

# *Listening to the Voice of God*

Hebrews 1:1-4

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What is our greatest danger? What poses the greatest threat to us? This is something that the Scriptures pay a lot of attention to. And it is particularly the preacher of Hebrews who is most concerned about the greatest danger that the congregation that he is preaching to faces. This is a homily, the Book of Hebrews is. It is written to a group of Christians who are Jewish and converted to the Christian faith, who are gathered in different house-churches in Rome and in a large urban area. And he is concerned for them. And so he addresses what he sees as their greatest problem, their greatest threat. But he begins not with their greatest problem; he begins with the only antidote to this threat, to the disease. And he means to enlighten them, to have them hear the voice of God. And so it is, as we pick this book to begin this year, it was not lost on me in preparation that this group of people who were—they had the tradition and the history of the Jewish faith of following the Lord God, Yahweh, now following and turning to Christ as the perfect fulfillment of all that God had promised. They have now been walking with him, having been the great inheritors of not only the Jewish tradition and all the promises of God, but now—but now, the greatest inheritance: Christ.

So they have all of these things. They're living in a metropolitan area. What does that sound like to you? That sounds like a place a lot like Columbia Presbyterian Church. We live in a large metropolitan area. We've received the great gift of faith, the gift of salvation, the history of the Christian faith passed down from generation to generation. Do we face the same dangers? I want to suggest that we do. But the real good news is, we need the very same antidote. And so we will begin this book this morning of Hebrews 1:1-4. And then I will briefly show you how this is a telescope to what we are going to be doing over the next several weeks. Hear now God's Word, Hebrews 1:1-4.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making 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.

[ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please, pray with me.

Now we ask you, our Heavenly Father, by the power and gift of your Holy Spirit, give us ears to hear, hearts to understand what it is you are speaking to us. And may we respond by that very grace that you have given to us in Christ Jesus. Bless our study and work in this wonderful book. May it give us a greater view of who you are, and may we rejoice that you are a God of glory, majesty, and power, and that you in your grace have lavishly poured out on us the love of God in Christ. What a gift. Now help us, Father, to rejoice in it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Robert Hanson looked and looked, like we do. I don't know if you remember who Robert Hanson is. Some of you do. Robert Hanson lived in Vienna, Virginia, worked in Washington D.C., had a family, enjoyed the suburb of Vienna, enjoyed the parks, traveled on the same roads we do, maybe even attended a church much like CPC. I don't know. But he would have fit right in. But there was something very dangerous about Robert Hanson. There was something that he was doing that would pose what some considered to be the greatest threat to American intelligence in the history of double spies.

What makes him so dangerous is we didn't see it. It was right there. So what did he do? Robert Hanson was working for the Federal Bureau of Investigations, who was asked to actually serve as a spy for the Soviet and Russian Intelligence Service. He did so for twenty-two years between 1979 and 2001. He is now serving fifteen consecutive life sentences at a super-max prison in Colorado. He was arrested on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2001, at a park in Vienna. He was charged with selling secrets to the Soviet Union and subsequently to the Russian Federation for more than \$1.4 million in cash and diamonds over that twenty-two year period. What makes Robert Hanson so dangerous is what makes our dangers so dangerous: they're subtle, they don't cry out for attention, they're incredible subtle, they're supported by our culture, our lifestyles feed them.

What are our greatest dangers? They are threefold: spiritual dullness, drifting, and hardness. Dullness, drifting, and hardness. These are the three greatest dangers that the preacher of Hebrews believed that these house-churches faced. Now, while they may have faced them in very different circumstances than our own, as we will look at in a few moments, it nonetheless is still the case that we face these very same dangers. As receiving the gift of the promises of Christ, hearing of them, singing of them, praying of them, reading about them, going to conferences that talk about them, having books aplenty, sermons online, sermons on the radio, Christian music everywhere, Bibles everywhere—on our phones, in our iPads, in our books—we've got it. We've got access more than anyone else probably in history. And yet we, too, still fall prey to dullness, drifting, and hardness.

