

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, October 4, 2015

**An Early Sermon**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
October 4, 2015  
World Communion Sunday

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

The Letter to the Hebrews was long thought to be written by Paul but it is now believed to have been written by someone else and, in fact, is not a letter at all. It appears to be an early sermon written by an unknown preacher. Hebrews lacks the customary formal greeting of a letter and does not mention the name of the author and to whom the message was written as is the case with all other Epistles in the New Testament.

Hebrews appears to be a sermon or an essay designed to demonstrate the incomparable superiority of Christ. In the words of Fred B. Craddock, et al<sup>1</sup> the opening four verses of our scripture reading today are packed with “... *numerous claims about Christ, and they are quite staggering ...*

*“Christ is ‘a Son ... appointed heir of all things ...’*

*“Christ is God’s assistant in creation ...*

*“He is a reflection of the glory, or radiance of God ...*

*“Christ ‘sustains all things by his powerful word ...’*

*“Christ ‘made purification for sins ...’*

*“His resurrection is seen as an exaltation to the right hand of God ...*

*“His exalted position beside God renders Christ superior to the angels.”*

In four short verses Hebrews expounds the very essence of who Jesus is.

The remainder of the scripture reading, eight verses, explains God’s and Christ’s relationship to human beings and the redemptive character of Jesus’ suffering.

Humans were meant to have dominion over all of God’s creation according to Genesis 1:28. *“God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”*

As our scripture reading says, *“God left nothing that is not subject to them.”*

Scripture goes on to say that while this was God's intent, humans did not do this. Rather humans were frustrated by circumstances. Humans were not what they were meant to be because of sin.

As William Barclay<sup>2</sup> phrased it, *"God created humans, only a little less than himself, to have the mastery over all things.*

*"Humans through sin entered into defeat instead of mastery.*

*"Into this state of defeat came Jesus Christ in order that by his life and death and glory he might make humankind what it was meant to be...*

*"The writer of Hebrews shows us three things. He shows us the ideal of what humans should be --- kin to God and master of the universe.*

*"He shows us the actual state of humankind --- the frustration instead of the mastery, the failure instead of the glory.*

*"He shows us how the actual can be changed into the ideal through Christ.*

*"The writer ... sees in Christ the One, who by his sufferings and his glory, can make humankind what it was meant to be and what, without him, humans could never be."*

But are humans what we were meant to be? It doesn't look that way does it? Is Jesus running the show or not? It doesn't seem that way does it? Wars, crime, sin abounding --- when will it stop?

Our sins have been forgiven through Jesus' death and resurrection yet we keep on sinning. Why?

Thomas G. Long<sup>3</sup>, in referring to our scripture reading said, *"Now that preacher (meaning the author of Hebrews) has placed Jesus firmly in view, he shuttles swiftly back and forth between what can be known about Jesus and what can be known only by faith ... Everyone who saw Jesus arrested and tried and pushed around like a common criminal knows that he was 'lower than the angels'; you could see that. But it takes hearing the word of the gospel to know that this same Jesus is 'now crowned with glory and honor.' Everyone who watched Jesus die in agony on the cross knows about 'the suffering of death'; that could be seen with the eyes. Only by what is heard through the ears, though, could it be known that his death was in order to save humanity, that 'by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.' This portion of the sermon is much like the word of the risen Jesus to the disheartened followers on the road to*

*Emmaus; “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”*

Long tells the story of a television reporter talking about Presidential politics. The report was critical of the President and was rather negative. The network used stock video footage with the report but it was anything but negative. It was footage provided by the White House and showed the President in a flattering way.

The reporter received a call from the White House complimenting the report and the reporter protested saying that the report was critical, not complimentary.

The caller said, *“Your words were critical but you used my pictures, and in the battle between the eye and the ear, the eye wins every time.”*

The author of Hebrews disagrees. *“The eye may win ‘for a little while’ but when all is said and done, it is the gospel heard through the ear that turns out to hold the full truth.”*

Jesus suffered horribly and many people saw his suffering. Jesus died, as all humans will eventually do, thus sharing his fate. But listen to the words of the sermon, our scripture reading.

Listen to the words of that early sermon. As Tom Long put it, *“When one hears the full message of the gospel, one recognizes beyond mere sight that the season of Jesus’ suffering was a necessary segment of the arc of grace that curves finally to the place we cannot see, to the place of triumph where the Son is even now crowned with glory and honor.”*

Are we listening?

**Amen.**

1. Fred B. Craddock, et al, “Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B”, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA 1993.
2. William Barclay, “The Gospel of Mark”, rev. ed., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1975 (Quotes have been rephrased to make them gender neutral).
3. Thomas G. Long, “Hebrews,” John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1997.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011