

Give Me That Old Time Religion
Hebrews 5:1-10, 7:1-3, 26-28
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
April 22, 2007
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This morning, we turn again to the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. We've been looking at this document for a couple of months now, and have come to see it not as a book or even as a letter, but as a sermon in which a Christian leader seeks to help this early Christian community come up with a way to understand the presence of and the role of Jesus in their lives.

We've seen how this group of early Christians, some of whom were experiencing some sort of persecution for their faith, was a little bit confused or even disappointed by the death of Jesus. To be honest, these folks had hoped for something a little better. In some ways, these people might have agreed with comedian and philosopher Woody Allen, who says, "If it turns out that there is a God, I don't think that he's evil. But the worst that you can say about him is that basically he's an underachiever." They had expected more of God than a suffering, dying Jesus.

And in the beginning of this letter, or sermon, we've seen how the Preacher has shown the Hebrews that Jesus is superior to the angels and to Moses. He spends a lot of time in the middle of this message talking about how Jesus is really like a High Priest.

Being faithful Jews, his audience knew all about High Priests. They knew what they were supposed to be like, and they knew what all too often they actually were like. I can hear them now:

"High Priest, huh? That's what Jesus is supposed to be like? I gotta tell you, preacher, you're not filling me with a lot of hope, here. Do you mean a High Priest like Aaron, who the second his brother Moses turned his back helped the people make a golden calf to worship? Or are you thinking of a high priest like someone more recent, maybe Annas or Caiaphas, the boys who brought you the crucifixion of Jesus? Yeah, we know about High Priests. Jesus is like that, huh?"

The preacher goes on to say, "No, not a High Priest like Aaron or Caiaphas. A High Priest like Melchizedek."

Who? Melchizedek. We've heard his name before. You may remember him from a year or two ago, when we were studying Genesis. He's a pretty shadowy figure from the Old Testament, a priest who lived in Salem (which later became Jerusalem) who received tithes and honor from Abraham. The important thing for us to note this morning is that Melchizedek pre-dates Aaron, who most folks thought to be the first "High Priest". He shows up in the story before Moses, before the temple, before so-called "right worship" had even been

defined to the people of God. He is above and beyond any definition that the people had of a traditional High Priest.

So why is this important? Because then, like now, a whole lot of people thought that they had God all figured out. They understood this “religion” stuff. They were sure that they knew what God expected of them, what God wanted them to do, and where God was prepared to let them off the hook. In a sense, these early hearers of the Sermon to the Hebrews had, like many of us, “tamed” God. They had figured out a way to put him into a box and just bring him out when he was useful.

Do you remember the C.S. Lewis story of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*? In that story we meet a lion named Aslan, who sure reminds me a lot of Jesus. And the lion is in conflict with the White Witch, who seems to think that she is in charge of Narnia. She knows that Aslan has more brute strength than she does, but when Edmond, one of Aslan’s followers, betrays him, she thinks that she has a chance to get her own way. The Witch calls Aslan and, using the “Deep Magic from the dawn of time”, compels Aslan to submit to his own death. His friends and followers watch in hopeless despair as she uses “religion” to get her own way. She thinks that she is in a position to manipulate the creation and the Creator by using this magic.

Isn’t that the truth? How often do we limit our dealings with God to bargains that we are willing to extend based on what we will or will not accept from him and what we are or are not willing to do? How often do we treat faith and religion as manageable commodities that we concern ourselves with when we are not too busy with the rest of our lives? You know how it is: we allow ourselves to think that “church” is a place that I come to when there’s nothing better to do; prayers are hopes that I whisper when I don’t have any better ideas, and that religion is fine if it doesn’t get in the way of the rest of my life.

But our faith, and the faith of the scripture, is not a faith in managers and commodities and spare time. It is a faith in the God who breathes life into being from nothingness. It is a trust in the God who resurrects. It is a full-time relationship with a God who is intrusive and persistent and acts a lot of time like he thinks he owns the place.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Aslan does die. But he comes back to life. How? He explains to his followers that while the witch was right about the deep magic from the dawn of time, she didn’t know anything about the Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time. And that magic, said Aslan, allowed his life to remain even when the original magic said that his life was forfeit.

I think that’s the point that the preacher is trying to get at when he brings up Melchizedek to the hearers of Hebrews. It’s not just about the kinds of things that we think we know about God, and the ways that God may or may not fit into our little boxes. Jesus, like Melchizedek, reminds us that we are not in control.

That we serve a God who deals in mystery and questions, not just easy answers.

When a gunman goes berserk on a college campus, for instance, our natural reaction is to put God on the spot. “Where were you then, God!?!?” People who see faith and religion as a kind of commodity find it easy to shake their fists at the sky and say, “What’s wrong with you?” and demand that God give an accounting for his obvious shortcomings and failures to behave as they expect him to.

But perhaps a more appropriate, if certainly more difficult, question, is “What happened, God? Where are you now, God? Where do you need me to be now, God?” Do you see the difference?

This makes a world of difference as we celebrate the sacrament of Baptism this morning. We are here to baptize Isabella Michelle into a faith relationship with the God of Jesus Christ - with the God of Melchizedek.

And I’m here to warn you that for a lot of us – particularly a lot of us Americans, to tell you the truth, this is bad news for Isabella. As she comes into a relationship with the Lord, she will grow up knowing that she cannot compartmentalize her life. She is not free, we will tell her, to go around suggesting that there are parts of her life that belong to God and parts that do not. There is no aspect of her existence that is safe from God’s prying interest. There will be no room, she needs to learn, for a “religious life” over here and a “regular life” over there.

Isabella needs to learn that God cares what she will do with the time that she is given. God is concerned about how she will use the money she will have. It all matters to God: what she does in school, who her friends are, what her work will be, who she will date, who she will sleep with, where she will live...Do you see this truth? There is no part of her life that will be safe from God’s interference! To many of us, this is the Bad News of the gospel.

But I’m here to tell you that it’s Good News. As Isabella comes into a relationship with the Lord, she will grow up knowing that she cannot compartmentalize her life. She has the promise – not the threat, but the promise – of God’s presence and guidance and help and direction in every single area of her life. Her growing, learning, working, spending, loving, relaxing life – every aspect of her being is open to the presence of the God who has created her and who has known her since before she was born. The God in whose name we baptize her this morning has an eternal relationship with her. Just like he does with you.

The Good News of the gospel this morning – and it is Good News, to us and to the first hearers of Hebrews, is that in Jesus Christ, we have a High Priest who does exactly what High Priests ought to do – he stands before God on our behalf. He stands with us before God. And while it’s not Magic, as it’s described in Lewis’ children’s story, it can sure feel like that sometimes.

There is no part of your life that is beyond the reach of God's care for you in Jesus Christ. As you live and work and love, as you experience tragedy and loss, as you question and hope and wonder, know that each day that you live is in the presence of your Savior, Jesus Christ. And know that when you die – for surely you realize that you are dying – that not even your own death can break the power of Christ's redeeming love in your life.

I don't mean to suggest that faith is simple and easy, or that there's something wrong with anyone who has difficulty opening his or her life to God. But I will remind you, beloved, that your life is not so complicated, so bent, so broken, so overwhelming that at the end of the day it cannot and will not be sorted out, straightened, mended and held by the One who gave it to you in the first place. This you can believe, in the name and power of Jesus. Amen.