

Yes, Jesus Really Matters!

World Communion Sunday, October 3, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

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,

*1.) whom he appointed **heir of all things,***

*2.) through whom he also **created the worlds.***

*3.) He is the **reflection of God's glory** and*

*4.) the **exact imprint of God's very being,** and*

*5.) he **sustains all things** by his powerful word.*

*6.) When he had **made purification for sins,***

*7.) 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.

[Numbers have been added.]

The Letter to the Hebrews, our day's epistle lesson, is a New Testament letter of unknown authorship written to a Jewish Christian congregation. The title is confusing as many hear it and naturally think of an *Old Testament* book, as that collection is the story of God raising up the Hebrew people. It is a shame that it was not better named, and I think I know just the right title. Hebrews should be re-named "*Yes, Jesus Really Matters,*" for that is the main theme of the whole book. This Hebrew congregation was facing persecution, not only from a pagan world which did not take kindly to a new and competing religion, but also from fellow Jews who felt that these people were denying their heritage by becoming followers of Christ. Their temptation was to walk away from Christ, or perhaps to be more subtle in their denial of Christ by downplaying His importance or centrality to their faith. The Book of Hebrews was a resounding "no" to such desires. Jesus matters! This is a theme which speaks today to modern believers as it is all too tempting and easy for us to downplay the centrality of Christ and instead emphasize more innocuous and hazy notions of God. Not only was Hebrews a boldly stated book, but from the very opening verses the centrality and importance of Christ is loudly proclaimed. The first three verses of the book spell out seven reasons that Jesus matters.

The first two points address Jesus' significant role as our Creator. "*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.*" You may be surprised by this as we usually associate the creation of the world with God the Father. Jesus, however, was a co-creator with the Father. For that matter, in the Book of Genesis we read of the Spirit of God brooding over the waters! The whole Trinity was involved in the Creation. You may recall Paul's words in Colossians 1:16 that *by him*—referring to Jesus—*all things were created*. Let us not leave Jesus out of our Creation celebrations!

Jesus is also presented as the *heir* of all things. All things will eventually go to Jesus for Him to reign over. We sing, "*Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun, doth its successive journeys run,*" and rightly so. Jesus came to conquer and won that victory through the Resurrection. The victory is now guaranteed, though we await the final return of Earth's King. Jesus is our destiny, and we shall spend eternity in Christ's glad presence. How sad that when we usually think of Creation our thoughts immediately go to visions of lovely sunsets, seashores, and grand mountains. All these things are beautiful, but with such a focus of attention we miss out on the even greater wonders of Creation. Christ has created us and the human family! Our Old Testament lesson told of the creation of man and woman. Many books have been written about what it truly means to be a man, or to be a woman. We seek to more fully understand our identities, and this may be a good desire. What a joy to know the One who created us male and female. Our Gospel lesson tells of Jesus blessing the children. What a joy to worship the one who created us to begin our lives as children, and who was a child once Himself. And all of this Jesus created to be together. It is sweet to celebrate "*the rocks and seas, the skies and seas,*" but how much sweeter to know that we are part of the crowning glory of Creation—God's family. Some years ago, a beautiful song was composed which celebrated "*The Maker of My Heart.*" This song of praise delighted in the knowledge that Jesus knew his every part and every feeling, and gladly concluded, "*It's so good to know the Maker of my heart.*" Jesus matters. He is the Creator of all that is, but this is only the beginning as there are even greater matters to be celebrated.

Greater yet, Jesus is God's full and true revelation. People wonder, what does God look like, and for those who claim to know much about God there arises the most reasonable question, how do you know that? The "smart set" chuckles at anyone claiming to know God in any detail, and even doubt that there is a God. The Book of Hebrews opens with a bold claim of God's full and true revelation in Jesus Christ. *He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.* Do you want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus. We think of Philip on the night of Jesus' betrayal. Jesus was speaking extensively of the Father in heaven, when Philip, perhaps a bit exasperated, pleaded with Jesus, "*Show us the Father and that will be enough.*" Jesus was glad to respond that *Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.* Amen!

