

When God Looks in a Mirror

By Dr. Dave Neale

We acknowledge that the Victoria Church of the Nazarene lies within the territories of the peoples represented by the Songhees, Esquimalt and W_SÁNEĆ Nations.

Our message today is sort of a part II of last week's message on the prologue of the Book of Hebrews. Last week we looked at Hebrews 1:1-2 and today we look at vss 3 and 4. I call this message **When God Looks in a Mirror**.

One of the keys to having a vibrant faith is to be filled with wonder about God. We have to get our heads back to what it was like for the first followers. Because our minds get numbed by the orthodoxy of the faith – the settled Christian creed that we are all expected to believe. The trinity, the death and resurrection. It can all become so rote, so common place, so, well... dull.

And the question The Way was struggling with over those first four or five decades of the movement with the question 'Who is He?'

The members of the movement

1. Had seen the risen Jesus.
2. They struggled with the idea that Jesus was the Messiah because of his shameful death.
3. The first Christians had to reread the Hebrew Bible in a quest for scriptural evidence that the Messiah was a suffering, resurrected figure¹

This remains the greatest question in human history. 'Who is He?'

I've been in the academic business of biblical studies for 35 years. I consider myself something of an expert on the literature of the historical Jesus. I still am flummoxed; Jesus is new to me every morning. Who was he? I never get used to this. I hope I never do.

The Book of Hebrews is a long, cogent treatise which answers that question. I think it must have been written in the days when the temple was still standing, but it was becoming clear that the Roman threat to Jerusalem and Judea was about to explode in the Great Revolt of 66 CE. It was a powder keg. And so by 70 the temple was a smoldering ruin, so the attempt to understand Judaism and Christianity in light of that historical disaster was no small thing.

We don't know who wrote the book, although some people think it was a woman. I like that theory but its just that.

What we have to understand is that the ideas and courage of faith contained in the Book of Hebrews wasn't some classroom exercise, and ivory tower academic discussion, it was played out before magistrates and in the arenas of the Roman empire, a life-or-death matter of belief.

This argument of the book proceeds on the assertion that Jesus was superior to:

1. The prophets, as we saw last week. ***In the past God spoke to our foremothers and forefathers many times and in many different ways, but especially through the prophets. Just recently***

¹ Psalm 110:1 is oft quoted in the NT as one of the main messianic texts. It is found in Mt 22:44; Acts 2:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20 and Heb 1:3 and 13.

however, God spoke to us in the person of a Son... It was the prophets' time, now its Jesus' time.

2. The second assertion was that Jesus was superior to angels. In fact, there are perhaps a dozen or more quotations from the Old Testament.² The reason for this is pretty simple, it is to define Jesus, not as a creature, like angels are, but as a Creator.
3. The third assertion is that Jesus was superior to Moses. **Yet Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself** (Heb 3:3)

The rest of the book is a closely reasoned argument of **how** Jesus is superior to Moses, i.e. how the coming of the Son acts as a replacement for the system of *Jewish law practice* that was *centered in the temple*. It is hard for us to grasp what a radical movement this The Way was.

All of the NT actually an attempt to answer this question, "Who is Jesus of Nazareth?" Every page, every sentence is an attempt to answer this question. From the first sentence (**An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham**) to the last (**Come, Lord Jesus**). (The other word for this is Christology.³)

I am filled with wonder and appreciation for the radical courage of those who have gone before us, for those first members of The Way who gave their hearts and minds and lives to struggle with these questions. As we face our own challenges in these days of Truth and Reconciliation we ought to be brave for the truth. It is our heritage.

In the Text

And just maybe one of the most enlivening spiritual issues for the believer is to return in wonder and curiosity, over and over again, to this question, 'Who was Jesus?'

Our text for today consists in two brief verses in Hebrews 1:3-4

Let's hear those two verses now:

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

He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being... (v 3a, NRSV)

Or, as it puts it in the Passion Translation, which I think captures the language of the passage better...

The Son is the dazzling radiance of God's splendor, the exact expression of God's true nature—his mirror image! (The Passion Translation)

² Heb 1:5, Ps 2:7, 2 Sam 7:14; Heb 1:6, Deut 32:43, Ps 97:7; Heb 1:7, Ps 104:4; Heb 1:8-9, Ps 45:6-7; Heb 1:10-12, Ps 102:25-27; Heb 1:13, Ps 110:1; Heb 2:6-8, Ps 8:4-6 (from the *Oxford Study Bible*).

³ The great Christological passages in the NT are, as we said last week, the prologues of John and Hebrews. One scholar said that, "Next to the Fourth Gospel, Hebrews has the most carefully worked out and sustained Christology in the NT...(1:2-3 and 2:6-17)" (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I p. 985). Also see 1 Cor 8:5-6; Phil 2:5-11; but also every passage that asserts that Jesus was raised from the dead is a fundamental assertion of his identity as the Son of God.

