

“Fix Your Eyes”

Introduction: We noted last Sunday, as we journeyed with the wise men, that the season in the church year known as “Epiphany” has begun. Now, we’re pretty comfortable with the meaning of Advent and Christmas, we know that Lent has to do with the cross, Easter the empty tomb, and Pentecost the gifting of the Holy Spirit, but Epiphany? It means what. . . exactly? Well, Epiphany means manifestation, or a showing forth. And so perhaps the simplest way to understand it is, as the refrain of an old Episcopal hymn puts it, “God in flesh made manifest.”

This is certainly what the various texts appointed for the weeks of this season seek to convey. They begin with the light of a star and the visit of those wise men, and they end (on the Sunday just before Ash Wednesday) on the mountain of transfiguration with the clothes of Jesus shining a dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them, Mark reports (9:2-4). In between we’re invited to consider the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the calling of his disciples, the changing of water into wine, the healing of the sick and demon-possessed, and his remarkable teaching and preaching.

This Jesus, we are called to observe, is not simply a moral example, a religious instructor, or a social activist, though we see him in each of these roles. No, this Jesus is none other than “God in the flesh made manifest.” He is, as we just heard the writer of Hebrews describe him, the “radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” Why is that so important? To explore that question we will put the traditional texts for this season aside and focus on this NT letter to a people called the Hebrews.

I. Hebrews

A. We don’t know who wrote Hebrews, although the author does tell us that he is sharing apostolic, eyewitness testimony to the words and the work of Jesus (2:3), and so what he writes can be trusted. What’s even more helpful for us are the recipients of the letter, “Hebrews,” that is, those who had grown up in and around Judaism and had come to believe in Jesus as Messiah.

B. Yet, they have hit a snag. For whatever reason – daily challenges, cultural pressures, the threat of persecution, or the chaos of the world around them – they are considering returning to their old ways of being and doing, the way of Jesus either seeming too difficult, or possibly just irrelevant to them. Our author’s desire is to exhort and encourage his readers to stay faithful, to endure and persevere in the midst of difficult times. He does so by directing them to fix their eyes on Jesus because Jesus is better and more beautiful than any possible person they could follow, or way that they could walk.

Where are you feeling discouraged? What might you be tempted to think is better way than Jesus? How or where might you be inclined to drift in your faith in these difficult days? In what ways might understanding Jesus more deeply – God in flesh made manifest – be helpful to you?

C. I just called Hebrews a letter, and it certainly ends like one, but it sounds like more of a sermon as it begins. In fact, our author begins, not by saying “hello” but by saying “heads up!” as he drops us into some deep theological waters. It’s as if he was saying, “You need a double shot of Jesus and you need it now!” He knows that to combat discouragement and spiritual sluggishness we need to have a vision of the One who is our greatest and most beautiful treasure. So, he lifts Jesus up to us with some incredibly rich statements, saying in effect, “fix your eyes on this:”

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.<sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

What, then, does he want us to know, right up front, about Jesus? Consider four pairs.

## II. Jesus is God's communicating word.

A. Our writer observes that God has been communicating with the world for a long time, primarily through the prophets. As you scan through them, almost all of them, like we heard from Jeremiah, begin their work with the words: "The word of the Lord came to me..." To be a prophet meant not that your role was to predict the future; it was to proclaim the word of God, to speak forth what was on God's mind and heart, to facilitate communication between God and his people. But our author wants us to know that God's communication gets better than that from the prophets. Why? Because, as effectively as they communicated God's mind and heart, in these "last days," a phrase the biblical writers use to designate the time between the first and second coming of Jesus, God has spoken by his Son.

B. Before we move to the Son, it's worth pausing here and noting that we tend, probably, to think of the grace of God in the context of salvation, that we have been rescued from our sin by Jesus paying the penalty for it on the cross. And that is grace – God's undeserved favor – to be sure. But we also need to think about grace in the context of revelation. That is, if God had not chosen to reveal himself to us in his word, we would have no knowledge or understanding about who he is or what he desires. Wonderfully, God wants to share himself. He is not an idea, or impersonal force, but a personal being who desires a relationship with his people. Any good relationship needs good communication, and thank the Lord, he has provided us with that, through the prophets in the past, and now through his Son in the present.