Why do we insist on speaking in vague terms of the character and nature of God when God has so plainly revealed Himself in Christ? I have often shared my own story. Though raised in the Church, I entered young adulthood feeling quite lost and confused about life, and about God. It was then that I began reading the Bible, and it was in the pages of the Gospels as I saw and heard the Savior that it all became clear to me. This is God, coming to meet us in our lost state and leading the way. While I could understand so little of what I read in the Bible I was still amazed by what I found. God was revealing Himself to all who desired to find Him. Why did I wait so long, and why don't more people seek?

Granted, the Bible is not always an easy read, especially in a day when we are accustomed to novels and articles which do not challenge us. It is also easy to become discouraged when we feel confused by parts of the Scripture. The Bible is there to inform us, but we must not only look for rational information. Let us also remember to read the Bible for the beauty which it reveals. Jesus is beautiful! Look and be blessed. Rightly we celebrate the hymn "Beautiful Savior," and the title alone tells the story. Jesus is beautiful, and as we look to Jesus, in Scripture, in worship and in prayer we can be blessed and lifted by that beauty. We commonly hear the organ prelude, "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." The title is phrased in a way which sounds odd to modern ears, but again, the title speaks volumes. Jesus is a joy to behold and to know Christ is life itself! Let us draw near and be blessed to experience the beauty that is divine, and let us rejoice in the privilege of coming to His table on this Sunday of communion.

Thus far and in just a few sentences the Hebrews Epistle has made some profound claims for Jesus, but the greatest claim is yet to come. *When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.* The matter of purification may not excite us, and it sounds very Hebrew. We think of priests in the Temple with their rituals of ceremonial washing and symbolic cleansings, and this all seems a bit removed from our daily lives. In actuality, this letter is presenting to us a matter of life and death! I had just mentioned how Jesus reveals to us the glory and character of God, but thus far I have failed to mention a major problem that results when one sees God. To see God is to see complete holiness and perfection, and then to realize that we are completely unworthy to even be near such glory! When Isaiah had his vision of God in the Temple he immediately cried out, *Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips.* He spoke wisely, for he, like all of us, is unworthy of God's presence. Shortly after meeting Jesus, Peter witnessed a great miracle and quickly realized who Jesus was. Suddenly overcome by fear and anguish Peter fell at Jesus' feet and shouted, *Depart from me, for I am a sinful man!* But Jesus would call and commission Isaiah, and Peter was also to be prepared and appointed for Kingdom service. As we come to experience the beauty and purity of Christ, we also come to realize that we are not worthy to stand before God as our sin—our prideful rebellion against the holy and almighty—have offended God and stand in our way. But Jesus came to purify us

from all evil, and this He did by dying for us on the Cross and rising in victory. Jesus is our purification! Alleluia!

Purification does sound like a matter of mere ritual rather than a complete cleansing of body and soul. Had he been writing to a Gentile audience the letter might have said *When he had made **reconciliation** between God and the human race.* Reconciliation, the bringing together of two alienated parties and of restoring fellowship and friendship is what this purification is really all about. Because of Jesus we are now family. We are invited to the Table. This is Good News for an alienated world.

Finally, we are told of how Jesus now reigns. Sitting at the right hand is an illustration from the days of monarch but it is still meaningful and powerful in our day. Jesus rules. Jesus is Lord! Even though this world seems to have gone crazy, Jesus is in control and will soon return in glory to rule.

The Hebrew believers of the first century were feeling the pressure and were tempted to give up their faith in Christ, or to at least play down His importance. In a modern world where numerous religions live among us it is also tempting to play down our faith in Jesus Christ and to hold forth instead a vague faith in some transcendent God which will not offend anyone who hears, but we do so at our own peril. In our day, I hear many Christians and Christian pastors speak almost exclusively of our Creator God, and this makes me very uncomfortable. Indeed, ours is a Creator God, and Jesus played a key role in our creation, but I find it tragic that some seem to be trying to reduce our God and our Savior to only a Creator. As wonderful as Creation is, the knowledge of Jesus being our Creator does not deal with the fatal problem of our sin. And as wonderful as the Creation is I am absolutely convinced that for God to create all of this was easy business. What is difficult and amazing beyond our imagining is the work of redemption and Christ's dying for the sin of the world. This is why our first impulse should be to call Christ Savior.

World Communion should not be a day to blend into the rest of the world, but to graciously and gladly present the One True Revelation and Salvation to the world. As the writer of Hebrews makes clear from the very start, Jesus really matters.