

Hebrews 6:13-20

“Jesus Our Anchor”

April 25, 2021

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Fourth Sunday in Easter

The portion of God’s word that is given for us today is Hebrews 6:13-20, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

I invite you to listen carefully now to God’s holy and inerrant Word.

13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, 14 saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” 15 And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. 16 For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. 19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It’s important to remember the world in which the Apostle writes to these Hebrew Christians in this ancient letter we are studying together this year.

You see, Jesus died and rose again sometime around the year 30 AD, but even though his followers proclaimed he was the true lamb whose death and spilled blood at the cross was the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system, the sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem did not come to a halt.

No, when the Apostle wrote this letter to his Jewish Christian readers, and described Jesus as the true high priest whose sacrifice had atoned once for all the sin of the human race, there was an actual high priest in Jerusalem continuing to go about his ritual duties.

Jesus had prophesied on multiple occasions during his public ministry that the temple itself would be destroyed, and surely the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem was a natural capstone to his claims to be the true high priest.

But, in the patience and mercy and kindness of God, Israel was given forty long years to repent before the temple and holy city was finally destroyed in 70 AD, and it was during this time, prior to 70AD, that the letter to the Hebrews was written.

It's hard to us to grasp exactly how disorienting this must have been for those early Jewish Christians.

They were meant to believe that Jesus, a man who was condemned as a criminal and crucified was the true high priest, interceding for them by his shed blood in heaven itself, and yet for decades the entire Temple system in Jerusalem continued unabated.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the pride of Israel - rebuilt after its destruction by the Babylonians and restored to glory recent through the efforts of Herod. It covered hundreds of acres at the heart of Jerusalem, the holy city of Zion, and its stone and gold and cedar structure was overwhelming to behold.

Daily, sacrifices were offered at the Temple. Daily, it was proclaimed by Israel's priests that the true forgiveness of sins was found here, in the blood of goats and bulls. And they had all the weight of tradition and authority and money and power on their side.

All the early Christians had were written scrolls passed hand to hand, the gospels which recorded the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and the epistles which were written by some of his apostles and explained how they were to live in response to Jesus' claims.

And on top of all of this, persecution of the early Christian church by the authorities in Israel was rampant. And it was especially Jewish Christians, of course, who were particularly targeted by the Jewish leaders who saw them as dangerous heretics and betrayers of the true Israelite religion.

The letter to the Hebrews acknowledges this suffering. It appears at the very least that these early Jewish Christians had suffered the loss of property and imprisonment, with more potentially to come.

All of this is to say, the early Christians who first read this letter knew a great deal of what it meant to live with a profound tension with the world around. They looked around them and they knew things were not the way they were meant to be.

They had the promises of God, yes, but what about their daily experience? What about the suffering and death that they knew? What about the frustrations of life under the curse in this world? What about the gap between the kingdom that God promised and their actual experience? What about those things?

I think that we can relate to that sentiment today as well. I know that I can.

All of us carry wounds, places where we are bewildered and overwhelmed by the difficulty of trusting God in the context of the tragedy of life in this world under the curse of sin.

It's into that tension, that challenge, that brokenness of heart that the Apostle writes the words we've just read.

He begins by reminding his readers of the story of Abraham, which is a profoundly appropriate place to go.

Abraham, you'll remember, was promised some remarkable things by God. He was minding his own business in Ur, when one day God spoke and promised Abraham a land to inherit, an enormous amount of descendants, and indeed, that the whole world would be blessed through him.

Now, the only problem was that, as it turned out, Abraham didn't fully attain any of these promises during his life.

Indeed, for most of his life, Abraham was childless and a wanderer from place to place. But the writer to the Hebrews points out that God not only made verbal promises to Abraham, he also swore an oath to him, and since there was nothing greater than himself to swear by, God swore by himself when he made an oath to Abraham.

Here the Apostle refers to the story recorded in Genesis 22 that we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning, when Abraham obeyed God by offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice on Moriah, only to be stopped by the Angel of the Lord.

And then, after Abraham's demonstration of his faith in God's promise, God swore him an oath.

As Genesis 22 tells us, God said to Abraham: *“By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and the sand that is on the seashore. And in your offspring, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”*

The argument the writer to the Hebrews is making is a little bit complicated, but this is essentially what he is saying.

Decades before, when God called Abraham out of Ur, he made him promises. But then, later in his life, after he offered Isaac, God confirmed his promise to Abraham by swearing an oath upon himself, and in this way, Abraham, having patiently waited, as the writer says in verse 15, obtained the promise.

And indeed, Genesis 23 and 24 record interesting initial fulfillments of God’s promise to Abraham. In Genesis 23, Abraham obtains his first real plot of land in the promised land, as he purchases a burial plot for his wife Sarah, and in Genesis 24, Abraham sends his servant to find a bride for Isaac, securing the line of promise and future descendants for himself.

Then, in verses 16 and following, the apostle applies the situation of God swearing an oath to Abraham to the circumstances of his readers.

He says in verses 17-18, *“17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.”*

The heirs of the promise here are the readers, and us as well, those who are the true descendants of Abraham.

What the apostle is saying is for us God has also guaranteed his verbal promises to us by an oath that he has sworn upon himself, and contextually, we can be confident that God's oath to us is the work of redemption that he has worked by his Son, the covenant he has made with us that is sealed by Jesus' own blood.

