

The Reflection of God's Glory
Sunday, December 28, 2008
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

Scripture:

Old Testament: Psalm 98

New Testament: Hebrews 1:1-12

Before Cyndi reads our New Testament scripture, I thought I would say a few words of introduction to this passage, which forms the opening to the Book of Hebrews.

The common lectionary, which I generally follow in preaching, actually suggests this reading for Christmas Day instead of this, the first Sunday after Christmas. But I've chosen it for today because it speaks to us in clear and poetic language about what has just happened.

This is, of course, the fourth day after Christmas ... and I bet you can already feel it happening. The secular world, full of its own noise and distraction, has begun again to pull hard on our minds and hearts, doing its best to shove aside the wondrous events of the season. Thanks in part to all the commercial build up, we anticipate the coming of December the 25th for so long. But society sure can be quick to move on.

It's a little like when we go to the movies. We get there in plenty of time to get some popcorn and a drink, to find our seats and watch the previews. But as soon as main feature is over and the credits start rolling, we're up and out of there. Maybe we talk for a few minutes about the film in the car ride home. Maybe not.

These opening verses of Hebrews provide a wonderful opportunity to fight against that tendency, to dwell a bit longer on just what has happened with our God and with us.

Sophie, our youngest daughter, received a computer game from her grandmother for Christmas. She loved it. She didn't put it down for hours and hours, unless we specifically "suggested" she take a break. When she was taking one of those daddy-imposed breaks, she settled onto the couch and started reading something. After a few minutes, I asked what she was reading. It was the product literature that came with the computer game. She was using her break to read about ways to unlock even more of what the game could do.

In somewhat the same way, we might pause this morning and consult these verses in Hebrews for how its author begins to unlock the full truth of the gift we have been given this Christmas, the gift of Jesus Christ.

(Scripture is read)

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Did you hear or read any of the news coverage of the angel just up the block at Presbyterian Hospital?

It seems that a girl who is gravely ill was back in the hospital, suffering from the symptoms of a disease that her doctors say they cannot cure.

Her family and friends were prepared for the worst, even the possibility that she would not live to celebrate her birthday on Christmas Day. But to everyone's surprise, she experienced a strong recovery and was sent home.

While she was in the hospital, the security cameras recorded the strangest thing. It was a stunningly bright, glowing white image in the shape of an angel, wings and all, hovering in the doorway of the girl's room.

Now, I know this section of the hospital. I was on that floor several times while working as an intern in the hospital chaplain's office. This hallway is deep in the interior of the building. There are no exterior windows nearby so it can't be some kind of sunlight reflection. Hospital officials have simply said that they cannot explain it, which strikes me as a pretty wise response.

When I was in the hospital last week visiting someone, I stopped by the chaplain's office. I joshed with my friends there that we were missing an angel down at Caldwell and asked if they could please return it. They didn't laugh much. In a world that so desperately needs assurance that God is with us, it seems that people are taking angels more and more seriously, as they should.

Angles appear throughout the Bible. From the very beginning, they appear to God's people, in the stories of the patriarchs of Genesis and later to judges and kings. Angels herald unusual births of Isaac, Samson and, of course, Christ. They even get physical, as did the one who wrestled with Jacob.

Mostly, though, angels are God's messengers. That is the meaning of the Greek word for angel, *angelos*. They are God's intermediaries. They speak for God.

But even as glorious as the appearance of an angel can be, what we have in Jesus Christ is incomparably more. That is what the author of Hebrews wants to get across to his readers.

They were, you see, having something of a crisis of confidence. Most scholars believe Hebrews was written to a community of new believers, perhaps Jewish Christians, somewhere between 30 and 60 years after Christ's death and resurrection. They had risked all to join this new minority movement, built around the audacious idea that a carpenter's son from the nothing town of Nazareth was the messiah, God's own son.

But now they were having second thoughts. The Roman government was bearing down. Persecution was spreading, and there was no sign of the expected return of the messiah.

Just as it does with us in our time, the secular world of their time was threatening to shove aside the radical revelation that inspired this new covenant community. There was even word of people giving up and dropping out.

Perhaps that is why the book of Hebrews has no formal greeting or introduction. The author gets down to business immediately from the first word. In the first five verses, he summarizes his entire message. He pours out his heart to encourage his readers. Realize what you have been given, he says. Hold on to it and it *will* deliver you.

Verses five through twelve go on to provide an eloquent but crystal clear distinction that not even angels can compare with the Christ, who is forever and ever, whose years never end. This is the Son who, in, with and through God pre-existed the universe. As the opening verses of John read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and in the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

This messiah is no messenger, no intermediary, no scout of God sent to say "hang on for a little while longer while God tries to decide what to do with the world."

No, this Christ, as Hebrews says, is the "reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being and he sustains all things by his powerful word." (Hebrews 1:3).

* * *

In these last weeks, we have sung:

“Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set they people free. From our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.”

And:

“O come, desire of nations, bind ... all peoples in one heart and mind; Bid envy strife and discord cease; Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.”

And even:

“Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand; ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in His hand, Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.”

But beyond the doors of this sanctuary, it is already well underway - a multitude of voices shouting at us, trying to shove aside the meaning of the event for which we had waited.

A cacophony of political news about transition in the White House; heart-breaking news of continued violence in the Middle East; non-stop analysis of when the economy might get better; even the speculation of whether our beloved Panthers will make it back to the Super Bowl.

We will take down the Christmas decorations and roll out the trash bin, overflowing with wrapping paper and discarded packaging. We will come to reckon with the pound or two we’ve gained. We will put away our gifts and the present reality of our world will begin to weigh again on our shoulders.

I heard it said once that we should leave one piece of Christmas decoration up year-round, as a visual reminder of the hope and the promise of this season. I think I will keep a nativity set on a shelf in my office.

Here at Caldwell, we have such remarkable news to share of what God is doing, news our neighborhood, our city and our world needs desperately to hear. We are deeply blessed in our particular opportunity to share that great good news in word and in deed.

But, first, let us simply receive and hold onto the news that “in these last days, God has spoken to us by a son.” (Hebrews 1:2)

In the name of the God who is our creator and redeemer, Amen.