

January 17, 2021 The Better Way Hebrews 1:1-14

Dearly Beloved;

We are not at the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, more likely we are at its cold and vicious heart. Yes there are vaccines that will eventually help all of us remain reasonably well, but we are months from receiving the doses that we will need to be helped to live in a world that has been changed by Covid-19. I listened as one specialist speculated that it will be 2022 before we are back to anything resembling normal. So our struggle is not over. I say this to you, to encourage you to stick to the basics: go out when you must, and when you can go out as safely as possible. If you are going to be inside with others, work at distancing yourself, and of course wear your mask. Wash your hands often. And when you are out, or have come home, or have gotten into your car, use hand sanitizer. Even after we receive the vaccinations, they are already reminding us, we will have to observe the old ways when modern medicines and techniques were not available or unknown.

Barbara and I are well. At times we feel like we have been away from you, family and friends for a long time. I am not exaggerating when I say we miss you. We miss seeing your faces without masks, and we miss a time when we could be seen without having to wear one. The way forward requires that all of us be extremely careful, protecting others and doing what we can to protect ourselves. The presence of variant strains of Covid-19 simply reminds us that the virus is evolving, not in the intensity of the illness it creates, but to increase its efficiency, in being able to infect us. Knowledge is a weapon.

Knowing what we know, we have every reason to be diligent in terms of being careful.

In the midst of all of this, remember that God still loves you. Jesus cares and HIS name is more powerful, than this virus. The Holy Spirit is with you and within you. All of which means you and I are not alone in the midst of a trying time. Our parents, survived 1918. By the grace of God and with the encouragement of our friends, we can survive 2020-2021. With that, let us turn to the message, remembering that although the sanctuary is closed, in you and I, and our brothers and sisters in Christ, the church is very much alive and active.

The letter to the Hebrews is an intriguing letter in the New Testament. My Thompson Chain, King James Version of the Bible has this note in its margin beside the very first verse of chapter 1: "Authorship uncertain, commonly attributed to Paul." Unlike most of Paul's correspondence, Hebrews does not open with his identifying formula of, "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ...to the church in thy house." What I have just quoted are words chosen by me from the first 2 verses of Paul's letter to Philemon, on the previous page of my KJV Bible.

The note in my old KJV text tells us two things: The church has always recognized we could not be absolutely certain Hebrews was written by Paul. At the same time, because Paul was a Jew and Pharisee, and wrote the bulk of the letters in the New Testament, it is very difficult to say with any certainty, he did not write this one, because believers have

attributed it to Paul for most of the history of Christendom. Only in our current era, in which we need to recognize, we are super critical of the very Biblical word we love, that the balance has tipped away from Paul's being the author, embracing the uncertainty of who wrote it. Old geezers like me, favour the idea that Paul was the author of Hebrews. Why? Because the issues the letter addresses are in keeping with Paul's declaration of the faith. Here is the key thing to remember: authorship, who wrote it, is not the reason it is an important letter to the faithful in times that are tough. The key question is what does it teach us. And as the title of this new series declares...the text teaches that following Jesus, in a time when people are dying around you because of persecution, or in our case when people are dying because of a disease for which there is no magic pill, following Jesus is the better way.

The author begins (I've already said I think it is Paul), by saying this: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers by the prophets....but in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son." (Heb. 1:1-2) The author's audience is that body of first generation believers, in Jerusalem, but also spread out over the Empire, as they have been scattered by persecution. It seems everyone was suddenly interested in catching, punishing, and killing the followers of Jesus. Jewish leaders regarded the infant church as a band of heretics. Rome, which had been more lenient with the Jews than any other conquered people who had a religion other than that of Rome, quickly hardened to rejection of the "Christians" once they understood they were not just a weird group of Jews. As a result followers of Jesus left

Jerusalem, Judea, and considered going back to their Jewish roots as a means of survival.

Hebrews was written to these Jewish disciples of Jesus to encourage them to hold to the faith that had brought them the joy of salvation, and the possibility of new life, in the midst of a hostile world. The author's first statement in the opening phrases of the letter is that God spoke to the Hebrew world in the old days by means of the prophets, who for the most part were persecuted and killed for what they dared say...like, Gentiles are also loved by God and can enjoy the same faith as you possess. The dramatic thing that the author says, and Paul experienced this on the Damascus Road, is that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is better than the revelation in the words of the prophets. Many of the believers affected by this letter had seen Jesus in the flesh, heard HIM speak with credal authority and passion, and of course, they witnessed some of the miracles. The author simply states, the revelation of God's love for us and his will for us and how he wants us to live is better as it came to us in the person of Jesus. It is a better way.

He goes on to say, Jesus is God's Son, and that thereby HE is the heir to all things. An heir owns stuff. When I die I will leave my Martin guitar to my daughter Rebekah because she plays guitar. At that point it will become hers. I will leave my books about the Toronto Maple Leafs to Matthew because he is a fan, and they will become his. The writer of Hebrews says Jesus is the heir of ALL things, because HE is

God's Son and then sounding a little like John the disciple, he says, Jesus is the one through whom the universe was created. The KJV says that this way, very specific: "by whom also HE made all the worlds." As I have said, it sounds like John's concept of Jesus (John 1:3) "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made, that was made." (KJV)

Whoever the author was, he goes on to say of Jesus, "after he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became superior to the angels...For to which of the angels did God ever say, You are my Son." (Hebrews 1:3-5) It is his argument that Jesus is not an angel of God, but rather God the Son. Which also puts to the lie, the idea that the concept of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) was invented by the church at a much later date than the time of the emergence of the church following the resurrection of Jesus. Here, the author of this letter, a disciple of Jesus, with a background in Jewish theology (for me the shoe fits Paul perfectly) argues that the Jesus, believers with a Hebrew background knew, saw and heard is God who came into the world in flesh and blood. He calls them to remain steadfast in their faith in tough times. Why? Because it is a better way.

The author goes on to say, based on Psalm 45:6-7 that he declares this about Jesus: "speaking of the angels (God) says, he makes his angels winds...and flames of fire." Winds cease their blowing. Fires die out. "But about the Son he says, your throne, O God, will last forever and ever." And the

obvious point to some who are thinking of dropping out of the church and going back to their former religion is, don't do it. The revelation of God's love for us in Jesus is, a better and everlasting way.

These are trying times. It is tempting to say, what's the point. Will we ever get to worship in person again, sing the hymns, read the Psalms responsively, celebrate communion like we used to? I need the encouragement the author of the Hebrews offers. It is medicine for my soul in a hard, spiritually trying time. Following Jesus is a better way. The Kingdom to which HE calls us, is everlasting.

Let us pray;

O Lord who redeems and loves and feeds our souls, we give thanks for the witness of those who lived in tougher times than we are experiencing. We thank you for their honesty and the clarity of their declarations. Grant that we might have the strength and conviction to follow this better way. To invest our lives in Jesus. To love our neighbours as we love ourselves. To cling to the Kingdom life we experience in the fellowship of the church. Amen