What is the antidote? The preacher of Hebrews tells us. First he tells us in verses one through four that God has spoken. Secondly, Jesus has come. So as we look together at these set of verses, let's first look at God has spoken. And you will notice that what he does is he speaks in terms of time. Specifically, he says, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets." So what he's doing is he's looking in the past, and he's talking about God speaking. We want—we like this idea of God speaking. But what he does is he grounds it not in mystery; he grounds it in actual speech. In other words, to ask that God would speak to us is not a special prayer or incantation that we're to do in our private prayer closets or in our cars, asking God with a voice to speak to us. No, what the preacher of Hebrews does, does exactly what the Scriptures say. And that is, God speaks through his Word. And here he says God spoke in the past through the prophets. The prophets wrote, and they prophesied. Also, this most certainly—and for this audience, which was largely Jewish, not completely but largely Jewish—would have certainly involved Moses. God spoke to Moses. Moses wrote it down. God spoke to David. David wrote it down. God spoke through the prophets. They wrote it down, and they preached it. And he says, "God has spoken."

What is God's will for us in 2018? What is God's will for you? God's will for you is given to us in the Word. Now, what we mean by God's will is that we want God to tell us what we're supposed to do and when we're supposed to do it. But that's not how God's Word works. He tells us how we ought to live and the One in whom we are to trust. And he gives us the Word, which tell us is a light to—what?—to our feet and a lamp to our path. Now, the light about which the psalmist would have spoken would have been a torch light. Not one of our LED massive bulb lights that can see really far away. But how far can a torch light give us? Not much. It can give us enough to take the next step in front of us. I don't know about you, but when I want God to speak, I want him to give me, like, a little bit more LED wattage. You know, further. Because—not because God is unclear. It's because I want to know. "Yeah, I know God, you've spoken to us in your Word." No, but that's what he's saying. "I've spoken to you. I've given you what it is I want you to do." What is it? We've already read in Joshua, "I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be very strong and courageous."

So here's what's funny. Even when we want God to speak to us and tell us what he's going to do, when he's done it in the past, it wasn't enough. When he spoke to Israel and told them exactly what was going to happen, they were still shaking in their boots next to the Red Sea. When he told Joshua that they were going to take the land, the spies went out, and they were still quaking in their boots. Even when God

tells us what he's going to do, it's not enough. The problem isn't that God has not spoken. It's that we're wanting to listen for something different than what he's already said. The problem is not with the Lord, because he has spoken. He's reminding us, God has already told us, "I am your God, and you are my people, and I will be with you." God has spoken. And he has spoken in the past.

And then he says, "But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son." So here he points to all the teachings that Christ spoke, which the apostles wrote down. Even John tells us, "These things I have written to you so that you might believe." Now, he didn't write everything that Jesus did and said. I wished he had. But he didn't. But he wrote to us so that we might believe. So he has spoken through his Son. And the implication is, if God who has spoken in the past through the prophets, through Moses and through David—if God is now speaking in the present through the revelation of his Son by his teachings and his life, his death and resurrection, then can we not also trust that he is speaking to us in the future? "I am with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you." God has spoken.

But in that speaking, from the beginning of Genesis to Revelation, the emphasis of God's speech has all been about the revelation, the incarnation, the life, the teaching, the death and resurrection, and the assentation of Christ Jesus our Lord. And so the writer and preacher of Hebrews says, "In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world." Christ is the Alpha and the Omega. He, with the Father and the Spirit, has created all things from nothing. He has spoken through the revelation of his Son.

And as we look at the fact that Jesus has come, what do we learn in this passage specifically regarding Jesus? In this second point, there are three things I want you to note. First: his majesty, his power, and his victory. First the majesty. The majesty begins in verse two, which we've sung of this morning. Whom he appointed the heir of all things, the Omega. He's also—through whom he created the world. He's the Alpha. He is the source and the direction of all things. He is majestic. And then he says these things in verse three, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." Now, what could that mean? Well, first, we know that God the Father—from the gospels, God is spirit.

And so Jesus taking on human flesh is the exact imprint of all that God is, the fullness of who God is in his character, in his being, in his wisdom, in his power. If we've seen Christ, we've seen the Father. If we have heard of Christ, we've heard of the Father. If we've learned of Christ, we've learned of the Father. They are two persons yet one God. And it is the Holy Spirit through his power and agency that comes with the Word that declares who Christ is, declares who the Father is. And when the preacher says he is the exact imprint of his nature, he's saying, "What does God the Spirit look like in all that he is? Look at Christ. Read of who he is and what he has done. There you will see what is our Heavenly Father like." The Scriptures tell us God is love. He is radiant.

