

What Child is This?

(Hebrews 1: 1-4)

For our sermon this morning I would like us to study four verses from the opening words of the Epistle to the Hebrews. These verses answer better than anything else in the Scripture the question that is on the lips of those who come with the question, "What Child is this?"

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but 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. ³He 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, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”

Clearly, the central declaration of this passage is the twice repeated phrase "God spoke" to humans. In times past he spoke by the prophets but now, the writer says, "he has spoken to us by a Son." That indicates that the answer to the question "What Child is this?" is that this Baby lying in Mary's lap in Bethlehem is the ultimate, the complete word of God to humankind. We never again will have God speaking to men and women in this world in as definitive a way until on that great day when Jesus will come again. All that God wants to say to us in this world has been said, and it is only up to us to hear and to heed what he says. That is why for almost twenty-one centuries we have never had another event like Jesus’ life, for God has spoken to us in his Son.

In the passage in Hebrews the writer surrounds this statement that Jesus is the word of God with certain phrases that give five great reasons why the child at Bethlehem is God's final word to us.

The first one is in the very first sentence,

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets.

When you open the Old Testament you are reading the Word of God spoken to our ancestors in the faith. And it is a fascinating version. I hope you have come to

understand and really value the Old Testament. What a marvelous book! How many different ways God spoke in that book -- in dreams, in visions, in sudden appearances -- in that wonderful act of inspiration that nobody fully understands where somebody speaking the words that come to his mind and heart is uttering the words of God.

If you would like to come to understand the Old Testament more thoroughly I would like to I invite you to take a six week survey called "See Through the Scriptures:" During these six weeks you will come to better understand the major themes of the Old Testament. It will also aid you in better seeing how Jesus is the fulfillment of all that is written in the Jewish Bible. It will begin on Monday evening, January 17th at 7:30 PM.

Yet, when you finish the Old Testament and you have heard all the matchless oratory of Moses, David and the prophets, you still realize that God's voice has not answered the deep questions of the human heart. It is only when you open the Gospels and begin to read of Jesus, who he was, what he did, where he went, what he said, how he acted, how he lived and the way he handled situations, that all the utterance of the prophets and other Old Testament writings begins to merge into one great voice and we get God's final word to humankind. That is why I love the Sermon on the Mount so. I think it is the greatest message we have ever been privileged to hear. If Ruthy and the Vestry think it the right course for our study in the New Year, we will begin a detailed examination of these three chapters in the middle of January

Then the writer here points out that Jesus is the greater word because he forms the boundaries of history.

²but 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.

Now there is the beginning in the past: "He created the world"; there is the end of the future: He is "the heir of all things." When the writer says that he is looking on to the end of time. But he is not only the end of the future, he is the beginning of the past. Look backwards to the very creation and there you find him. The most wonderful thing that the Christmas story brings before us is this almost unbelievable statement that the Baby who lies in Mary's arms in a smelly cave in Bethlehem is the One who created the entire universe.

Think about this. All the vast universe with its teeming millions of galaxies, with it taking hundreds of thousands of light years to cross even one of them, was brought into being by the hand of the One who lies as a Babe at Mary's breast in Bethlehem! That is the universal testimony of Scripture. By prediction in the Old Testament, by the statement of the Gospels, and by the declaration of the apostles afterward. The whole of the biblical record declares the great truth that the One who lay there in Bethlehem is the Creator of the world. He brackets all of time; Jesus stands at the end of every path upon which every creature and every human being who ever lived travels.

Now, not only that, but the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus is the complete word of God because he is the master of the present as well. He puts it this way,

³He 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.

That is an amazing statement. It is put in the present tense, saying that he is the One who is keeping things going right now. That is not only true of the physical universe, including our bodies and all that we are, but it is true of all the other forces and powers in the universe -- physical, psychological, social, spiritual, whatever, -- he is in charge of them all. After the resurrection, when our Lord appeared to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, in the most forthright terms, simple, artlessly, he said to them, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" {Matt 28:18b KJV} means he not only controls all the physical forces of the planet and the universe, but he controls all the events that occur upon them. This is something Christians tend to forget. We get so used to seeing things through the secular eyes of the media, and other propaganda forces around us, that we forget that behind the events that fill the pages of our newspapers is a mighty controlling hand that is blending them all together, permitting some things to happen, restraining other things.