This phrase translated as **dazzling radiance** [*apaugasma*] **of God's splendor**, perhaps **he is the brightness of God's glory...**

The word *apaugasma* is found only here in the Bible. The author was attempting to say something that had never been said.

It is like studying a new subject in school or university. There are words that have been adopted to try to explain a new field of study and the first thing you have to do is figure out what the language means. Our author was seeking to say something that had never been said before, and which was so boundless, so infinite, so transcendent in its import that she had to create new language for it!

Next, still in 3a **and he sustains all things by his powerful word**. Literally, he “bears everything,” he “carries everything along.” As William Lane puts it, “ascribes to the Son the providential government of all created existence” (*Hebrews 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary*, p.14).

Next, in 3b **the exact expression of God's true nature—his mirror image!** Again here, the author uses a word that isn't found otherwise in the Bible (except 3x in the LXX). It is the word *character*, and I think you can hear that it is the basis of the English word “character.”

Here is the logic at the centre of this statement...

When God looks in a mirror he sees Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel says, ‘If you want to know who God is look at Jesus.’ This beautiful man, so patient and kind, so loving, so tolerant of the sinner, weeping over the treatment of the Indigenous children, the seeker of the lost, rubbing elbows over dinner with the raucous crowd in Zaccheus’ home. The one who, having come face-to-face with all the violence and corruption of the world as it was, in the end gives his very life-blood for the sake of others – who does that? The meaning of this passage is that **this is what God is like**.

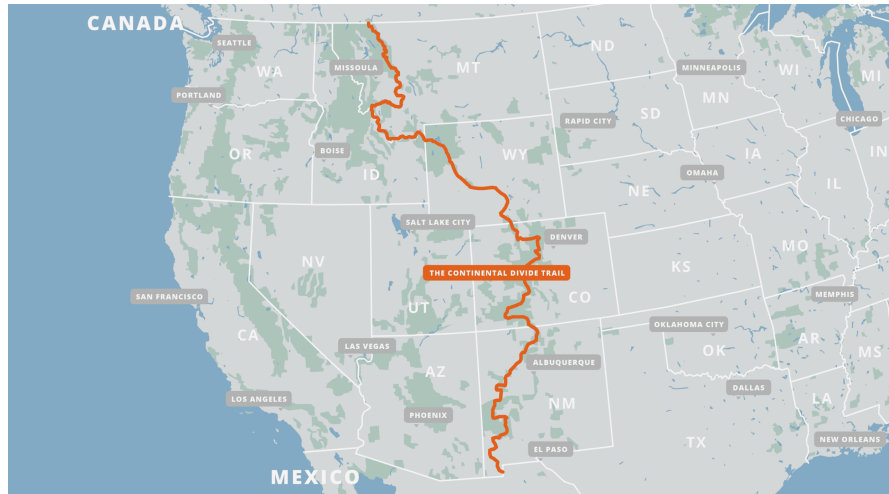
After all these years (50 years since I found the Lord in college) I’m still just a Jesus person. That’s all you have to be. Don’t make this harder than it is. Just read your gospels and let God do the rest.

When he had made purification for sins,⁴ he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high... (Heb 1:3b-4). Sacrifice and exaltation. Sequential. It is the key to understanding Jesus.

From the Text

In 1806 Lewis and Clark were returning from their trip across what is now the United States to the Pacific Ocean. In 1805 Thomas Jefferson had commissioned them to their way up the Missouri River and over the Continental Divide and so on to the coast. They wintered on the coast and then made their way back in the spring of 1806.

⁴ As in Romans 5:18-21 where Paul says Jesus’ death makes “many righteous.” 1 Cor 15:20ff **For since death came through a human being** [Adam], **the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being** [Jesus]; and vs 45-49.



The Continental Divide is that geological feature where the water on one side flows to the east and so on to the Atlantic and everything on the other the west flows to the Pacific. In Canada much of the water on the eastern side flows into the Hudson Bay.

In the hills above Salmon, Idaho where we were living for a couple of years, on the top of the Continental Divide the headwaters of the Missouri River bubble out of the ground. Lewis and Clark came back this way hoping to find a river that could carry them east and home. They weren't very successful in that actually, but you see the idea.

[Musicians Come!]

This verse is the Continental Divide of all of cosmic history for us: ***In the past God spoke to our foremothers and forefathers many times and in many different ways, but especially through the prophets. Just recently however, God spoke to us in the person of a Son...***

If we want to keep our spiritual and moral focus, if we want to stay centred in these challenging days, just listen to this!

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)

That is our text for next week and I can't wait to get into that with you. Are you with me?