

# **YOU STARE SKYWARD, AND IT'S RIGHT THERE**

## **Hebrews 1:1-4**

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on December 25, 2011, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria.*

### *Focus Passage*

#### ***Hebrews 1:1-4***

*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,*

*whom he appointed heir of all things,  
through whom he also created the worlds.*

*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.*

*When he had made 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.*

In the Christian faith, to the extent that we can identify experiences of the presence of God, much of what we experience is through our horizontal relationships, our relationships with other people.

- Many of us feel closest to God when we experience love for another human being: in the earliest days of unbridled passion and glee, in our most intimate moments, in our times of enduring crisis together, and in mature and appreciative caring as the years draw nigh. We feel closest to God in the presence of those with whom we are closest.
- Some of us feel closest to God through the witness of those who have gone before us: the sound of our grandmother's voice as she read us stories from the King James Version of the Bible as we fell asleep on her lap; the vision of our Atticus-Finch-like grandfather fighting for something right in the community and suffering for it; the courage of a public figure we admire – Mother Theresa; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We feel closest to God in the shadow of those who have gone before us and who have made a difference to us or to our world.
- Some of us feel closest to God when we work closely with others in the creative process: singing a master work in a choir; defending a client whom we and our colleagues believe innocent; building a start-up company that takes off as a result of twenty-hour days and sleepless nights; working on the inside of a political campaign of a candidate in whom we believe.

Through many of these, we experience intense, beautiful, and productive horizontal relationships through which we actually encounter something that we are willing to say is the presence of God.

## I.

But there is something about horizontality that can only take us so far. In fact, the older I have gotten, the more I have come to believe that in every experience of God we have – direct or indirect – there is an element of verticality, of God coming to us from outside us, from above us, from beyond us. Even in those times when we experience God in *horizontal* relationships, I believe, the *source* of those experiences lies outside and above us.

In the literate and learned letter to the Hebrews, the anonymous writer opens with a one-sentence tribute to Jesus Christ, whom the remainder of the letter will present in an exalted way.

*Long ago [the writer begins] 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, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.*

*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.*

In this passage, there is a lot that serves to bless the value of knowing Jesus Christ through horizontal relationships:

- “Long ago”
- “God spoke to our ancestors”
- “God spoke in many and various ways by the prophets”

This is all an eloquent way of saying that we can know God by “reading history,” by listening to what God has revealed to those who have gone before us, by paying attention to the “many and various ways” God has spoken through prophetic oracles or writings of others in scripture.

But then the passage takes a turn:

*but in these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son...*

Notice the sense of time changes from “ancestors” and “long ago” to “in these days,” a phrase that comes from eschatology more than chronology.

*... whom he appointed heir of all things,  
through whom he also created the worlds...*

Notice that the Son is heir of *all* things – not necessarily something that happens horizontally – and perhaps more important, the Son is the one through whom God created the worlds. The change is from a horizontal relationship with God through other people to, at this point, a meditation upon God [and God's Son] *prior to* creation, anything but horizontal.

The passage continues with a claim about the relationship between this Son and God his father:

*[This Son] 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.*

This says to me, among other things, that while on the one hand the relationship the Son has with the Father is in many ways horizontal – the Son is a reflection of God's glory – the Son's relationship to us is one of *divine outsider to mortal dweller on earth*. “The Son...is the exact imprint of God's very being,” writes the writer of this letter. *Exact imprint*. Something we are not.

With this idea that Christ bears the “exact imprint” of God, we have moved beyond relating to Christ horizontally. Christ’s verticality in regards to us is finalized as the passage ends:

*When he had made 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.*

At this point, the Son is anything but horizontal to the writer of Hebrews, and by implication, to us.

## II.

So what is the significance here? What is at stake for us to believe that in our relationship to God through Jesus Christ, there is an element of verticality, of Christ coming to us from outside us? What does it matter?

I think it matters a lot.

If our relationship with God is solely with and through other people, we will miss that part of Jesus Christ who can bless us with blessings no mortal can provide and who can challenge us to go places no mortal will dare challenge us. The One who is “reflection and imprint” of God can lead us to do things no one else can lead us to do.

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Though I am quite horizontal in my relationship with God in that I draw much strength from the “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love” of the people of God, it is ultimately Christ as *outside* me who defines who I am and who gives me the strength to live.

