

Many Times, Many Ways - Part I

By Dr. Dave Neale

Part I

This morning we turn to the prologue of the Book of Hebrews in our NT. If you are following the lectionary you will realize that I am working from the texts for Oct 3 and will make a two-parter out of this message. This week I'll treat verses 1 & 2 of the prologue and next week verses 3 & 4.

Over the next two months I'll be in Hebrews for the most part, with a couple of weeks in the Gospel of Mark. This is the time of the Christian year when we find ourselves in expansive texts and sometimes in texts about the end of time, both near and far. This makes sense because as the Christian year makes its annual cycle it moves from the birth and revealing of Jesus in ministry, on to the end of Jesus' life when he **made purification for our sins**, as this morning's reading puts it, and eventually on to the last things.

So during these last weeks preceding Advent we will read about the coming crucifixion in Jerusalem and then in Mark 13 about the culmination of history. Things will have come full circle from the birth of the Messiah to the culmination of history.¹ I hope you can join us for this time of learning and inspiration.

Context

When I pick up a book, especially a novel, the first page is the most important page. Because you can be sure that the author has put their very best foot forward to reach out a touch the reader. You can be sure the first page has been rewritten countless times in order to strike just the right note and hook the reader.

That's why I always take great pleasure in the first sentences of all of the biblical books. It might be, in part, why the books of the Hebrew Bible often derive their name from the first word in the book.²

For example Genesis in the Hebrew Bible is known as Bereshit, from כְּרֵאשִׁית, *bereshit*, as "In the beginning"; or Exodus is known as Shemot from שֵׁם, *sham*, name(s), as in "The names of the sons of Israel"; or Leviticus as Vayikra, from קָרָא, *kra*, to call, as in "God called Moses."

And if I was to name this book in Hebrew Bible fashion I would call it *Many Times, Many Ways*, the title of my message this morning.

There are, I think, three places in the Bible where there is a sweeping cosmic panorama painted at the beginning of a narrative. Only three - so this is not a common thing, but they are very stirring to behold.

[A slide or video of the vastness of space]

We think of these as "ontological" statements. Word of the Day: That is, they are words and ideas that deal with the nature of existence and being. Genesis chapter one is the first and most famous and

¹ If you are new to us I'd like you to understand that when we deal with our text for the week it isn't one that I have plucked out of the Bible because I liked it. We follow a discipline of dealing with the text of the week from the Revised Common Lectionary used throughout Christendom for reading the Bible in a 3-year cycle. This approach broadens us and requires us to reflect on the whole of the biblical tradition with a long view in mind, to see God's revelation in all of its breadth and depth.

² So Genesis in the Hebrew Bible is known as Bereshit, from כְּרֵאשִׁית, *bereshit*, as "In the beginning"; or Exodus is known as Shemot from שֵׁם, *sham*, name(s), as in "the names of the sons of Israel"; or Leviticus as Vayikra, from קָרָא, *kra*, to call, as in "God called Moses."

possibly the best example of this type of narrative in the Bible. It is stunningly majestic and impossibly bold in its assertions:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Gen 1:1)

And then there is the second cosmic scenario - John 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being (John 1:1-2).

In the Text

This morning our text is the prologue of the Book of Hebrews. And here we find the third great cosmic scenario to which I referred.

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, to whom he has bequeathed all things in creation, because it was through this Son that all things came into being. (Hebrews 1:1-2, my translation)

First, ***...many times and in many different ways***

- ***...many times*** This year we have been in the historical and poetic books of the Bible (Samuel and Job, for example). Through an immense scope of times and places God has spoken into and through the lives of His people, and he has never stopped. The Bible is a closed canon now, but God continues to speak to and through His people. You might recall the House of Listening series during Lent this year. This is always the question, its not ‘Is God present?’, it is ‘Are we listening?’ The point is, ‘many times’ includes today.
- ***...many different ways*** (my translation, *polutropōs* = manner of life, ways of life) That is, God speaks in manifold ways. Our theological tradition, the Wesleyan tradition believes that God speaks through four media – Scripture, Tradition, Experience, Reason. But also through all the circumstances of life. Even the crises, in which we find lessons for life that cannot be seen by any other means. So to live in Christ, is to remain open to the full range of our experiences as the means by which God communicates with us.

Second, ***...but especially through the prophets***

- But He speaks ***especially*** through the prophets. It is literally, *God spoke to us through the prophets*. I think the term “prophets” here should be understood, firstly as the whole of the Hebrew Bible, not just the prophets per se. And, for us, the whole of the NT as well. You don’t have to be a Bible thumper to hold that this corpus is a preserved record of God’s communication with his people over centuries. We may all interpret it differently from time to time, we may disagree on its meaning on occasion. But nothing should obscure the idea that we have a here a moral and spiritual guide that is valuable beyond all measure. And that by its contemplation and rereading and study and preaching...we are nourished mentally and spiritually and morally. That we find God’s heart here.

Third, ... ***Just recently however, God spoke to us in the person of a Son,***

- That is God has made Jesus the Son the crown prince, the primogenitor, the heir to the throne, the sole beneficiary to all that is in creation.

Third, ...***to whom he has bequeathed all things in creation, because it was through this Son that all things came into being.***

- Notice how in John 1:2 ***All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being*** (John 1:1-2).
- And see how this idea is emphasized in Hebrews 11:3: ***By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.***
- *Through whom he made tous aiōnas*, you can take this as “things,” you can take this as “worlds (NRSV),” “the universe” (NLT), you can take this as reference to time itself, “the ages.... eternity.” All of this can be understood in this simple word – and I say to us, that if we can in any way absorb the cosmic vastness of his identity we come closer to the heart and mind of God.
- ***By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end.*** (The Message)

This is the purpose of the line of argument about angels. It is the uniqueness of Jesus in the cosmic scheme that is being asserted. Angels are creatures, as are we. Jesus is not a creature. He is the creator. Perhaps a bit more about angels next week when we finish the prologue.

From the Text

We don't come to church to say something original, or be modern or clever. It is quite the opposite. We come to church to be encounter the timeless truth. God has communicated this truth ***In many times and in many ways***... and most recently by sending the Son.

How do we translate this into modern life?

First, we Christians believe (I'm taking a liberty by presuming to speak for us of course!) that contrary to the rampant subjectivism of our time, or “soft relativism,” in which what I think is more important than any other standard... we believe that some things have significance *in and of themselves*, and not just because someone *thinks* they *do* or *don't* have significance.

Our passage this morning anchors our view of life and the world in on stunning fact. It is this....the highest value is not what one person decides, but what we believe. But this - there is an immutable, eternal, loving and communicative Presence in the universe.³ We are the children of a loving God, made know to us in these last days through the redemptive acts of Christ.

Can we see how this anchors us in an idea of our lives a part of the fabric of eternity? Can we celebrate this morning the fact that we don't steer by the lights of every passing ship, but by the stars created by a loving God?⁴

³ Following Taylor (*TMOM*, p 36).

⁴ As General Omar Bradley once said.

As our Psalm for the week of Oct 3 says: ***O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.*** (Ps 8:1)

Second, when we say that we have a communicative God, through many and various ways, we are saying that we have real relationship with God is possible. We know what God is thinking: Love God and Love People, and the rest is just lots of commentary around that, as Pastor Jimmy has been teaching us the past two weeks. We know the God with whom we have to do.

Third, there are few things as destructive to relationship as the failure to communicate. When we don't communicate we actually become involved in mythical relationships. Imagined opinions, imaginary offenses.

A God who communicates with us through many times and ways is the foundation for a life of meaning that is far beyond our mere human experience!

Thanks be to God!