## III. Jesus is the radiance and exact representation of God.

A. Who is this Son? He is the "radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's being." Jesus shines the light on who God is. Or, as Jesus himself put it, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). As one translation puts it, "Jesus is God in focus." That sentiment is captured, not only by the word radiance, but by the word "representation," which literally means "character." It was also a word used to describe the impression a seal would leave on wax. Jesus is thus being described as the personal expression, or impression of the character of God. Do you want to know what the beauty and greatness of God is like and what he thinks of us and desires from us? Look no further than Jesus. Fix your eyes on him. He is God's ultimate communication, his ultimate word.

## IV. Jesus is heir and creator of all things.

A. As God's appointed heir, Jesus stands to inherit all things. All that belongs to the Father will be given to the Son. The notion of ruling over all things is in mind here. The psalmist puts it this way, with the Father speaking to the Son: "Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Ps. 2:8) And then the Son himself declares, after his resurrection: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." (Ma. 28:18). There is, we might say, no greater being. This being, Jesus, has authority over all.

B. But not only that. Jesus will not only stand at the end of time as ruler of all, he stands at its beginning as creator of all. He is the one through whom God made the universe. All things are not only moving toward his rule but all things began with him. As John puts it in his gospel: “For by him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (Jn. 1:3). To use an image from my childhood HO scale slot-car set-up, it was the Father who came up with all of the cars and tracks and houses and bridges, it was the Spirit who provided the power for it all to run, and it was the Son who designed and put the whole thing together. This Son, our author wants us to know, is not a created being but a beautiful member of the pre-existent trinity, one who took part in creation itself.

#### V. Jesus is sustainer and purifier of all things.

A. In this final pair we see, first of all that Jesus has not just brought creation into being and then walked away, leaving us to our own devices. No, he doesn't just create all things he sustains all things. He continually organizes and carries forward his created order so that it will reach its desired goal. He does so, notice, by means of his powerful word. To the leper he says, “Be clean.” To the paralytic, “Get up!” To the possessing demon, “Come out.” To the sinner, “You're forgiven.” That same powerful word sustains us by providing direction in how to live, guiding us through the darkness and into the light of life.

B. Wonderfully, when we stumble and fall in that darkness, when we forget or ignore or simply fall short of his guidance, Jesus does not watch us go astray and get aggravated. He has come to walk with us and give his life for us, loving us and purifying us and fixing our brokenness through his death on the cross.

This aspect of Jesus got me thinking about the fellows from Murphy Construction who built our addition over 20 years ago. One of the things I so appreciated about them was that after they finished, they didn't leave us on our own. Whenever we called and reported that something wasn't working right, from a door that was sticking, to an outlet that had gone dead, to a piece of wood that had splintered, they came right back to fix what had gone wrong. They did not abandon the work of their hands. I contrast that with the fellas who put on a new roof on our house in NH. An aspect of that job, done last fall, was not done properly. But they still, despite my repeated calls, have not come back to fix the problem. The Murphy boys left me feeling loved. These other guys are causing my stomach to churn! Jesus doesn't leave our stomach churning but calms our spirit with the healing of forgiveness.

As we will see, our author has much more to say about this topic of purification, but now he simply wants us to know that after providing purification for our sins, Jesus sat down at the Father's right hand. This position declared that the job was complete. Even though the fault was ours, Jesus came back and fixed us right. Our forgiveness has been realized and the justice of God has been satisfied. The King of the world has laid down his life for you. How beautiful is that?

And so our author begins to meet the discouragement of our readers by lifting up the incredible figure of Jesus, wanting them to see God in flesh made manifest. As you fix your eyes on this vision, where have you become discouraged? Where does your faith need to be strengthened today? What aspect of the character of Christ might you need to see more clearly? What captures your attention? Jesus as radiance and representation? Jesus as creator and heir? Jesus as sustainer and purifier? May he reveal to you more of his greatness and his beauty as we continue to read along.