If I may be personal and reflective for a minute, allow me to illustrate.

Over Thanksgiving Weekend, I was home in Memphis to join my brother and our small families to celebrate our mother’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Most who came for the event had to return home on Saturday or Sunday, but I had planned to remain until Monday and attend worship with her in the church in which I grew up and in which she remains an active member.

Sitting among 100 or so worshippers in the early service in a Sanctuary about the size and feel of ours, we heard the newly-arrived minister announce during the announcements the not-unexpected death of one Charles Walker.

Charles Walker was a contemporary of my parents, a friend, and a longtime leader in the church. I had known and watched him since the time I was a child.

There was much to admire about Charles Walker.

- He attended church every Sunday.
- He served as an elder and deacon.
- He taught Sunday School.
- He spoke up at congregational meetings and always was clear about what *he* believed and what he believed *the church* should believe and do.

But in many ways Charles Walker was a bane to ministers and other leaders of that congregation for over fifty years.

- He quoted the *Book of Order* incessantly and seemed to interpret it more strictly than others.
- He seemed to believe that only the most literal interpretation of the Westminster Confession of Faith qualified one as a good Presbyterian.
- Whether he knew it or not, many of the ministers and elders often asked themselves – “Is this proposal worth pursuing when we know Charlie will challenge it?”

In my formative years as a teenager, in two events five years apart, I saw both the bane and blessing of Charles Walker.

When I was thirteen years old, I came home from baseball practice one afternoon, took a shower, and learned from the boxy radio plugged in to the wall and sitting in the window that Dr. Martin Luther King had been killed in our city.

I jumped out of the shower, threw on some clothes, ran into the yard where my dad had been raking freshly mown Bermuda grass, and where, standing next to him, leaning on his car door, was Charles Walker.

I ran up to the two men and said: “Did you hear that Martin Luther King has been killed?”

Before any other word was spoken, before any breath was emitted, Charles Walker said: “He deserved it.” He slid into his car, closed the door, and drove off.

Something there was deep within me that instant that told me that that reaction was wrong. Very wrong. Unforgivably wrong.

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Five years later, in the six short weeks that were the longest six weeks of my life, my father seemed to speed downhill in the Methodist Hospital, unable even to complete the first round of radiation designed to attack the lung cancer with which he had been diagnosed the day after Christmas.

Of all the friends and neighbors and church members who sent cards, wrote letters, made phone calls, lifted prayers, brought casseroles to the house and even visited in the downtown hospital, the one who came most often, stayed the longest, and held my father's hand the most was Charles Walker.

Something there was deep down inside that told me that that reaction was right. Extremely right.

In the man named Charles Walker, I saw, as I would see in others over the years, a mixture of good and evil, of blessing and curse, of sacredness and sinfulness that marks many of us, perhaps Charles Walker simply in more pronounced form. He and others since – myself included – have taught me that we humans are complicated people, and that we often embody within one life, one person, “the best and worst of human nature.”

What is important for this sermon on this day is this: While my observations of Charles Walker were formed in horizontal relationships I had with him and others like him, the only explanation I have for the personal, spiritual, and theological resistance I felt to his reaction to the death of Martin Luther King was vertical. In that culture at that time, it was only the Spirit of God who could plant within me the sense that “this was not right.”

Relating to this text, I believe the Christ who is both “reflection and imprint of God” put within me at a very young age the *conscience* that knew to reject what Charlie Walker said in the yard and the *sensitivity* that knew to embrace what he did by the bedside. I did not have the power to come to such awareness myself; I can only explain it as coming from Christ, the “reflection and imprint of God.”

### III.

In Joseph Brodsky's lengthy Christmas poem, entitled “December 24, 1971,” ends with these lines:

...both a newborn and a Spirit that's Holy  
in your self you discover; you stare  
skyward, and it's right there:

a star.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Brodsky, “December 24, 1971,” in *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 53-54. Also available at [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=468551677599&comments](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=468551677599&comments).

Even as we learn from our horizontal relationships, even as we experience God's presence through them, they can only go so far. Ultimately, it is that which comes from outside us – Jesus Christ himself, “the reflection...and... imprint of God's very being” – that gives us faith.

...[we] stare  
skyward, and it's right there:

a star.

Amen.