In other words, what the Apostle is saying is that we who are heirs of the promise not only have the verbal, spoken promises of God to assure us of God's character and faithfulness, we also have the oath that God has enacted and sworn to us in the body of Jesus Christ.

As one of my favorite hymns of Jesus' passion puts it, at the cross:

*"The sinless Son of God must die in sadness;
that the sinful child of man may live in gladness;
We forfeit our lives, yet are acquitted--
God is committed!"*

What the Apostle is saying is that in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the verbal, spoken promises of God to his people throughout the Old Testament take on literal flesh, and in the death of Jesus, God swears an oath to us of his faithfulness and seals that oath by the blood of his Son.

Which means that in these latter days, something new has happened. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, God is committed his children of flesh and blood like he has never been committed before - for he has sworn an oath to us by his very own self.

For my money, this is what is so fascinating about the epistle to the Hebrews. Again and again, the Apostle is engaging in Holy Spirit inspired and radically creative biblical theology - reading the Old Testament afresh through the lens of Jesus' death and resurrection and applying it to our lives in all sorts of unexpected ways.

And what difference does this make? The apostle tells us clearly in the end of verse 18:

So that "we who have fled to God for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."

I love the way the apostle puts that. I mean, that's who are, right? We are not those who have carefully studied all the possible evidence and have wisely deduced that Christianity is the most likely of all the plausible theological and philosophical accounts of the world.

No, we are those who have fled to God for refuge!

We are those who know, beyond the shadow of a doubt that this world is a troubled place, and we have no hope of fixing things on our own because there is too much grief, too much sadness, too much brokenness to put back together.

We are those who know that we need help. We need deliverance and salvation to come to us from outside ourselves, and somehow in God's grace and mercy, we have realized that the only shot we have is to flee to him for refuge and hold on as fast as we can.

I mean, that's who we are, really.

We are those who know that the promises and the sworn oaths of men are no good. We need the promise and the sworn oath of God. And we have come to believe that in Jesus Christ, God has sworn to us an oath that he can never forsake. And so we have fled to him, run to him, escaped to him for refuge and deliverance.

And then, in verses 19-20, the apostle closes this passage with one of the most remarkable images of our relationship to Jesus in all of the Scriptures.

He writes: *"19 We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, 20 where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."*

Do you see the argument that the Apostle is making here?

He is saying that, in the midst of the turmoil of life in this world, where we live in that terrible gap as we wait for the fulfillment of all the promises of God, only one thing will enable us to continue in faith and patience as we wait - we need an anchor that will hold us firm and in place, and that anchor is the ascended Son of God, Jesus - he who is in his own body God's sworn promise to us.

John Calvin comments on this passage and writes:

"As long as we are pilgrims in this world we have no firm ground to stand on, but we are tossed about as if we were in the midst of the sea, and a stormy one at that. But just as an anchor is let down through the midst of the water to a hidden place, and while it remains there is not swept away, so our hope is fixed on God...There is this difference, that an anchor is cast down into the sea because there is solid ground at the bottom, but our hope rises and flies aloft because it finds nothing to stand on in this world...When we are bound in this way to God, even though we have to contend with continual storms, we are safe from the danger of shipwreck."

Do you see the image that the Apostle is giving us of our relationship to Jesus?

He is saying that Jesus has gone up into heaven, he has risen from the dead and entered into God's holy place, the place of joy and light and peace where all God's promises are realized, and he has become an anchor for those of us who wait still to enter into that holy land.

Jesus is there, and we are here, but through our union to him, we are connected to Jesus and held fast by him as a ship is held fast by its anchor to the floor of the sea.

Though the storms of sin and death and grief and sickness and violence still blow upon us in this life, if we are in Christ, then we are anchored by his living presence in heaven, we are held firmly by his steadfastness.

As Calvin puts it, if Christ is our anchor then we are bound in this way to God, and even if we have to deal with continual storms, we are safe from the danger of shipwreck.

Beloved, this is why I speak to you so often of abiding with Jesus through the means of grace he offers you in Word, Sacrament and Prayer. Not only abiding with Jesus on the Lord's Day, but on every day of your life.

It is because there is nothing else in this life that is solid. Nothing. Nothing other than Jesus will hold you steadfast. That's what the Word of God is saying to you here.

There are many things that you will be tempted to find stability and hope in in this life. It might be your intellect and your gifts. It might be your bank account and investments. It might be the love and loyalty of other people. It might be a particular political agenda or outcome. It might be your health or looks or charisma or self-discipline.

But, beloved, all of those things will ultimately let you down. They are just as broken, just as unstable as you are.

And this morning I am here to tell you that there is only one sure and steadfast anchor for your soul, and that is the Lord Jesus Christ.

For Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. He does not grow old or weary, and he does not change.

Jesus bears, in his own body, the marks of God's sworn oath to you, sealed by his blood, and he stands forever, risen from dead in the presence of his Father, making constant intercession for you.

You cannot save yourself. You cannot survive the storms of this world on your own.

But there is one who is your soul's anchor, and each day of your life, he will invite you to flee to him for refuge.

So let us flee to him for refuge and hold fast to the Hope that is set before us. For there is nothing in all this world but Jesus who can save us.

He is our anchor. And he will hold us fast.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.