

“Subverting the Monarchy”
Hebrews 1:1-9
The Last Sunday After Pentecost
November 26, 2023
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Hebrews 1:1-9 (Women’s lectionary year A)

Many times and in many ways God spoke to our mothers and fathers through the prophets, female and male. In these last days God has spoken to us by a Son, whom God appointed heir of all there is, and through whom God created the worlds. The Son is the brilliance of God’s glory and reproduction of God’s very being, and the Son undergirds all there is by his word of power. When the Son had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much greater than the angels as the name he inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,
“You are my child; today I have begotten you”?
Or this,
“I will be their Parent, and they will be my Child”?
Then again, when God brings the firstborn into the world, God says,
“let all the angels of God worship him.”
On the one hand of the angels God says,
*“God makes winds into celestial messengers,
And flames of fire into God’s ministers.”*
But of the Son God says,
*“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
And the righteous scepter is the scepter of your realm.
You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
With the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”*

On this last Sunday of the liturgical year, before we begin Advent next week, we gather in somewhat of a liminal space. In this passage from the book of Hebrews, found at the end of the Christian testament, we read about Jesus’ supremacy over all other heavenly beings, united as he is with the glory of God. And at the same time, we know that we are about to enter a season where we talk about the humility of Jesus, the groundedness of a real person who walked the earth just as we do.

So before we dim the lights and visit the manger, before we look for the star in the sky and listen for the tread of camel footsteps, we wonder together, “who is Jesus?” Our Scripture text from

Hebrews gives us some insight into Jesus' theological significance and his political significance, for his time and for our own.

Over the past two millennia, much attention has been paid to the study of the historical Jesus, the person who really lived and died in ancient Judea. There are groups like the Jesus Seminar that explore the person Jesus of Nazareth and posit what his life would have been like in first century CE Galilee as a carpenter and itinerant preacher. And let me tell you that the historical Jesus is one hot topic among seminarians!

But the person attested to in the historical record is not the only aspect of Jesus that Christians pay attention to. We are not only interested in archaeological finds and scientific proofs. We are also interested in the stories told about him, those recorded in the gospels and elsewhere, the aspects of his character are drawn out in parable and verse. And what is clear, from the gospel of Matthew to the account of historian Flavius Josephus, is that the Roman Empire viewed Jesus as a threat, and they executed him on a cross.

What happened in early Christ-following communities after Jesus' death gives us some insight into the passage of Scripture from Hebrews we are considering this morning. These communities wrestled with their identity once their leader was no longer among them. They had to figure out what was next, who they were, what would draw them together. The communities were wrestling with *theology*, trying to make sense of what they believed about God in light of the events they had experienced together—death and resurrection and lifting up the poor and speaking against corruption...what a lot to untangle.

There's a lot to untangle in the book of Hebrews, too. You might be unfamiliar with this book because it is not talked about a lot and it rarely shows up in the lectionary or in sermons. Hebrews was most likely written in the late first century CE, but it is unclear whether it was written before or after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in year 70, an event that shook the region's Jewish community and the emerging Christ movement. Scholars are pretty sure that the apostle Paul didn't write Hebrews, as it differs in structure greatly from the books that Paul, and even his imitators, penned. And Hebrews, though called a "letter," is actually more of a sermon. Its literary structure and theological development are fascinating, and quite different from other texts included in the Christian testament.

But I also must note that Hebrews is a dangerous book. In it, there are passages that contain language and sentiments that have been used to oppress Jewish people, to assert the supremacy of Jesus and his teachings over those of Hebrew Bible prophets and patriarchs, and other sentiments that place Christianity as better or more right than Judaism. Those sentiments can be summed up in the word "supersessionism," the idea that Christianity supersedes Judaism in the person of Jesus, and that is a dangerous idea that leads to much Christian antisemitism. So please treat the book of Hebrews with caution and care.

So as this early Christian community was doing their best to untangle their experiences and values and make meaning from what they knew to be true in their hearts, some theological principles developed that we still look to today.

One principle is the unity of Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit, which today we know as part of the doctrine of the Trinity. This idea shows up in our Scripture today as the author writes about how Jesus shares in God's glory and identifies with Godself and possesses all the attributes of God.

Another idea is Jesus as King. The language in our scripture passage of the Son sitting at the right hand of God, and the references to "throne" and "scepter" and "majesty" are royal. In the gospels, we encounter Jesus called the "King," and "kingdom of God" language. These ideas did not sit well with the ruling powers of Judea, King Herod and his ilk, or the Roman Empire's government in Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate. They heard the people's affirmation of Jesus using royal language and feared the power he had to subvert the monarchy and empire.

Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney writes this in her commentary on this passage, "monarchy is as all human institutions, an enterprise that is doomed to fail. Yet monarchy and its conventions has given us language for God, imperfect but familiar as the psalm amply demonstrates. Jesus takes that language and those conventions and inverts them; the reign of God and its majesty are very different from the splendor of the world's sovereigns. To the fallen Judean monarchy and their Babylonian colonizers and occupiers, Jesus says the poor of the land who were deemed not worth the labor to even deport are at the heart of the reign of God. The majesty of Christ is not found in treasures of temple or palace, burgled and broken apart, but in a crown of thorns beaten in by bullies and in his battered and denuded body. This human, mortal, woman-born Jesus is the glory and majesty of God; in the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "the brilliance of God's glory and reproduction of God's very being." That humanness, shared with every girl and woman, boy and man, nonbinary child and adult, is also the majesty of Christ and our own."

Beloveds, we are made in the image of God in all our beautiful diversity and extraordinary uniqueness. The radiance of Christ is also cast upon us—upon all humanity. The challenge for us is to see it in ourselves, in each other, and not be influenced by institutions that are set up to preserve power structures that lie to us about the worth and dignity of all humanity. Institutions like monarchy and empire.

We don't live under a monarchy here, but we sure do live in an empire—perhaps the most powerful empire in the history of the world. And now, just as then, the person and stories of Jesus have power that threatens empire. Think of the civil disobedience done by Black folks of all ages during the 50s and 60s, trading strategies for militant nonviolence in church basements, and singing hymns as they were arrested. Think of the nuns in Kentucky who fought against fracking and oil pipelines. Think of the multifaith leaders singing "This Little Light of Mine" as we called for a ceasefire in Gaza. The person and stories of Jesus have power that threatens empire.

But in our text from Hebrews 1, it seems like only one kind of power is the focus: the grandiose, cosmic power of God that Jesus shares in his identification with God. Missing is the kind of power represented in the Magnificat, in the story of an infant wrapped in bands of cloth and laying in a manger where animals feed, in the shock of a people who realized that this was a

different kind of king than the war hero they were expecting—the kind of power we will soon remember again during the Advent season.

In conversations about subverting systems of oppression, often the image that comes to mind is of a system that is just flipped over: those in the most privileged position become those at the bottom of the food chain and vice versa. Patriarchy flipped over would be matriarchy. White supremacy flipped over would be people of color supremacy. But that conversation only gets us so far. That conversation is still based on the idea that someone has to be the winner, and others have to lose. One big fish gets swapped for another, and the little fish still lose out.

That pattern of thought is still buying into binary thinking, that there are only two modes of being: power-ful and power-less. When we approach our collective problems with systemic oppression simply as problems of who is in the seats at the table, and not as problems with the structure itself, we are falling into the trap of accepting structures as they are. Instead, the way of Jesus calls us to a different understanding of what power is, and what words and actions can disrupt systems of oppression.

This quote from Ursula K. LeGuin often comes to mind when I wonder about subverting systems that seem so insurmountable: “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.”

This call to resistance and change was a key part of Jesus’ Way—helping the poor, the outcast, the forgotten, the shunned, to recognize and live into their identity as beloved children of the Holy, and live into their call to recognize their own power.

A challenge of Hebrews 1 is that it falls in this trap of “accepting structures of power, but just flipped around.” Declaring Jesus the King and focusing on his royal majesty, though threatening to the institutions of Jesus’ day, does not help us break out of the monarchical structure as a whole. It only brings the challenge of supersessionism, which is now rampant around the world in Christian circles of all political leanings.

The challenge before us now, in this liminal space between liturgical seasons, is: how do we declare the glory of God and praise God, while also remembering the every-day-ness of God, the humanity of Jesus and the way he lived his life?

Perhaps Hebrews 1 does not only give us problems, but can also point us in a helpful direction, calling us to pay attention to the identification of Jesus with God. I would guess that some among our number are unsure about the divinity of Jesus, or unsure about the idea of the Trinity. But what I love about this model, and what it offers us, is that there is relationship at the center. There is indwelling and conspiring and belonging among God the Creator, Christ the Child, Holy Spirit the Comforter. God and Son and Spirit are one and the same, all capable of dwelling within a human body and also capable of crafting the cosmos.

As we head into Advent, don’t get caught in traps...of your own making or of others. Traps that tell you that you are powerless while those with more money, more experience, more political know-how, more positions of influence, are powerful. Traps that convince you that this world is

not capable of change, or even capable of wanting to change. Traps that maintain violence is the only answer, and that resistance is futile. Don't get caught in those traps.

Instead, know that when we are following the way of Jesus, when we are on the side of the oppressed and dehumanized, when we are subverting the empire, we are not calling for a change of top leadership only—we are advocating for busting out of the existing system and using our creative hearts and minds to build something new.

Won't you join in creating the kin-dom, this Advent and beyond?

May it ever be so. Amen.