

Being the Church at Brentwood

God's Intent

**Ps 67 & Hebrews 1:1-3 and 2:5-12
(645, 726, 530, 563)**

**October 7, 2012
(Communion)**

The Letter to the Hebrews
is written to an exhausted and discouraged church.
They are tired, as Tom Long points out in his commentary.
“They are tired - tired of serving the world,
tired of worship,
tired of Christian education,
tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society,
tired of spiritual struggle,
tired of trying to keep their prayer life going,
tired even of Jesus.” (p.3)

It's a powerful description of the audience for this letter,
the context into which the letter is written.

And it's a description of the church than rings true today.
There are days when even I feel tired of it all.
I'm sure the same is true for you.
We're a small church.

We are not experiencing dramatic growth,
growth that might assure us of long-term viability.
There seems to be a lot to do,
and too few to do it.

The world around us has turned indifferent.
There are too many competing loyalties for Sunday morning.
When I was in Winnipeg last month,
I was staying in a hotel across the street
from St. James Presbyterian Church.
Glenn Ball, whom you might remember
from the prayer workshop he did with us this summer,
commented on the location of the church when he dropped me off.
In the immediate neighbourhood was the largest mall in Winnipeg,
the largest cinema complex in Winnipeg,
the hockey arena for the Winnipeg Jets,
and the football stadium for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

Shopping, entertainment, and sports – the competing triumvirate –
all within four blocks of this church building.

It's easy these days to get exhausted and discouraged
about the future of congregations like St. James
and perhaps even Brentwood.
People come for a Sunday or two,
then disappear.
People drive by and walk by all the time,
but never come in.

What's a community of follower of Jesus Christ like us to do?

Hebrews is not like the other letters in the New Testament.
It's Greek is much more proper.
It's content is much more theological and theoretical.
It's more of a sermon than a letter,
perhaps circulated the early congregations
with a letter that has not survived.

And what does this preacher say to this
exhausted and discouraged community of followers of Jesus Christ?

Let's take a closer look at this sermon from some 2000 years ago.
We'll explore parts of the sermon over the next seven weeks.
This morning, we'll dip into the first couple of chapters
and try and figure out what the preacher had to say
to this exhausted and discouraged congregation.

Most of you know that I spend some of the other half of my working time
helping organizations, including other churches,
explore possibilities for using their resources more faithfully and effectively
in mission and ministries.

With that in mind, I was intrigued by what the preacher didn't talk much about –
improved group dynamics, conflict management techniques,
the reorganization of mission structures,
or snappy worship services with contemporary music and movie clips.
He didn't talk about who wasn't there in the church
and how to get them there.

What he did talk about was Jesus Christ and what God did through him.
When faced with exhaustion and discouragement,
this preacher pointed away from the people experiencing that
and reminded them of what God has done for them
and what God intended by that merciful grace.

The theology of Hebrews can get a bit complex,
but you will understand it well if you keep this focus in mind.
The sermon is about what God has done for them
and what God intended by that merciful grace.

It's not about all the human dynamics,
the feelings of disappointment, anger, rejection, resentment, and irritation
that can arise when people come together.

It's about what God intends.
Most of our church conflicts would become creative and restorative
if we simply asked ourselves these kinds of questions –
“What serves God's intention best?”
“What will make us more faithful followers of Jesus Christ?”
“How can we best show God's forgiving love in their neighbourhood?”

God's intent, as seen in vss. 1:3 and 2:11,
is to forgive and purify.
Jesus takes on the sin of all humanity and pays for it.
He pays for it once and for all.
He alone pays for it.
Because of what God did in Jesus Christ,
we are free from sin in God's eyes.
That is the scandal of the Gospel – unconditional love and forgiveness.
We are freed from stains and shame.

Here's a simple formula to remember.
We are forgiven to be free to flourish.

That is God's intention,
the purpose of everything Jesus Christ did,
the crowning fulfillment of God's covenant promises throughout the Scriptures.

The church's energy and encouragement comes from this source,
and this source alone.
That's why the preacher in Hebrews focuses on it.

It is God's loving and forgiving intention
to give us his energy and encouragement
as we do our utmost for his mission in this world.

That mission, as we have said repeatedly, is to go out into the world
and be a blessing.

That mission, as we have said repeatedly, is to go out into the world
and touch people's lives with the grace of Jesus Christ.
That mission, as we have said repeatedly, is to go out into the world
and be compassionate with a courage that amazes most people.

A lot of people these days
find their purpose in consumerism, escapism, or sports fanaticism.
God's people are different.
We find our purpose in God's intent –
a forgiveness that frees us to flourish.

We are reminded of that intent and nourished in its benefits
at the Lord's Supper which we celebrate this morning.
This is the deepest source of our gratitude and thanksgiving
on this glorious fall day.

On this Worldwide Communion Sunday,
we celebrate this sacrament with Christians around the world.
We remember the forgiveness that God gave in Jesus Christ,
the forgiveness that frees us to be bold in using our talents to bless this world,
the forgiveness that frees us to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.
Come, let us eat together with Jesus Christ and his people around the world,
enjoying afresh his great salvation.

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