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God Has Spoken to Us in These Days

Text: Hebrews 1:1-4

When the author of *The Letter to the Hebrews* tells the tired, flagging congregation that is the recipient of his sermon to lay aside every weight he gives them really critical advice. One cannot move forward spiritually when one is weighed down, even a little bit. As the great Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century, St. John of the Cross put it in an allegory of the soul seeking God, “a bird cannot fly if there is anything that keeps her tied to the ground, even the thinnest of silk threads.” So, even the slightest of attachments has to be cut if we are going to fly. Now, there are many weighty things that keep us from moving forward; a lot of them are our own states of mind. *Hebrews* and the rest of the New Testament find sin particularly weighty, for example. But this letter also finds that one of the greatest weights upon us is the past. Although there is a past that roots us, and is beneficial, there is a lot of the past that is just plain heavy, and we cannot move forward as long as we continue to live with this past as part of our daily load.

Essential as this advice is, however, it comes rather late in this preacher’s attempts to get the congregation to look forward. The reason it comes so late is, I suspect, because of this fact: while we certainly cannot move forward if we are stuck or held back by anything, unsticking us or removing the weights upon us will not by itself move us forward. Something else is needed, something positive, some forward moving energy. For us to move ahead, or to hope for a future different than the present, we have to have a reason to move, we have to aspire to *something*, we need to have a vision. Without aspiration, we will not lay aside the weights that hold us down. All of that is surely why, in an older translation, the much earlier book of *Proverbs* declared in a

similar vein that when the vision fails, the people perish. If there is no inspiration, if there is no vision, if there is no plan, if there is nothing to look forward to, if there is no energy, then there is no way to move ahead. Thus a people without a vision, without inspiration, simply stagnate and die. So it seems that not only were the original recipients of the *Letter to the Hebrews* stuck, their vision was failing, and as a result they were perishing.

That is undoubtedly why our author opens his sermon the way he does. Now, if that opening did not possess the hymnic beauty that it does, those first few lines might appear rudely blunt given the situation. They *are* beautiful and uplifting, but when in those lines he declares the divinity of Christ to the congregation, and Christ's superiority to all else, he is not trying to convince them of a surprising possibility that they had not thought of before. He is not proposing something new for them to entertain, nor is he trying with beautiful words to enchant them into converting. They were, in fact, already a church of the Christian faithful. Rather, he is reminding them in no uncertain terms just what it is that they do believe and what exactly that means. They seem to have forgotten something. So he is trying to get them to focus once again on what the vision is that holds the church together; in getting them to focus, he is trying to get them to look forward to the hope that they have. For it is only by so reminding them, it is only by trying to get them to focus on what the vision is, that they will ever be able to distinguish between the past that is weighing them down, and what it is in them that will propel them forward, and let them run the race with perseverance.

What exactly does he tell them? What does he remind them of? Nothing less than that things ought to be extremely clear for them, and that there ought to be no ambiguity about their vision and no ambiguity about its greatness. In the past, when God spoke to his people he did so in various and sundry ways. This is to say, God spoke in ways that were not always direct and

unambiguous. In fact, they were thought to be *always* indirect. For example, it was assumed that God's words in the past had always come through intermediaries – through human agents such as prophets, or through angels or through dreams and visions, or even miraculous phenomena such as the burning bush. Thus when in the past God had revealed himself, something always remained hidden in the same way that a portrait or a photo hides something. A portrait may reveal something of a person, perhaps even something very deep about that person. Yet, even when it reveals, it will always remain a substitute, a mere representation of the presence of a loving face, which is not really present.

But, now, our preacher goes on, there is nothing hidden. In these last days God has spoken to us through a Son. That means that the only intermediary that God has used in these days when he speaks to his people is Jesus Christ. But, since Christ is the Son of God, he is also the beginning and end of all creation, and the one who is the radiance of God's own glory, and who as God's image so perfectly reproduces God that he is indistinguishable from God. Where, therefore, there is no difference, there is perfect unity. So there is nothing hidden or ambiguous now in what God speaks. Here in Jesus Christ *is* the vision for here is the face and mind of God himself, not a substitute. Here is the future towards which they need to strive for and here is the one who is going to lead them there. Here is the motivation they need in order to put themselves into motion.

Now, given this kind of reminder, and this forceful contrast between a former revelation that was spoken in various and sundry ways, ways that may not have been clear and unambiguous, and the way that God now speaks, that is, directly and by the Son who reveals God fully, one gets a clue as to where things have gone wrong in this congregation. As things have gotten difficult, and as the demands of the Christian faith have pushed the church, the

church has apparently started to question whether this new way really is the right way to go at all. This sort of questioning is a common phenomenon, hardly confined to the first century. Most of us when we do not like things because they are difficult all tend to find ways to excuse ourselves from having to do them. We start rationalizing. So, in this case, they seem to have reasoned, perhaps this really isn't the only way to go. After all, they may have said to themselves, "when God had spoken before, it had always been in multiple forms with numerous hidden twists and turns. God has always been a bit wily in his speech, so why not now? God has said a lot of things, which of them are we to believe? So why not go with our own inclinations on this?"

