

The Priest Who Was Tested in All the Ways We Are  
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, October 13, 2024  
Hebrews 4:12-16  
Choptank Charge      Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends. We're so glad you could join us today for worship. This week we're continuing our study of the Book of Hebrews by exploring chapter 4, verses 12-16.

Our reading begins as verses 12 and 13 get straight to the point. They may bring us up short, perhaps even prompt fear. Why? Well, many of us think of God's word as comforting as it tells us the story of God's relationship with humanity and creation and also proclaims the good news about Jesus. We're always looking for good news. Moreover, God's spoken word brought all of creation into being. Where would we be without God's word? What we read in these two verses, however, are words of divine judgment. Notice that "the thoughts and intentions of our heart" are being judged by "the word of God," which is sharp enough to divide "soul from spirit" and "joints from marrow" (4:12). If those ideas aren't scary enough, verse 13 tells us that we are naked before God! Not one creature is hidden before the one to whom we must give account. Psalm 139 reminds us that we cannot escape from God. Verse 7 asks: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" The short answer is "nowhere." The psalmist recognizes that no matter where he is, God is there also.

Yikes! That would be horrific news, except for the fact that we have a great high priest, Jesus, who is on our team! With him on our side, we don't need to hide from God. We do, however, have to "hold fast to our confession" (4:14), which means that we have to cling to the faith we profess. Recall from last week that the people to whom this sermon is addressed are tired. They're tired of being outcasts in their own families and communities. They're tired of trying to live as faithful disciples in a world that seems to thwart them at every turn. Don't leave the church, shouts the Preacher of Hebrews! Instead, recognize that Jesus knows our every weakness because he too has been tested in human flesh. And he has prevailed!

We Protestants may find the idea of a priest to be a bit foreign. We talk about our preachers, a word that focus on those called to impart the word of God to the congregation. We also talk about pastors, who are to be shepherds caring for the flock of God. We seldom refer to our leaders as priests, however, who serve as mediators between the people and God.

Tom Long explains the role of the priest this way (*Hebrews, Interpretation* series, p. 65).

The task of a priest is to approach God on behalf of the people, to gather what the people bring—their offerings, their prayers, the symbols of their repentance, their cares, their deepest needs—and to take these offerings into the very presence of God. The priest, therefore, faces in two directions. On behalf of the people, he faces toward God and travels to the holy place with their offerings...This high priest carries our need, our distress, our pain, our infirmities, our hunger for justice, our cries for peace to the very throne room of God.

What a difference a few verses make! We've gone from being naked before the God who judges the intentions of our heart to ones who, through Jesus our High Priest, are able to "approach the throne of grace with boldness" (4:16). We can be confident because Jesus intercedes for us, thus enabling us to have access to God. At this divine throne we can expect to find mercy and grace. Hallelujah! Can there be any better news than this?

I like the way *The Message* states verse 14: "Now that we know what we have—Jesus, the great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers!"

What great advice. And yet, when I think about prayer lifted in the name of Jesus so that he might intercede for us, I am aware that many people don't avail themselves of this direct connection that we have with God. Oh yes, we fret, we worry, but we don't "take it to the Lord in prayer" as the hymn reminds us to do ("What a Friend We Have in Jesus," UMH #526). Instead, we may be like the people to whom *Hebrews* is addressed. We may be allowing our faith to grow lukewarm, or turning away from the faith altogether.

Approximately 40 million U.S. Christians have left the church in the past 25 years (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/07/christian-church-community-participation-drop/674843/>). And those who remain aren't attending as often, as shown by these statistics gathered by Gallup and reported on ChurchTrac:

About 20% Americans attend church every week.

41% Americans are in monthly church attendance.

57% Americans are seldom or never in religious service attendance.

Regular church attendance has steadily declined since the turn of the century (Gallup and Pew Research Center).

And if these numbers weren't enough to open our eyes, "leading experts say church should expect to lose about 15% its members year over year" (<https://www.churchtrac.com/articles/the-state-of-church-attendance-trends-and-statistics-2023>).

No question about it! The Preacher who wrote Hebrews is clearly speaking not only to first century Christians but to us as well! I wonder if at least part of our problem is that we no longer approach the throne of grace with the awe and respect that God deserves. Is it possible that we don't expect to find mercy or help in our time of need, so we just don't ask?

Perhaps there is another question lurking behind that one. How many Christians actually pray on a regular basis? I wonder if a lack of prayer has contributed to our lack of faithfulness to the church. I use the verb "contributed" because I think there are many reasons that people have pulled away from the church today, just as I imagine there were many reasons for doing so in the days of the Preacher. And yet, if my hunch about prayer is correct, we can work together to fix that problem. In doing so, more people will feel that they are invited to approach Jesus at the throne of grace and find help and solace there.

