

October 7, 2012

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.5-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Earlier this week, I was absentmindedly reading a Biblical commentary on Hebrews, reading in that way where one part of my brain was thinking about the words in front of me while another part was writing my grocery list and sorting out my kids' school schedule. You know what I'm talking about.

But as I read, I came across these words: "With the seductive pressures of a materialistic and violent world bearing down on them, they had become burned out, discouraged, apathetic believers."

Aha! I thought, someone is addressing the malaise of the 21st century, this heavy feeling that we in the church are battling left, right, and center. Suddenly, the commentary had my full attention as I wanted to know how our text from Hebrews can fortify us against this modern day problem. How can we fight apathy?

Then I read the sentence prior. The author of the commentary, Susan Andrews, was talking about first-century Christians. First century. This second generation of believers was just enough removed from the passion and intensity of the early movement that their interest was waning.

It is to THAT community that the letter to the Hebrews was written. This letter is passionate and even hyperbolic in its adoration of God and Christ. We read from Hebrews three times during Holy Week *every year* and again in Christmas, because the emphatic language makes such an appropriate match for the heightened Christology of those seasons.

But the language that is on one hand so emphatic and passionate, on the other hand holds us at arms' length. Hebrews, at first glance, reads as the stuff of judgment and ultimatum. It is the kind of thing "those other" denominations believe, about falling into sin beyond restoration, about being at the mercy of a vengeful God. This is not the sort of thing that we who put our faith in a loving, forgiving God tend to cuddle up with.

But here's the thing, despite what Paul writes about eternal judgment, despite his admonishment and hard-to-swallow instructions, he does not believe the Hebrews to be beyond redemption. They are wandering, but not lost. It is his job, Paul believes, to inspire them back into the fold of rapt believers, those who will usher in the kingdom of God with the depth of their faith and the strength of their conviction. They were such people once, and Paul knows they can be so again.

Which brings us to the 21st century. There is so much for us to be distracted by. There are so many other things for us to care about. There are SO MANY other gods that sneak into place in front of the one that really matters most. There are so many reasons for us to lose sight of why we are called to be faithful people. There is so much standing in the way of getting here on Sunday morning, standing in the way of taking care of the poor and needy, of giving of our resources wholly and without hesitation. There is a lot in the way. I know, believe me, I know.

And Paul's response to all of these half-hearted half-truths about the half-attention to our half-faithful lives is to remind us FULLY and PASSIONATELY that we are not in control. In the letter to the Hebrews, Paul is reminding us that judgment is not ours, grace is not ours, forgiveness is not ours, not even our place in the cosmic order is ours.

All of it is God's. All of it.

Paul reminds the community of the Hebrews this 2,000 years ago. And through them, we are reminded today. But here is the important thing about the way Paul addresses this community of stumbling believers: as polemical as it sounds, as forceful as Paul's words are, he has not given up on them. Paul knows that this community can thrive and grow, in numbers and in faith. He does not think that they are beyond redemption.

This community to which Paul is writing, these Hebrews, they are already converts to Christianity. They are baptized believers and, even more than that, they are teachers of the faith and evangelists. They were already witnessing to others and baptizing new members.

But they were also living in a time of widespread persecution of Christians. And while Paul's letter suggests that they were probably not being tortured or killed, they were subject to public ridicule and suspicion, cast out of the upper echelons of society and barred from many of the best professions. All for their professed belief.

On top of that, they were frustrated by the delay in the return of Christ. This community that Paul addresses were taught to expect Jesus Christ to return at any moment. And, I can imagine, living as if any moment could genuinely be the rapture had to be exhausting.

And so, it seems, they had gotten faithfully lazy. They made excuses for not practicing the tenants which they taught. They found reasons not to be a present member of the community. After a while, their laziness melted into apathy and they found that their lives had a little less meaning and a lot more going through the motions.

Sounds familiar?

These are the people to whom Paul addresses this letter. *These* are the people to whom Paul addresses this letter. All of us who find our selves drifting away from that which is of ultimate worth, through no event or action, just inattention.

Paul knows that life here on earth is better when we pay attention to our faith and to God. He drives that point home over and over throughout this letter. He will not let the Hebrews off the hook.

Because he knows we are worth saving. Paul knows that, not only are we not yet totally lost, he knows that with us in it, the community of Christian believers is better for our presence. Each of us, every one of us.

He in fact starts the letter, as we read today, by reminding us of our special position in the kingdom of God. We are the stewards of all creation, just a little lower than the angels. We are crowned with glory and honor. We are brothers and sisters to Christ, whom God sent to be with us, to be like us.

We have no excuse for apathy or laziness in our faith lives. Paul does not believe us lost. But he does urge us to examine our lives, to turn time, attention and resources to those things that reflect God's glory, that reflect our status as only a little lower than angels, that reflect who we are as brothers and sisters of Christ.

Unlike Paul, I am not going to preach hellfire and damnation to try to shock you into taking charge of our own faith life. But I will urge you into passion. I can't find it for you, but I can encourage you to look around and tap into it. There is plenty of passion in this community for living a life of faith, prayer, good work and fellowship. Turn yourself toward it, shed your apathy and live a life as one crowned by God with glory and honor.