But of course once one starts to reason this way, once one starts rationalizing and not going ahead full steam, once one starts arguing that, really, nothing is expected of us, that is when the vision starts failing. Once we start relativizing things, once you make a way of life that is incumbent upon a matter of mere opinion, then the vision fails. Once a demand is clearly laid on you, and you fob it off, noting that there are other authorities who say differently, and who can say who is really right, then the vision fails. Once truth doesn't matter much, and once you don't see it as ordered to goodness, the vision fails. Once you put the vision on the same level as everything else, it is no longer a vision. Then God has no longer spoken as far as you are concerned, for your conviction has vanished, and your conscience tells you nothing on this score. Then the past becomes particularly weighty, for the future is no longer to be striven for with all your heart and soul. It becomes ambiguous; then the hope it used to put in our hearts is replaced by nostalgia. Nostalgia and hope are polar opposites, and each other's enemy, for one is the weighty past; the other launches us in the future that God has prepared.

I think that is something that a lot of adults have to struggle with every Christmas; rather

than thinking of the future and joy that the once born Christ shall bring, we pump ourselves up by looking back nostalgically on Christmases that we had when we or our children were young. Rather than going out and acting on the belief that in that first Christmas in his incarnate Son God spoke unambiguously about the future of the world, and that God changed the direction of the world, and set us a direction, we have played our faith off against every other commitment we have, not remembering what is vision and what is not. In that way we lose the vision, and our sole source of deep emotion is a past that will not come back again.

Herein lies one of the great reasons why churches, too, start losing vision, and why they start flagging. This includes both congregations and whole denominations. They forget what made them what they are in the first place because they have rationalized and trivialized what was spoken to them. They have put it on a level with everything else, and accept every good excuse as to why they and their folks shouldn't do more. But that makes sense. Once the original vision is relativized, and is no more important than anything else in our lives, or if it is important just because it helps something else in our lives, it is no longer a matter of vision.

How so? As the contemporary Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor has recently argued, one of the greatest contributors to the secularism of the nations of the North Atlantic, has not only been science, but the churches themselves, who have tried to compete with worldly institutions, and thus have tried to be worldly institutions. Rather than speaking of the fact, as St. Athanasius did, that God became a man so that men and women might become God, or of talking about the sum of theology, as St. Thomas Aquinas did, as being a matter of our becoming God's friends, churches have instead talked about their civilizing effects, or their influence in society. Rather than telling people that they can really see and live with *God*, they look no higher than an ever ephemeral society or civilization. Thus modern American and European churches

have set their sights much lower than the ancient church, as well as the very vision driven, rapidly growing Christian churches of the third world. St. Augustine admitted that Christians made good citizens because they, too, sought peace and order; but he also made it clear that being a citizen of the City of God was *not* in any sense the same thing as being a citizen of Rome. God had planned much bigger things for his city than Rome ever planned or ever could or did provide. I am not sure that we do admit this or tell people this in churches much anymore; I *am* sure that we argue for our relevance far too often on the basis of how well we meet Rome's expectations. And, of course, when those expectations are on the same level as Christ's, they compete, and we obey them as readily as anything that the church might expect, probably even more readily.

Now, there is no certainly no problem, as Augustine saw, in contributing, and even contributing mightily to the welfare of the world in which we live. It is even expected. But when God spoke in these last days through a Son, we were given a vision that is far greater than just that. God wasn't trying to simply improve things, or trying give some helpful philosophical advice. God wasn't even trying to be inspirational and to buck people up so that they could go back to doing whatever they do on Monday mornings. God meant to change things, especially us, and to change them rather radically. As *Hebrews* suggests, God intends in his Son to gather all things unto him, just as in the Son all things were created. That is also the effective message of Advent – that the Christ who came to gather us to God, will gather us to God, and that, based on his Incarnation, death and resurrection, that gathering is what we have to look forward to.

What does it mean to have that vision? In the broadest terms, it means to have hope, certain hope, rooted in the living Christ; it means not to make our values and practices dependent on nostalgia or anything other than God. But it also means several things that the author of this

letter points out in very concrete terms. For example, it means to cast aside every weight, certainly, and to persevere in the race set before us. It means that with confidence we can approach God to find help in every time of need, so it involves prayer. But it also means that we are to meet together regularly and to provoke each other to good works. It means to seek peace with everybody, and the holiness without which no one will see God. It means letting love dwell among us, and welcoming strangers, for in doing so angels themselves have been entertained, even though we may not have been aware of it. It means fidelity in all our covenants with each other, our spouses, our parents, our children and our brothers and sisters in Christ. It means all of these things, for Christian hope is no dream, and contains no ambiguity. Christian hope and the Christian vision is extremely concrete; indeed, they are *visible*, for they are witnessed in what we do, and the way we live. During this Advent, let us have hope, let us have vision, and let us have in it not just in what we dream, but in everything we do.

There is a prayer that the Monday night Bible study class used when studying the *Letter to the Hebrews* that sums up the vision that letter thinks is given in God's speaking to us, and of what that means for us. It goes this way:

O Christ, you are the same yesterday, today and forever.
You are the Son of God;
unto you all things will return, just as in you all things were created.
You are filled with God's glory, and are God's perfect image,
the Word by which God sustains all things.
You are our King and High Priest,
the perfect sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world,
and the one who sits at God's right hand, interceding for us,
for you understand our weakness.
Bring us to glory, we pray, you who are the pioneer and substance of our faith.
Give us grace to share in your holiness,
and the perseverance to run the race that is set before us.
May we pursue peace with everyone, and may love dwell among us.
Make us complete in every good thing,
working in us all that is pleasing in God's sight. **Amen.**

Indeed, Amen.