

Psalm 104: 1-9, 24, 35c
Hebrews 5:1-10 (p. 221)

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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THE MISSING LINK

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest,
but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you";
as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever." *Hebrews 5:5-6a*

The religion of the Old Testament had two centers, the temple and synagogue. The Temple in Jerusalem, to which every devout Jew sought to make pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime, was the center for atonement with God, where thanksgiving offerings were dedicated to God, and animal sacrifices (something costly to the worshiper) were made to atone for the sins of the pilgrims and their households. Commonly, the animal sacrificed was given back once slaughtered for the nourishment of the people. The Synagogue was a place of weekly prayer, the reading of Scripture, and study in the fellowship of one's own community.

Hebrews may have been written after the last Jerusalem Temple was completely destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans, and the temple priests became largely superfluous. Hebrews answers the question, especially among Jewish Christians, with no temple sacrifice for the atonement of sins, how then are we forgiven our sins; how are we saved? The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the new high priest who replaces the old system. They were mere mortals, where Jesus was proclaimed "my son" by God. They had to offer sacrifice for their own sins; he kept his purity before God. They were subject to human weakness, while Jesus endured, demonstrating the perfection of the *imago dei*—our creation in the image of God—to perfection. Their sacrifices had to be repeated endlessly, with the blood of animals, where Christ shed his own blood, ending once-for-all the need for any further sacrifice.

Formerly, priests were the bridge between humankind and God, a tradition effectively maintained in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions in the Eucharist, confession booth, and so on. Protestants proclaimed since the Reformation that all the faithful are priests with direct access to God. Yet one crucial thing remains to complete the bridge to God. Jesus links hands with God, and so is glorified—made seamless in his identity with God. And Jesus, fully human, shared life even unto death in perfect solidarity with us. But a gap remains between us and him that Jesus did not create and cannot bridge arbitrarily. It is the missing link of our personal, active *faith*. Faith is the great equalizer, the universal currency of rich or poor, of brilliant intellect and homespun plainness, of high priests and the widow with but two pennies to rub together in heartfelt thanksgiving.

Faith is a gift offered to all, but when it's little exercised it compiles little evidence. The challenge is that God, through Jesus, speaks to us in ways quite contrary to the ways of the world. Let me offer an analogy. Take the way we open a set of nested Russian dolls beginning with the largest. We know that the end of the sequence will be finding the smallest doll. The fun is discovering just how small. But there it ends. The spiritual journey is just the opposite. *It commonly begins with the small*. Perhaps a moment of unexpected blessing as an answer to prayer, or a moment of idyllic peace that hints at a peace-giving God. Perhaps in a moment of solitude a longed for sense of direction breaks through. Or a stranger intervenes in a critical time. Or an overheard conversation between others speaks profoundly to some weighty decision you're struggling with. Think about this for a moment. We have all experienced such moments. But after the glow of that "angel unawares" (Hebrews 13:2) moment, the presence often fades as life drifts into the fog of normalcy.

Now, imagine a *spiritual* journey that's like those tiny, nested dolls. This time they're all separated and hidden, and your fleeting spiritual moment is like the smallest of them. But instead of losing contact with the moment you decide to build on it, and you begin to search to experience other pieces that the first one implies. Your diligence pays off as the more you seek the more you find. They're random sizes, some smaller, some larger, but together they build a deeper certainty of oneness. Each discovery brings another validating experience—not tangible evidence but something felt and known, like falling in love, which is always more mystery than matter. And searching, you discover it has no end, but a series of beautifully integrated confirmations that God is who our faith claims God to be, and that each experience is part of an ever greater whole. This is the spiritual journey, and its passport for each step on the journey is our willingness to reach out in faith; a faith that will not disappoint.

It isn't about what the preacher says, or how the preacher says it. It's about each of us risking to follow through in seeking what cannot merely be told—it's about experiencing God for oneself. It isn't what happens here that counts. It's what you do after you leave here that counts.

God says, "you make your choices because I give you freedom to choose." But, ironically, it is choosing to satisfy one's own self that is ultimately least satisfying. God says 'If, instead of simply taking the things you desire, you were to give them up to me, I'd give you what you need anyway and fulfill your desires, too.' Here's an example. In Genesis 13 Abraham and Lot leave Egypt to find the land that God has promised Abraham and his descendants forever. Problem is, Abraham doesn't know specifically what that land is. So he and his nephew, Lot, journey on to find suitable land, but all around it is clear that the land cannot support both of them, their families and their herds. Then they come to a high place overlooking a spectacular valley, surrounded by lush arable land, pasture for grazing, palm trees, and water sufficient for hundreds of animals, which Abraham has in abundance, far more than Lot. Still, it clearly will not support both Abraham and Lot.

Now the natural thing is for Abraham, the senior, who has the largest responsibility for family and herds, to choose this for himself. But he doesn't. He lets Lot choose. And Lot, salivating at the prospect of riches and security on such a land, chooses the valley. Now that was *dumb*, Abraham! It was yours for the taking! But Abraham *trusts* God, knowing that God already has the land picked out, because when Lot chooses, he will choose what God does not want Abraham to have. And so they separate, and Abraham moves on. He allows his faith in God to be the missing link, knowing that God will always choose rightly for him—even when it might seem the wrong course. Later, the story confirms Abraham's course. For the cities in that Jordan valley, Jericho, Sodom and Gomorrah, which were wretchedly profane, lay in a natural fault line that produces a terrible conflagration of earthquake and fire.

We cannot force a willful swimmer to heed an unseen rip-tide. No more does God force us to ask God's guidance in faith. We may teach our children to be watchful, even prayerful. But they *are* children, and we, after all, are *adults*. We know how to be pragmatic as the moment demands. The previous chapter, Genesis 12, shows the consequence of that course, with Abraham in Egypt. Abraham will never go that way again. (I urge you to read Genesis 12-14).

To build for yourself, by God's companionship, a house constructed on trust in the one who lives in our future. And to let each experience of faith validated build a life secure in God. Now there's a life worth celebrating.

As you choose to take that journey more intentionally, let me know how I might help, if you should need some companionship on it.

Amen