

The Exact Imprint
First Reading: Psalm 8
Second Reading: Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

There is an intriguing story in the book of Acts about a healing in Troas, an ancient coastal city on the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Picture the scene Luke describes here -- *On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.*

"He continued speaking until midnight!" Eutychus (don't see that name popping up very often), *Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead.* Paul, checking on him, pronounces *No big deal, he's good*, then goes back upstairs and talks 'til dawn! One thinks Paul would

have taken the clue that it was time to call it a night. It's a fascinating, but usually unheralded, story. Maybe we'll take a deep dive into the text someday, but for today it is enough to highlight it as a cautionary tale for all engaged in the practice of public speech. Paul's impact on the spread of the gospel is unmatched, but this story hints that he was better at correspondence, community organizing, campaigning, and curriculum than he was as an orator.

True artisans of speech composition and delivery draw people into what they are saying, and don't make a habit of inducing narcolepsy. I know what you're thinking -- *If only...* Be that as it may, there is a power and an energy that transcend ordinary communication when speaker and audience or congregation are caught up together at a thin place where the voice of the speaker, the Spirit of God, and the spirits of the people become a single living, breathing being, moved, captured, and sent.

Perhaps you know the sidebar to MLK's *I Have a Dream* speech at the March on Washington in 1963. MLK was the tenth speaker of the day, and the massive crowd was slipping from attention. But nobody knew how to read a crowd like the great Gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, and sensing the restlessness of the crowd, she got King's attention and urged him to tell them about the dream, and so King abandoned his text and improvised, inserting

the dream section, something Mahalia Jackson had heard him preach before. The words were so powerful, and spoken with such artful passion, both those who heard it then, and who hear it now, are not just impressed by it, but are swept up in it such that it becomes their dream also. Similarly, when FDR spoke the famous words -- *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself!* -- the listeners were not only encouraged, they were given courage.

Hebrews scholar, Tom Long, tells us that, though it is listed in the Canon as a letter, Hebrews was actually crafted as an oral event, a worship experience, a spoken symphony. He says, "Its metered measures evoke the ethos of worship." (Tom Long, *Hebrews*) The Greek text begins artfully, making use of alliteration to convey a word about THE Word -- "*Polymers Kai Polytropos Palai*" - "*In many fragments and in many fashions in former times.*" The author is crafting an oral event to convey the way God speaks to us. He draws us in stylistically to understand that this is not just about God's Word, but about God's Word to us.

Hebrews was likely written in the late 1st Century. Clement of Rome, an early church leader actually used a quote from Hebrews in a letter written between 96 and 97CE. Hebrews' first audience may well have been composed of Hellenistic Jewish Christians in Rome at a time when they were

experiencing public abuse and ridicule as referred to occasionally in the text of the Hebrews sermon. The author is speaking to a people weary of mistreatment and pulled in many directions within a pluralistic culture, and he is intent on reigniting their focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ, whose suffering, death, and resurrection are the source of their redemption and hope. We sense this and perhaps feel this in that most quoted excerpt in Hebrews -- *“let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”*

Jesus was not just some historical hero, whose memory and example encourage those who follow. Jesus is the living Word of God through whom we live, and move, and have our being. Through this Jesus, who reigned preexistent with God even prior to Creation, the God who had delivered the Israelites, given the Law to Moses, and spoken through the prophets was doing a new thing. The text says -- *Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.* We hear a similar understanding of this Jesus in that theological masterpiece, John, chapter 1 -- *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”*

God is not a disengaged, silent force of the universe, God in Christ is a present Word, walking among us, speaking to us, providing both a refuge and a way for us. In Jesus, we experience nothing less than the fulness of God. As Paul describes it -- *"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."* The author of Hebrews is even more direct -- *"He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."*

Exact imprint. Do you remember the first generation fax machine? For our younger members, Fax is an abbreviation for facsimile which is a synonym for likeness, or copy. Long before Door Dash, the tech savvy wouldn't call the deli to order takeout, they'd fax their order.