Then the writer takes us even deeper, not only to these physical matters, these external visible things, but he takes us back now into the very depths of the human dilemma -- the problem of human evil. He says,

When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Jesus is the final and complete word of God to men and women because he has solved the deepest problem in human life -- the problem of human sinfulness. Everybody today is asking, in the face of some of the tragic things that are happening, "What's wrong with humanity? What's wrong with life? Why is the world in a continual mess? Why are our papers filled with murder and violence and hate and corruption and darkness?" Why all this murder and violence and evil? The answer of Scripture universally is, "Man's sin," or, to put it even more realistically, and more helpfully, to us, "Man's selfishness." That is what lies at the root of it all, the terrible taint that all of us possess that can never be washed away by our own efforts. Like Lady Macbeth, there are times we all want to cry out, "Out damned spot!" Yet it is never gone.

The amazing declaration of Scripture is that the reason the Creator of the world became the Babe of Bethlehem was that he might make purification for human selfishness, that he might solve the insoluble problem, and wash away the unwashable stain. The good news of Christmas, of course, is that every one of us who has found Christ, who has come to him, and who follows him finds again and again that he has the power to cleanse us. He has the power to put away the guilt of the past, whether it is the past 50 years of life or the past five minutes of time. He has the power to cleanse it, and wash it away, and to set us on our feet again with a clean slate and a fresh page to write on every day, to live life again in the power and the grace of the living God.

Now, that is the greatest message of all. When he had made purification for sins (what agony, what terrible hurt is involved in that phrase), he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Jesus is Lord: this was the early creed of the Church and it is the creed of all who come to know him now. He has solved that desperate problem of human life; he is in control and in charge of all human events.

The poet, James Russell Lowell, who puts it this way:

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone 'tis strong;
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne.
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows,
Keeping watch above his own.

The writer of Hebrews says the final reason why Jesus is God's last word to men and women is that he has won the right to the worship of all creation,

“having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”

We associate angels with Christmas. The angel chorus sang the praises of the Baby to the shepherds on that wonderful night when the heavens were opened, but they also are the ones who gather around the throne of the Lamb in the book of Revelation and give praise and glory to him.

I want to read that account now that we might have it before us. It is found in the 5th chapter, Verse 6, where John says:

6Then I looked and saw a Lamb standing in the center of the throne that was surrounded by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb looked as if it had once been killed. It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits ^[d] of God, sent out to all the earth. 7The Lamb went over and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. 8After he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders knelt down before him. Each of them had a harp and a gold bowl full of incense, ^[e] which are the prayers of God's people. 9Then they sang a new song, "You are worthy to receive the scroll and open its seals, because you were killed. And with your own blood you bought for God people from every tribe, language, nation, and race. 10You let them become kings and serve God as priests, and they will rule on earth." 11As I looked, I heard the voices of a lot of angels around the throne and the voices of the living creatures and of the elders. There were millions and millions of them, 12and they were saying in a loud voice, "The Lamb who was killed is worthy to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and praise." 13Then I heard all beings in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea offer praise. Together, all of them were saying, "Praise, honor, glory, and strength forever and ever to the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!" 14The four living creatures said "Amen," while the elders knelt down and worshiped.

That is the closing scene of all time. That is the one great event toward which the whole creation moves. All the events that crowd our newspapers, our televisions and web sites are working out in some strange way, more mysterious than we can imagine,

to the end that is described here. Therefore, Christmas means to us the most momentous event the ages have ever seen, when the Lord of Glory became the Babe of Bethlehem in order that we might be delivered from our selfishness. That is what Christmas is all about. It is the opportunity for love to break out in our families, in our homes, among our friends, wherever we are, that the back of evil might be broken in our individual lives and we be set free to be the loving creatures God made men and women to be. That is why Christmas is always associated with warmth and love and joy and forgiveness, with healing and beauty and light and glory.

I hope, as we leave this Eucharist that the gratitude of your hearts will express in your own way in words to God what it means to you to have had the Son of God born in your heart as he was born in the stable at Bethlehem. For remember

Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born,
Until he is born within your heart
Your life is still forlorn.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for the Lord of Glory. It is with very inadequate words that we seek to set forth the amazing wonder that he, the God of Glory, should give himself to come take the place of a helpless child and become a man that he might die for us to set us free and make purification for sins. We thank you for it. We pray that we will never forget it, that we are redeemed creatures, we have no value in ourselves, but in the One who loved us, who gave himself for us. In his name we pray, Amen.