

Things Hoped For ... A Body Prepared  
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Oct. 4, 2009  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:  
Hebrews 10:1-10, 39; 11:1

Of all the 66 books of the Bible, Hebrews stands out as unique. It has both piqued the interest of Bible scholars and historians and evaded their attempts to solve its mysteries.

You see, we don't know who wrote Hebrews or much about when. Nor do we know its audience. Hebrews is often called an epistle, or a letter. But scholars think it was probably more of a sermon. (So if any of you think I preach for too long on Sunday mornings, imagine sitting and listening to these 13 chapters for 2 or 3 hours.)

What scholars and experts do agree on, however, is that the audience for this sermon was tired. Perhaps, like many early Christians, they had once thought that Jesus was to have come back last Tuesday and now they were disappointed and weary of waiting. Perhaps they were tired of standing up for their faith only to be ridiculed and even persecuted for their beliefs.

Perhaps they had looked around and seen how everybody else seemed to be doing better than they were – those who worshipped pagan idols, those who pledged allegiance to the powerful Roman government or those who just kept their mouth shut and tried not to be noticed. Whatever the reasons, the first readers of Hebrews were losing faith, losing hope.

Here in Charlotte in 2009, we don't have to look far to find people who are having the same feelings. People faced with difficult illnesses and injuries. People who can't find work. People in relationships that limp along, at best. People looking for spiritual renewal. People who thought a year ago the dialogue about the future of our country was about to change for the better and who have seen how difficult that really is.

Whoever wrote the book of Hebrews is a hero among us preachers because of how he (and yes, it probably was a he) responded when faced with this worn out community of believers, just one or two steps away from giving up on their faith and their God. He doesn't come up with some new angle on the faith to prop them up. He doesn't preach prosperity or write best sellers about purpose-driven this or that. He doesn't say that

God visited him in the middle of the night and told him to build Bible Land with outlet stores and luxury condominiums.

No, this preacher has the crazy idea that the good news of the story of Jesus Christ is enough. God has made a promise, he says, and Jesus Christ is the guarantee of our hope.

That's the fundamental message of Hebrews and it doesn't stray far from it. By the time he gets to chapter 10, he must have been feeling like he is getting his point across. He must have been feeling *pretty* bold, some might say downright reckless, because he turns his attention to what people give to God and why.

Some people have worshipped God by giving and giving and giving, he says. They give sacrifice after sacrifice. They do it year after year. They don't have to be prompted. They don't have to be nudged. They know they'd better give to God and they know what to do.

But here's the problem, this preacher goes on to say. They are wrong. Their gifts and sacrifices don't make the difference they desire for themselves. They're not helping themselves and they surely aren't making God happy. They should just stop. Cease and desist.

I suppose that right about now, some of you may be thinking I'm off my rocker. You may be thinking: "This is his stewardship sermon and that's the best he's got?"

You're thinking: "He wants us to go home and fill out our pledge cards. Make as generous a financial commitment to Caldwell as we can along with a pledge of our time and our talent in service to God. And *this* is his idea of inspiration."

Well, in short, my answer is 'yes ... if.'

If you give to the church because you think you have to ... if you give because you think it reserves a good seat in heaven ... .. if you give because you think I will be checking how much you pledge ... or if you give because you think you can repay your debt to God for all your blessings or all your sins, well, then, don't.

As the author of Hebrews says, "In burnt offerings and sin offerings, God takes no pleasure."

Reflecting on this broken pattern, the great current day scholar Tom Wright observes:

What was wrong was that the old sacrifices needed to be done over and over again, thus demonstrating that they hadn't really dealt with the problem. If I have to take my car back to the mechanic every week with the same problem, that's a fair indication that he hasn't succeeded in fixing it.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, our pledges don't fix us or balance the books on our lives. What does? The author of Hebrews writes: "It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once and for all." (10:10)

Here is the good word, that in Christ God has paid our debt. So we don't have to give out of a sense of obligation. We can give out of joy. We give not because we must but because we can.

By this new and living way, Hebrews tells us, we can enter the sanctuary with confidence to greet Christ, who now reigns not as some kind of divine tax collector but as our priest. By his blood, not the blood of bulls, not even our tithes, we are transformed.

We who were weary are now renewed and called forth to serve God boldly in the world. Hebrews states: "But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." (10:39)

With those words that conclude chapter 10, it is as if the author of Hebrews has led his readers up to a plateau, preacher and professor Tom Long says. There, with those first century Christians, we can stand and look out, back in one direction to Calvary and ahead to be the church Christ calls us to build.

As we stand on that plateau, here on the fourth of October, 2009, at the corner of Park and 5th, we stand between memory and vision. Most of us may not have long personal memories of how this church was built and grew.

But we are learning the stories from those who were here first and who opened their arms to the rest of us. How this church was chartered to serve the first few homes on the edge of Charlotte in 1912. How, through the decades, its congregation helped start other churches all over town. How it built a home-made arc on wheels and travelled by caravan to serve their brothers and sisters in Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews for Everyone, p. 107

More recently, we have the memory of how God started a new thing here three years ago last month, a new thing that no one could have seen or imagined. Now, as we stand together on this plateau, we turn and face our future. We are guided by a mission statement that declares we are not the kind of people who shrink back. That much is for sure.

But our vision is still taking shape. Even now, we are having important conversations about how will we teach our children and youth in the ways of God in Christ. Even now, we have new possibilities for how we will use our Price education building next door to serve God and others, possibilities we will be discussing with the entire congregation soon.

Even now, we are called to talk and think together about how otherwise to fulfill our mission statement – to build a diverse, intentional affirming community, called forth into social action for the greater good, to be a progressive, missional community, to be always and in every way welcoming to all, old and young, gay and straight, rich and poor and to those of all races and ethnicities.

One thing I hear from you and others beyond our church family is that Caldwell is a source of hope in your lives and even in the life of the city. For so many of us, this new thing is unexpected. It is nurturing and fortifying in ways we haven't found elsewhere. It is stimulating and challenging in ways that draw us closer to God.

Now the question stands before us: What do we hope for? What do you hope for? For your church? How it can help you and how you can serve it? How can we model Christ in service to others? What call do you have to fulfill here? What talents can you bring here? What portion of your financial resources can you dedicate to God here?

As people of faith, God invites us to hope and then to give ourselves freely, a joyful response to Christ's giving his body on the cross for our liberation ... and then giving us this body, the church.

So we move forward in faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We know God is at work in ways we can't always see or understand, but now and in the future, moving us ever closer to God's promise of peace, justice, mercy and salvation.

Amen.