the one who certifies how God values people. This is why Christology cannot be separated from anthropology.

Jesus of Nazareth, the visible imprint of the invisible God, certifies how God values people. You and I and every-other-person-in-this-world are so valued that God sent/came/spoke in his exact nature. Every person – regardless of race, creed, color, orientation, ethnicity, work-ethic, skill-set, ability, body-shape, or net-worth – is ultimately so valued that God lived, died, and was resurrected in his exact nature.

May we see one another with that same conviction.
May we engage friend and neighbor with that same essential grounding.
May we live out of that confidence.
May our church know that audacious faith.
May we come to the table to commune with that God.
Amen.