

The Priest Who Keeps Promises
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, November 10, 2024
Hebrews 9:24-28
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome as we're sliding downhill to the end of Lectionary Year B. Year C starts on the first Sunday of Advent on December 1st. Next week we'll wrap up Hebrews in preparation for Christ the King Sunday on November 24th. So, stay tuned.

Let's pause for a moment and consider what Hebrews has taught us so far. We've learned a lot about the Levitical priesthood. Since we're not Jewish, we may wonder why studying the priests who are descendants of Levi is so important. In and of itself, it would only be a nice academic exercise. But the Preacher who wrote Hebrews used the Levitical priesthood as a foil to teach us about the identity of Christ. And that's a major reason why this book of the Bible is essential for us to explore. We can better understand Jesus when we can compare and contrast who he is to who he is not. Throughout our study, we've seen a lot of contrasts and heard a lot of repetition. That may grow monotonous to our ears, but remember that the first people who encountered Hebrews were listening to a sermon, not reading along with a printed copy as many of you do. Most of the audience would have been unable to read or write so the oral repetition of ideas helped them to remember what was going on here.

Writing in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Vol. XII, page 113), Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock provides a summary of these contrasts, which I have numbered to make them easier to read:

- 1) Christ appeared in heaven itself, not in an earthly copy (8:2-6).
- 2) Christ offered himself, not the blood of another sacrifice.
- 3) Christ entered the presence of God, not the inner tent with only symbols of God's presence.
- 4) Christ offered himself once for all, not again and again.
- 5) Christ removed sin, not bodily impurities (9:10, 13).

Dr. Craddock continues by saying:

Within these contrasts, the writer calls attention to several aspects of Christ's high priestly ministry. That Christ's appearance in God's presence was "on our behalf" recalls the intercessory function of his ministry (2:18;4:15; 7:25)...The intercession before God is not to be separated from the cross, which preceded it.

Another point that has been repeated is that Christ's death was once for all. This, as Dr. Craddock says, is "the nature of Christ's high priestly ministry." What he did, he did once, and there is no need to repeat this action.

Well, this sure is a lot of information, isn't it? Yet, it tells us a great deal about who Jesus is and what he has done on our behalf. As we review this list, it's clear that there is no one else, not even the Levitical priests, who could put us right with God as Jesus has done.

We move now from a summary of Hebrews 9:23-26 to the concluding verses of today's passage. The upshot here is a reminder that all mortals die once and then there is judgment. But, we're also reminded that Jesus will come again, though this

time his purpose in coming is “not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (9:28). The Second Coming is a well-known biblical concept, mentioned in over 300 verses (about 1 in 30) of the New Testament, but in our society, there are certainly those who don’t believe that Jesus will come, or that it’s even possible for him to come again.

A 2022 survey by the Pew Research Center claims that about 75% of US Christians believe that Jesus will return to earth. However, there are various understandings as to when and how this will occur. Black Protestant churches and those who label themselves as evangelical are more likely than other Christian groups to believe that Christ will return. A 2010 survey showed that about 40% of Americans believe that Jesus is likely to return by 2050. However, that number does not hold true across the board. Fifty-eight percent of white evangelical Christians believe that Christ is likely to return by 2050. That belief is shared by 32% of Catholics and 27% of us mainline Protestants.

I won’t ask for a show of hands, but I do wonder what each of you might believe. There are so many biblical references to the Second Coming that I personally believe it will occur. When or how it will happen are not questions I can answer. However, just reading Hebrews 9:28, which states that Jesus “will appear a second time,” convinces me that this is so. The word “will” points to a future activity that is likely to occur. Therefore, I read this verse as a promise that Jesus will come again.

I believe this promise because I believe Jesus is a promise-keeper. His word is forever sure! His coming again may sound unlikely, but let’s look at another story we know to be true to see how one human kept his word in a very tenuous situation.

In 1914 Ernest Shackleton led an expedition to sail to Antarctica, and then walk to the South Pole. The expedition went according to plan until ice trapped the ship and eventually crushed its hull. The men made their way by lifeboat to a small island.

Promising to come back for them, Shackleton and a small rescue party set out across 800 miles of perilous seas to South Georgia Island. With only a sextant to guide them, they made it to the island. Shackleton then led his party over steep mountainous terrain to the whaling port on the other side. Once there, he acquired a ship to rescue his crew. Their leader had kept his word and returned for them. Not one man was left behind.

(https://www.preceptaustin.org/hebrews_9-10_sermon_illustrations)

If Ernest Shackleton could keep his word under these nearly impossible circumstances, imagine how much more likely it is that Jesus will keep his promise! His promise is recorded in John 14:3, where we find a verse often read at funerals:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Perhaps some of you are wondering how I can feel so certain that Jesus will keep his promise. We have plenty of evidence for that. A fulfilled promise that all who have been baptized have experienced is that of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our lives. According to Acts 1:4-5, just before his ascension into heaven, the resurrected Jesus told his disciples:

not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for the promise of the Father.