Maybe we just need to get down to basics. First, how do we define prayer? I suspect different people will define this word differently. For some, it's the equivalent of presenting God with a "to do" list. I'm not suggesting that we stop asking God for help for ourselves and others. What I am suggesting is that we stop viewing God as our "cosmic bellhop." Prayer is far more than giving God a list of requests or demands. Instead, as a plaque in my office reads, "Prayer is the world's best wireless connection."

The question for us becomes: How do we use that connection? Do we believe that the prayers of the faithful have the power to change things? I certainly do, and Moses is my role model for this kind of thinking. Recall that in Exodus 32:14, God changed the divine mind because of the prayers of Moses. Another disaster was averted in the days of Jonah when the people of Nineveh sat in sackcloth and ashes and turned from their wicked ways (Jonah 3:10). Prayer has the power to change things if we love what God loves and think as God thinks and will whatever God wills. If we pray for something that is beyond the will of God, our prayer may not be answered in the way we would hope. So we need to be tuned into God's will.

Prayer includes asking for things, but it is far more than that. I just love William Barry's book, *Seek My Face: Prayer as Personal Relationship in Scripture*. For this Jesuit priest, prayer is not just words but rather a close

encounter with the living God. That sounds great, doesn't it? Well, yes or no, depending on who you ask. Many people want to be in a relationship with God, but as more of an acquaintance than an intimate partner. They want to be a Christian disciple, but they don't want to get too close to God. For some people, getting too close to God is a terrifying idea. What happens if God gets to know me too well? What happens if God wants me to do something that is not on my own agenda? What happens if I get pulled out of my comfort zone? All of these are valid questions. I would suggest, however, that the answer to them is rooted in our trust of God. Can we trust God to act in our best interest? If so, we may have opportunities that we couldn't have dreamed of and would have never gone after.

When we think of prayer as a relationship, we are free to act as we would with a close friend. We don't want to just pass along a list of desires. Instead, we want to give God praise and honor and glory, just as we would honor a friend. We can also say "I'm sorry, God," and mean it, just as we would apologize to a friend and ask forgiveness. Do we give thanks to God, as we would thank a friend for whatever they have done for us? And do we recognize that we can pour out our hearts, even if we are upset or angry, and God will listen and answer us? Do you see how the concept of prayer gets expanded when we think in the broader term of relationship, rather than limit ourselves to making a list and checking it twice?

In her book, *Five Means of Grace: Experiencing God's Love the Wesleyan Way*, Elaine Heath describes prayer this way (page 5):

The Christian faith is all about a relationship of love, trust, and vulnerability, on God's part and on ours. Prayer is the essence of that relationship. It is more than speaking and listening, more than liturgy or silence. Prayer is the very breath of God, breathing life into us, opening us to who God is, to who we are, and to this world that God loves. The breath of God brings life, healing, renewal, comfort, challenge, and direction. Just as breathing is necessary for life in our physical bodies, prayer is necessary for spiritual life.

Indeed, it is necessary. So then, I have to ask again if a lack prayer in one's life contributes to a falling away from the faith. Could part of the problem with the congregation to whom the Book of Hebrews was written simply be that they didn't take prayer seriously? Could that be part of our modern problem as well? If I'm right, what can we do about this?

One idea is to agree on a time of day when everyone offers a prayer, either their own prayer or one that the entire group is using. It doesn't need

to be a long prayer. It could be the Lord's Prayer or, one of my favorites, Wesley's Covenant Prayer:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

Let's challenge ourselves this week to say Wesley's Covenant Prayer early in the morning and the Lord's Prayer at bedtime. Of course, you are not limited to these two prayers. Nor are you limited to twice per day. But if you at least do this much, you may be able to form a new habit of prayer that you could expand on. Let me know how that works for you.

Another idea is to use a prayer book that has a variety of prayers, such as the *Book of Common Prayer*, used by Episcopalians. There are also books available with prayers for the liturgy of hours, which includes seven distinct times of prayer throughout the day. I'm going to be very honest here in saying that I belonged to a group that followed this monastery-style of praying. To say that I was a complete failure at it would be quite charitable. The prayer times were as follows:

Lauds (3 am),(6 am),(9 am), Sext (noon), None (3 pm), Vespers(evening),(before going to bed), and(Midnight) .

I might have been able to manage if I had lived in a convent and had no other responsibilities. However, trying to do all of this was a disaster for me. I was trying to build my confidence as a pray-er, but this practice had the opposite effect for me.

Well, I'm trying this again with a much more low-key book as my guide. *The Methodist Book of Daily Prayer* (Abingdon Press, 2023) provides morning and evening prayers for five days of the week. There's no exact time when the prayers have to be said. And each day has a lot of prompts for prayers, which I find quite useful.

In sum, today we've considered Jesus as our High priest who has been tested. We've seen how he provide us with all we need to come before the throne of grace. There, we can pour out our fervent prayers, as we continue to develop a close, personal relationship with him. And finally, we can explore ways of strengthening our relationship with God by strengthening and regularizing our prayer time. Let's see what we can do

this week!

Love, Nan