But the writer of Hebrews—and we can't encapsulate it just in these verses. He has seventeen different titles for Christ in this letter, in this sermon. They include formal and sort of informal names. They include High Priest, Son, Son of God, Son of Man, Jesus, Lord, the Shepherd, the Apostle, the Sanctifier. He's also our Surety, our Heir. He is a Minister. He is a Mediator. He is the Author. He is the Finisher. He is. And his majesty and his glory is that to which the preacher is drawing our attention. He is the radiance of the glory of God.

But listen to his power. It's twofold. The first, he says in verse three, at the end, "and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." So through his speech the world was created and came into being. But by his speech, by his power, Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father. And he tells us that God in the mystery of who he is, through the agency of the second person of the Godhead, is upholding all things. We breathe, we move, we live by his word of power. We got up this morning. We will eat. We will drink. We will sleep. And we will work. In what power? Whether we recognize it or not, it is the gracious power of Christ. And all that is created, this word tells us, is upheld by him.

But there's another power. He says, "After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high." So what happens is he tells us that it is Christ who upholds all things by the word of his power. And the verse ends by saying he's seated at the right hand of God the Father, which is a prominent seat. But in the middle, it says he provided purification for our sins. How is that a work of power? Well, Christ tells us that it is in his weakness that we receive the grace of God. What's the weakness? That Christ, as we've learned throughout the fall leading up to the celebration of Advent into Christmas, that it is Christ, in laying down his life, who was the strongest. Christ who was on the cross was at the moment of greatest human weakness, yet the greatest strength to redeem us. Being laid in a grave with common sinners, as common sinners would. And yet it was in that place that sin was buried, and he became a sin offering. And it was in the glorious, victorious resurrection from the dead that Christ is victorious over sin and death. But it had to go through a powerful weakness. But to be demonstrated as the greatest wisdom of all time. His power is not just in his creating and upholding and of his seat, but in his work as our Redeemer. This is our God.

And he's not only majestic and powerful. He tells us, it is his victory. And so he says, "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." What is that name? Jesus. For he shall save his people from their sins. Do you know that at every point a human being came into contact with an angel, they fell on their knees or on their face in fear? And yet not one single angel can do anything about what ails us. Only Christ. And Christ in his majesty and in his name is now seated. This idea of being seated is a place that is a declaration of victory. Victory over our sin. Victory over what separates us from God. Victory over death. And it is implied, and he will go on to it throughout the book—it is implied, death is of this age, not of that one to come. Why? Because Christ is victorious over death. It is not the end of the story. And it is in this victory that he is now seated, not as in a lounge chair, not as in a relaxing, but as a king on the throne. And his message to us. The preacher's message to us is to look at his radiance.

Now, why is all of this important? It is, as with what I began. Throughout the book we're going to see themes arise. Chapter two, verse one, "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" Neglect and drifting. Chapter five, verse eleven, "

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.  
[Hebrews 5:11-14, ESV]

Now, why would he write such things? It's because his audience was facing tribulation and trial of persecution throughout that part of the Roman Empire. And so in that persecution, they were drifting from their faith in Christ. They had forgotten what they had heard. They had dulled in their thinking. And they had lost the discernment between that which is good and evil. They were afraid to be known as those who stood for Christ because of the persecution that would come their way. And so their experience of dullness, drifting, and hardness looked a specific way. And we will unpack that in the chapters to come.

But while we may not be facing the same persecution, the temptation towards drifting, dullness, and hardness is nonetheless the same. Because persecution can lead us to cower in fear and to forget that which we have been taught. But so can wealth, success, and well-lived lives in freedom—that we grow dull and we drift, because we forget that we live not by that which we can see in our circumstances, but

what proceeds from the Word of God. Trusting in Christ and not in ourselves. When things are good, it is so easy to trust in ourselves, because things are going well. And that can become a place where this drifting and dullness and hardness can begin to fester and grow. And we get distracted. And we forget the great gift we've been given. And so he begins with these words to remind them what they have received.

And so if we—so let me tell you a little secret. If we face these same temptations, how do we get out of them? How are we to be awakened to the places in our lives where we've allowed dullness and drifting towards sinful behavior—"oh, it's not that bad" or "I deserve this, it's okay" or "it's just self-dependence." And that's clearly supported by our culture in the world that we live. How do we—how can be awakened to this? Well, first we have to ask, "Lord, where in my life have I allowed drifting and dullness and hardness to come in?"

