

“Focused”

Introduction: Last week I started us out by telling the story of a tragic murder that took place in NYC. This week we'll return to the Big Apple but with a little brighter tale. It concerns a hi-wire act undertaken by a Frenchman named Philippe Petit who, on August 7, 1974, stretched a cable at night between the two towers of the World Trade Center (under original construction at that time), and early the next morning, with awestruck crowds watching from below, walked back and forth across the cable multiple times! How did he keep from falling, we wonder? For high-wire performers, there is only one answer: You keep your eyes focused on the destination and never look down.

Hebrews 3:1 tells us that it works that way in the Christian life as well. If we are to keep from growing weary and losing heart, from falling and drifting away, we need to keep our focus on Jesus. Don't look down, our author exhorts; stay focused on him.

As we just heard, Peter learned this lesson the hard way. After Jesus invited him to get out of the boat and come to him, Peter seemed to be doing just fine until he began to focus, not on Jesus but on the wind and the waves around him. Then, he began to sink.

What threatens our own journey of faith? What distracts us from Jesus? What causes us to begin to sink? If the original readers of this letter were tempted to go back to Judaism, what ways of thinking and believing might we be tempted to return to? Can a renewed vision of Jesus help us to remain faithful? Our author thinks so and in these first few verses of chapter 3, he gives us two reasons to keep our focus on Jesus.

I. What Jesus has done for us.

A. Before he gets to the exhortation to focus our thoughts on Jesus, our author wants us to understand how Jesus thinks about us: “Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling...” Three items of note here.

1. Jesus sees us as holy people. He calls you holy, he calls me holy, he calls his readers holy. You might think he's not seeing us very clearly, right?! Holy...me? Does he not know that his audience is filled with sinners, and not saints? But not only here, in several other of the NT letters, the readers are addressed as saints, or “God's holy people” in Ephesus, in Philippi, in Colossae. We can be called holy, not because of anything we have done, but because of what God, through the work of Jesus, has done. He has made us holy, 2:11 explains. How? He has purified us from our sins, 1:3 declares. Which means that which has separated us from God has been taken away. It doesn't mean we are perfect, or that we no longer struggle with sin. But it does mean that we have been set on a new road. We have a new trajectory, a new identity.

2. Jesus thinks of us as part of his family. We are children of our heavenly Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus. This truth highlights the significance of the church. We gather in community because being together matters. We need one another to keep us on track, to encourage us, and to live out our gifts so that we can fully and effectively be the body of Christ in the places God has

planted us. Just like when a child goes off to college and the home is not the same. when several, or even just one, member of a family is missing, it's noticeable.

Our author comes back to the importance of our new family in v. 6 using the image of a house. We are God's house, he explains. Here, he is not talking about a physical house but a community of people. Paul draws on this house and family metaphor, combining it with "holy people," as he writes to the church, in Ephesus:

So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. We are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We who believe are carefully joined together, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also joined together as part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit. [Eph. 2:19-22, NLT]

And Peter, writing to Jewish Christians scattered throughout the region, explains:

As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house... -1 Pe. 2:4-5

Both images capture the sentiment that being together matters, that connecting with other "stones," and resting on the foundation stone of Jesus, is how the family that is the church takes shape and begins to live out its call. We need to guard against a spirit of individualism which is so prevalent in our culture, thinking "I don't really need a church. I'll just show up when I feel like it, do a little church shopping and then move on. But that is not the spirit we see in Hebrews. We are the people of God; we are the house where God's Spirit dwells. It is vital that we be linked and committed to one another so that we may live out God's call on us with effectiveness.

3. That call comprises the third way Jesus thinks about us. We have a heavenly calling, that is, a renewed purpose. It's not a calling to escape this world but to rule and reign rightly over all that God has placed into our care, to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves, to encourage others to get to know and love and serve this Jesus, beginning now and lasting into eternity.

So, based upon what Jesus has done for us, and what he thinks about us, we have reason to keep our focus on him. We also, our author goes on to explain, have reason to focus on him because of who he is. There are also three items in this basket:

II. Who Jesus is.

A. Jesus is our apostle. "Apostle" means one who is sent, with the authority of the one doing the sending. Ambassador is a more modern term – one who is sent and bears the authority of the government he or she represents. When we see the term apostle, we are likely to think of the Twelve that Jesus sends out. But in fact, Jesus was the very first apostle, as John 20:21 indicates: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Jesus was sent by God to speak to us, as our author explains in 1:1. He was sent to bring heaven to earth.

B. A high priest works in the opposite direction. His role is to represent humans to God. He does this by bringing offerings into the temple and sacrificing them on behalf of the people. Back in

2:17-18 our author further describes Jesus as a merciful and faithful high priest. He is merciful in that he has lived our life and understands our struggles. He is faithful in that he never calls in sick nor did he ever give in to temptation. He is with us, always.

Put together, focusing our thoughts on Jesus as both apostle and high priest means that Jesus is with us in both directions: he brings God to us, and he brings us to God. We could say that he serves as a kind of bridge builder, which is what the Latin term for priest – pontifex – actually means.

C. Lastly, to help us think about who Jesus is, in addition to apostle and high priest, our author wants us to focus on the fact that Jesus is superior to Moses. It seems like kind of a sudden shift, but perhaps not when we consider that the readers of this letter were considering going back to Judaism and that Moses was the most revered figure in all of Jewish life and thought. It was Moses who led the people out of Egypt, Moses who delivered the law and the whole system of temple worship, Moses who wrote the first five books of the Bible. If our author is having his readers recognize that Jesus is superior to the prophets and superior to the angels, he needs as well to throw Moses into the mix.

To be sure, he is not trying to be critical of Moses, or to bring Moses down in terms of his importance. Rather, he calls Moses faithful and applauds him for being a good servant in God's "house," which, as we have seen, means God's people. However, if Moses was the servant in God's house, as Son, Jesus was the designer and builder and ultimate owner of that house. Jesus, therefore, is worthy of far greater glory than the house itself or anyone who had served within it.

Note that Jesus doesn't try to fix or correct Moses, rather, as our author will continue to demonstrate, Jesus fulfills all that Moses pointed to, all that he bore witness to (v. 5). Further, there is, in fact, only one house, a single people of God throughout the history of the world. Moses was their shepherd in the OT and we call them Israel. Yet he was only pointing toward the coming of Jesus who would be the good shepherd of that people, now called the church, or the new Israel.

As someone has put it, the OT is a story in need of a conclusion; Jesus is that conclusion, that final chapter.

So, when the wind and the waves begin to blow, when you feel yourself growing weary and losing heart, drifting, or being tempted to turn, from your faith, the author of Hebrews encourages us to keep our focus on Jesus – on who he is and on what he has done for us. His contention is that as we come to know Jesus more fully, we will come to love him more deeply, and desire to follow him more closely.