“This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

I wonder how seriously Jesus’ followers took this promise. Like Shackleton’s crew, they may have been reassured by his words, but they had no real proof. None, that is, until the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them (Acts 2). That same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead dwells in you and me and all who believe in Jesus. And according to John Wesley’s teachings on grace, the Spirit is nudging those who are not yet believers to say yes to Jesus. We call this “prevenient grace.” The Spirit then continues to work in our lives through what we know as “justifying grace,” thereby putting us right with God. And as we continue to grow in our Christian faith, we experience “sanctifying grace.” This grace empowers us to be transformed so that we may be conformed to the image of Christ.

Knowing that the promised Holy Spirit has already come and is at work in the world and in my own life, it’s not a big leap for me to believe Jesus’ promise that he will come again. He also promised to be with us “to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). This age will end when, as Hebrews 9:28 reminds us, Jesus will come to save those of us who are eagerly awaiting his return. For me, the fulfillment of the momentous promise of the Holy Spirit is a sign that all promises will be fulfilled.

The challenge that some folks have in labeling Jesus as a “promise keeper” is that the time between the pronouncement of the promise and its fulfillment can stretch over centuries. His promise of the Holy Spirit’s coming to the disciples was quickly fulfilled, but if we read Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 (17-21, quoting Joel 28-32) we realize that this prophet spoke of the outpouring of the Spirit. He may have been prophesying as early as the ninth century B.C., or as late as the fifth or sixth century B.C. Whichever date is correct, the fulfillment of the promise made in Joel’s prophecy came hundreds of years after it was made.

So, at least for me, the fact that Jesus’ promise of his return has not yet been fulfilled doesn’t mean that it won’t be fulfilled. Instead, it means that God’s clock keeps time much differently than the way our timepieces do.

If you believe, as I do, that Jesus will come again to gather us up, then we need to be prepared to meet him. And let’s be clear, the chances are that we will die before his return, even if it comes as early as 2050, as some believe it will. When we will meet Jesus is unknown. But we have to be ready, so what steps can we take to do that? This is a question that we will explore more thoroughly when we get to our Advent passages, because Advent is a time of preparation for both Jesus’ first coming as God-in-the-flesh and his second coming as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the reading for December 1st we’re told in Luke 21:34, 36 to “be on guard” and to “be alert.”

Mike Livingstone has a handy list of seven ways we can prepare for Christ’s return. He includes a Scripture reading for items on his list that I’d encourage you to consult. (<https://explorethebible.lifeway.com/blog/adults/7-ways-to-prepare-for-jesus-return-session-11-mark-1324-37/>)

1. Live in the light of His first coming. Luke 19:11-27
2. Be discerning. Mark 13
3. Accept the uncertainties. Mark 13:32-33
4. Don't lose hope. Titus 2:11-13

5. Encourage one another. I Thessalonians 4 and 5
6. Live as if today was the day.
7. Keep on doing the work Jesus left us to do. Acts 1:8

In the time we have left this morning, let's consider just a few of these in more detail. In our day discernment (#2) is essential. With disinformation coming from within and beyond our own country, it's sometimes difficult to know what is really true. We also have to deal with artificial intelligence (AI), which may be used by bad actors to make things—and even people—appear to be one way when they are actually quite different. We understand that events and situations can be viewed from various perspectives, thereby giving them different slants, but we have to be familiar enough with our Bibles to cut through all the smoke and discern what God would have us to know.

Accepting uncertainties (#3) is also important. Some people want every “i” dotted and every “t” crossed before they'll take action. Just as the disciples didn't know when the Holy Spirit would be poured out, so too there are many things that may not be so clear to us. We have to wait and trust God will show us the way.

We need to keep doing the work Jesus called us to do (#7). We are to witness for him both in word and deed so that all people may come to know him.

If we truly believe that Jesus is a promise keeper, then we have to be ready for his return. After another deep dive into Hebrews, I want to close with a story from Darrel Davis:

A bank in Binghamton, New York, had some flowers sent to a competitor who had recently moved into a new building. There was a mix up at the flower shop, and the card sent with the arrangement read, "With our deepest sympathy." The florist, who was greatly embarrassed, apologized. But he was even more embarrassed when he realized that the card intended for the bank was attached to a floral arrangement sent to a funeral home in honor of a deceased person. That card read, "Congratulations on your new location!"

Jesus has promised to come again and take us to a new location. Do you believe his word? If so, how are you preparing to get there? The journey continues.

Love, Nan