So let me let you into a little bit of what it's like to be a pastor on Sunday mornings before we ever get to church. Well, okay—for this pastor. I wonder why you get up every Sunday morning to come to church. That's the temptation I face. "Why do they keep coming? Are they getting anything out of it? Why are we doing this?" These are the temptations that come. This is the battle that comes with preparing to preach, because it's starting to hammer away and to attack at the very thing which God has called me to do. And so I begin at times to, you know, when it's quiet downstairs, I'm pouring my first cup of coffee, I'm going, "Lord, have mercy. Will anyone come this morning? Lord, what are you going to do? I need you to work. I need your power. I need your presence. I need strength, Lord."

So it's very easy in our self-dependence and in our habits—we just come here to 10001 Route 108, to a beautiful building. And we get to see each other. And we have the wonderful coffee that has been sacrificially prepared. The seats have been set up by people who have been sweating and working hard. The worship team has been preparing and practicing. And we come together. And it's just this good thing. But are we just coming to pray a few prayers, hear a few words of Scriptures, listen to a sermon, say, you know, "Good to see you," and go home and we're done? Is that what we're doing? At times, as a pastor, it feels that way. It feels like we're in a giant restaurant, and my job is to be your spiritual chef. That so long as I bring out a meal of a sermon that you like each week, then the customer will go home happy. Bon appetite, baby. But that's the temptation. And I don't want to be a religious chef. And I don't want you to feel like all we're doing is coming to a building, we just do the same old rigmarole every week. I want to know that God is present, that God is speaking actively, and that the radiance of the glory of Christ is being shined forth through the Word of God and through the power of his Spirit through prayer and song.

But I was reminded of that in the preparation for this sermon. Because that's precisely what the preacher of Hebrews points to. And may the Lord use the reading of this Word that I'm about to read to you, to encourage you and by the Spirit awaken us to any dullness and drifting and hardening that has begun to set in. But know this, that the Word which he gives us is the antidote. Hear this from Hebrews the twelfth chapter. And he is comparing two things. The two things he's comparing are the people of Israel at the foot of Mount Zion when Moses went up to meet with God to get the law, and they were not allowed to touch the mountain. They were warned that if they did, they would do so at the loss of life. So the presence of God was so powerful, so imminent, and so awful, it was something worthy of fear, because of the Lord's presence. He's now comparing that to what you and I are doing right now. Listen to the comparison:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

[Hebrews 12:18-21, ESV]

So he's describing what was happening on that day. They couldn't even look at the face of Moses. Moses couldn't even look at God, because he would lose his life. No one could touch the mountain. It was full of smoke. It was full of God's powerful presence. And it's tempting to think, "Wow, look what they had!" I mean, a little smoke and trembling of the building? That might wake us up. I mean, God was present there. But listen to what he says:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.  
[Hebrews 12:22-25, ESV]

He's saying that when we gather on Sunday morning, we're not just gathering with CPC folks. We're gathering with all the angels in heaven, all the saints who have gone before us, of Christ who is seated on the throne. We are in his presence. And when the gathered people of God call on his name, when we pray and confess our sins, when we sing with joy and thanksgiving and we hear the Word of God spoken to us, we have a greater treasure than all of Israel combined. For we have Christ, who has sprinkled the blood that we might be forgiven, and that his presence is with us, not to lead us to fear and trembling, but a presence that welcomes and invites us in. A love that will not let us go.

This is why we gather. We gather to imitate heaven, because heaven—Christ is our audience. And we rejoice in his radiant glory. May this reality awaken us, strengthen us, enable us to say, "Lord, where am I drifting? Where have I hardened? Where am I dull? And by the love of God in Christ, through the power of your Spirit, awaken and renew me again." May the Lord do that in us individually. May he do that in us corporately. And if you are not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, in His name, I invite you to believe on Him, who loves you and invites you to rejoice in the one who knows you and who has redeemed you. Come to him, the radiant glory of the Son. Let's worship together. Let's pray.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit, hear our prayers. May the radiant glory of Christ be poured out by the presence of your Spirit on this body, this small part of the global kingdom of God here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. We acknowledge to you how easily we drift and are made dull, how easily we forget. But you have spoken in these last days through your Son. You have spoken to us by your Word. And you have invited us to worship you. Lord, in your presence we acknowledge that dullness. In your presence, we acknowledge our need. In your presence, we ask you, Lord, heal us and help us to hear again. May your word be written on our hearts, and may you enable us to be a people of rejoicing. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name. Amen.