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St. Martin's-in-the-Field Episcopal Church
Sermon Proper 22B
10/7/2018
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He 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. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere,

*"What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?*

*You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet."*

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

*"I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."*

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

This is the first of six weeks where we will hear readings from Hebrews as the New Testament lesson. A couple of things for us to know about as we dive into Hebrews:

- Don't know exactly who wrote this—Origen quote
- Starts off like a sermon...because it IS a sermon.
- Doxological—glorifying God for the salvation God has achieved through Jesus.

Our passage today, from the start of Hebrews, evokes all of the ways God has spoken through creation...even that God spoke creation into being in the first place. Our passage today ends with the fact that we are siblings of Christ's—adopted brothers and sisters of God's son, Jesus.

We are not told what to do to get right with God and neighbor—not a moralizing text, instead we are told about what God has done in creation, and how the paradoxical workings of God help us to know God more fully. This "sermon" to the Hebrews is written to second-generation followers of Jesus. Believers who were, like us, removed from the close proximity of Jesus...all of the drama and intimacy of Jesus that was characteristic with those first believers...those who could say, "I saw," or "I heard Jesus."

This second-generation congregation that is being preached to in Hebrews is kinda like every other church in America actually. As we reminisce and sentimentally look back to the "good old days" whenever those were, we actually miss the joy and the presence of God that is cropping up right in front of us.

The author of Hebrews wanted the congregation to realize where they were in their faith lives and who was still with them—God.

We will be hearing a lot from Hebrews over the next six weeks. And I want you to pay attention to the ways the author talks about the seductive pressures of the world—materialistic and violent—and how those pressures have made that congregation of disciples lethargic, maybe even burned out...certainly discouraged, and possibly even apathetic in their daily belief.

Doesn't this sound so much like how American culture views being "religious?" Or, maybe that even sounds like how we feel about our own faith, our own church right here. As one commentator I read put it—"it is if we are afflicted by the spiritual version of chronic fatigue syndrome—out of synch with culture around us, weary of serving, and unable to muster either the discipline or delight that daily discipleship can offer us."

Into this lethargy—where the average St. Martinite comes to church ONE Sunday a month—Hebrews injects some radical ideas meant to shock the original hearers, and us the congregation today, into a re-awakening to some very basic, and ubiquitous truths about the very nature of God.

Now I know that I've been preaching about some pretty "local" topics the past several months, but perhaps it is time for us to tend to our faith in a bit more a broad context.

Let's go cosmic for a bit, shall we?

I'm reminded of the closing credits song from Monty Python's Life of Brian...the first line of "always look on the bright side of life," which talks about the utter crapola-ness of life when we examine our existence in detail. In short—from about day # 10 of creation, things have gone wrong in the cosmos that God spoke into being. And things have not gotten any better since then it seems. Why? Sin.

Our lives seem, at moments, to be caught up in the quagmire of sin that we create for ourselves. And this sin that we create, inevitably involves suffering. This suffering is actually good news—thinks the author of Hebrews, but I'll get to that in a minute.

Hebrews is here to remind us about the incredible grace of God and in the awe-inspiring love of God. Our text this morning ultimately talks about God's love. "He [Jesus] 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."

So Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being. And at the end of the text for today, we hear: "For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." We are Christ's brothers and sisters and Jesus is not ashamed of us, no matter what.

Hebrews is reminding us that God's exact imprint is in Jesus, and—by adoption—in us. So, we are assured that very imprint is the power of God inside of us—which can endure the suffering of this life, because Christ gave his very life so that we might have eternal life. But in order to get to that eternal life, as Christians, we have to get comfortable with one concept: paradox. Not only get comfortable with paradox, but embrace it.

Things like, life and death, darkness and light, duty and delight, suffering and joy. Jesus is the one who shows us how to embrace these paradoxes of our faith. The one who dies on the cross of shame gives the entire world glorious eternal life and salvation. This is the same Jesus who said, "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." This is the same Jesus who said, "whoever wants to be the greatest must become the servant of all."

Isn't it true that sometimes we cannot see the light unless we are in the darkness? Sometimes we cannot recognize the love that is in our lives until that love has faded. Sometimes we cannot appreciate when we are well unless we have first experienced illness. Sometimes we cannot grasp the joy of abundance without first knowing the stark reality of lack. Each side of the paradox it seems helps us more clearly to know the other.

Remember I said a moment ago I'd come back to another paradox: that suffering is actually good news? Well let's talk about that for a minute...

Because we are sinful creatures—and because things still seem to go horribly wrong in God's created cosmos, we cannot escape the sufferings of this world.

The good news is that, according to the author of Hebrews, that although we cannot escape the sufferings of this world, they can, in fact, perfect us. "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation PERFECT through sufferings."

I'm not a fan of the sentiment that "God never gives you more than you can handle." I think God gives us more than we can handle all of the time, actually. Which, according to our Hebrews reading this morning, is kind of the whole point. As Christ was made perfect through his suffering on the cross and through his death and then his rising again, so too, can WE be made more perfect—more joined with Christ—when suffering happens in our lives.

That means that when Christ suffered, God knew what suffering was as well. And not knew it like one knows that one and one are two, but knew that suffering intimately, bodily, completely.

And this perfectness that I'm talking about is in a gospel sense: "perfectness" means "completeness." "Completeness," means clearing away the clutter and corruption of our living so that the 'imprint of God's very being' which is in each of us, may be more fully revealed." That completeness through the suffering that happens in our lives, in the end, makes us rely more fully on God alone and builds our faith in God our creator, redeemer and sanctifier.

Why are we about building our faith, deepening our faith, becoming more perfect in being disciples of Jesus here at St. Martin's? Because having that deep well from which to draw when everything seems wrong in your cosmos--knowing the deep and lasting love of God--even amidst the suffering that this world inflicts on us, that we inflict on one another, and even that we inflict on ourselves...being able to draw from that deep well of faith, the sufficiency of God, is the only thing that will save us. Sometimes literally.

We need to not only be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, but we also need to find ways to perfect ourselves, our faith and to deepen our relationship with God in Christ. We need to come to this church every Sunday and worship together—to be strengthened by one another's faith when ours seems insufficient for what we are suffering with at the moment. We need to take seriously God's deep and abiding desire to know each of us more fully...and for us to struggle to know God more fully.

All of that that starts with us making the commitment to simply come to church every week; that starts with us committing ourselves and our family to one hour of Christian education each week; that starts with picking a ministry that speaks to our heart and giving of our God-given time and talents to the betterment of God's creation and our fellow brothers and sisters; and yes, that starts with us giving back to God a portion of our wealth in proportion to how much we put our faith in God vs. our faith in the dollar.

As we grow more perfect in our faith in God, we will realize the gift of God and the paradox of God that is given to each of us: that the God in Hebrews who is utterly majestic and cosmic, would dare to come and actually touch us, getting up close and personal with us, loving us, even dying for us.

As our faith deepens we will be able to withstand the suffering that we must endure and once again sing with great joy our praises to Christ Jesus who even now is proclaiming our names in the heavens and claiming us as his own. AMEN.