What are the two most irritating sounds in the world? Those weather or amber alerts that scare the bejesus out of you, and the sound of a fax. Do you remember? You'd dial the deli number, and immediately this squealing, screeching sound would pierce your eardrum, sort of a combination of the shower scene from *Psycho*, a table saw, radio static, and a child's first violin lesson all at once. Do you remember? God forbid that you dial someone's fax machine instead of their regular landline. You wouldn't be able to hear again until Thanksgiving. So, you'd put your original in your machine, dial the

number, and once the screaming stopped, you'd press send. Now, if you were receiving a fax, the facsimile of the original would come out on this slick odd-feeling form of paper highlighted with shadows, and blurring the message to the extent that the Reuben you ordered would arrive as a fried bologna biscuit. Sometimes you couldn't make out the letters at all -- a facsimile, sometimes a poor copy of the original.

When the boys were young, we had a great time at Disney's Epcot, particularly the United Kingdom exhibit with its street theater and Tudor buildings. The highlight though was the Beatles tribute band, complete with the matching suits, bowl haircuts, and Paul's left-handed Hofner violin bass. They were really good, as you would expect at Disney, but guess what? They weren't the Beatles. A facsimile. A copy.

What the preacher in Hebrews wants to make absolutely clear is that Jesus is not some God tribute band, not some smudged or blurred copy of the original, but is God in the flesh. *Exact imprint* -- Note that the Greek word here is the word utilized as the name of the instrument employed for engraving or carving -- creating that which is precise, exact, permanent. Golfers, annually skipping church for the final round of the British Open, are used to seeing on camera the artisan engraver carving the name of the winner

onto the Claret Jug when it becomes apparent, sometimes even before the leader's last putt. You wonder, "Wow, what happens if the leader loses himself for a moment and drives the putt into the North Sea?" The one word you never want to hear from your engraver or your surgeon? "Oops!" The exact imprint. When we speak of Jesus, we are speaking of God. Jesus himself said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

And guess what? The Greek word translated as *exact imprint* is going to sound familiar. It is *xapaktnr*, from which we derive *character*, as in the letters on a keyboard typewriter; *character*, as in the measure of a person, the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual. What the author of Hebrews wants to make clear to all with wavering hearts is that this Jesus is THE focus of a God inspired life, Christ's character being the template in the formation of our character.. As Paul entreated the Philippians, "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*" Or, as Jesus describes his followers in John -- "*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*"

God so desired reconciliation and relationship with the people of God's creation that God would, in Jesus, empty himself, take the form of a slave, be born in human likeness. "*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.*" Why? This

is God. Why would God take on such suffering? And let us not be mistaken, this is not a matter of God sending someone else to suffer, this is Godself wrenching in pain upon an instrument of execution. Why would God be willing to endure such suffering? Fred Craddock offers a helpful perspective. “Any life short of suffering and death would have been less than identification with humankind.” (Fred Craddock, *People's NT Commentary*)

You know how when someone tells you they are sick, you have this compulsion to tell them all the details of your similar experience of illness. Here's a hint, most of the time they really don't need or want to hear all that unless they have a specific question about the doctor or about dealing with the side effects of the medicine, and they certainly don't need to hear any intimation that your suffering was much worse, or that you know exactly how they feel. You don't. Not to minimize your experience, but your experience is not theirs. You cannot know exactly how they feel, and in that moment your compassion is far more important than your memory. To put it bluntly, read the room. I mean, what is one thing Jesus did not say upon the cross? *You think you've got it bad!* Jesus doesn't compete with our suffering, In our trials, Jesus knows it and feels it, doesn't lord it over you, but walks with you, holds you close, understands what is happening, feels your precise pain.

The preacher in Hebrews says not to get distracted by all the other voices, not to get caught up in all the suppositions and theories about angels. This is about God, Jesus, the church, and us. It's like he is saying, *Focus people, focus!* Yes, Jesus passed by the angel exit on the way down and on the return trip, but this was not the time to stop and visit. This is about God, Jesus, the church, and you.

The preacher of Hebrews suggests we need to be very modest in talking about angels. We don't know enough to delve into that, but he says, *We do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.*"

God's voice, through the ages has been sensed or heard in a variety of ways, but God spoke God's clearest Word in a flesh and blood Jesus who knows us, gets us, identifies with us, feels our pain, forgives us, and redeems us. *"He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."* Let that be our focus and hope. Amen.