Parabola of Salvation

It’s been a long time since I had encountered the concept of a parabola—in fact, my first encounter was probably high school geometry and the last was probably a course in mathematics in college. The concept gained from high school geometry remains with me, the precepts from the differentials and others pronounced in college really didn’t stick. When I encountered the word in a commentary on this Hebrew text, I was amazed at how apt it is for what we proclaim in our confessional statements about God and God’s plan for our redemption through Jesus of Nazareth. When you begin to consider—to even try to understand—the incarnation as it tells us of how God loves us so much and the extreme extent that God has taken to draw us into a close relationship…what image can better picture it than one that begins at the very highest of points, then sinks down to the very lowest depths that a point can descend before returning to that highest of points. Hebrews 1:3 seems to be about those two very high points—“But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, who he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” As I read that earlier, did it sound very familiar…not just as the scripture chosen for today, but as part of the affirmations of faith we use many Sundays; especially the Nicene and Apostles’ Creed. These are the aspects of Christ which we often like to lift; the form the basis of our hope for something beyond this broken world. Later we will accept our Lord’s invitation to come to the Table provided for our nourishment and be reminded of the low point, the cost of that redemption offered to us through the incarnation. It seems particularly important on a day when we celebrate this sacrament with the whole Christian world and listen to the author of Hebrews’ lofty language of glory and angels and sanctification, that we stop and consider in our modern context two key questions that are still relevant to us all: Who is Jesus, and what does that mean for us? The text we read itself clearly answers that question: establishing Christ like the gospel of John as before and above all things. But this depiction of his holy supremacy is coupled with the vulnerability, suffering and sacrifice experienced by Jesus of Nazareth while he lived among us as part of his mission because in his mission he experienced all that we do while remaining obedient and sinless. These two things taken together lead to the second question posed by the Christology found in Hebrews: “what does this mean for us?” Especially as we prepare to come to the Table he prepares for us on World Communion Sunday, what does it mean to follow in the footsteps of one who unites all as heirs and siblings in salvation? How do we understand the teachings we are given that reveal our Lord as asking us to not only accept one another but to claim kin-ship, belonging to one another across all the barriers that we have created but that he calls us to cross. In the Hebrew text the author brings forth the traditions that the Son was present before there was time; that the radiance that is the glory that is God is the same light that shines from Christ and Christ came to reveal to us the fullness of God’s love for us so we might know how deeply we are loved. Through the act of incarnation God revealed the gracious and merciful and persistent commitment to what came into being at Creation. As we think about Jesus, is there any more powerful statement of the divine commitment to redeem the world that can be found in the intervention made on our behalf through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? As we think about this on World Communion Sunday in connection with the passage from Mark, it is rather poignant because the Pharisees try to test Jesus on points of Torah—the Law, the disciples try to keep small children away from him. Both situations involving people vulnerable in that society. To both issues Jesus responds by illustrations showing that what needs to be kept foremost is that the most vulnerable of society—the children and in that society any woman alone—need to be protected. Last Saturday night at Tony’s I watched the movie made at the Broadway production of the play Hamilton. Tony and his wife Heather are quite the movie watchers and always try to find one that they think I will like, which is actually not all that easy as the movie format is not one I usually enjoy…but my son knows me well. The play and movie, in case you are not familiar with is was all the rage in 1916-1917. It is set during the time of Alexander Hamilton and tells of events pre-revolutionary, revolutionary and through the time of Hamilton’s death in a duel with Aaron Burr. The dialogue is carried by some very creative rap music. One of the most powerful statements made through the story line is summed up in a song titled “The Room Where It Happened”. Verses of this song appear to describe several incidents throughout the play; a few people get together, meet and suddenly things happen which change the course of history; these things happen where things are decided by a few people and one person or group is noticeably left out of the process—the singer says “they arranged the meeting, the menu and the seating but I was not in the room where it happened” and what agreements were made were not known, the singer was not invited to be in “the room where it happened.” The singer in the play, Aaron Burr, vows to get into that room. When we look around our world today, not only our global community but our national one, we can see signs that there are many people who have been excluded from the “room where it happened”; the rooms where decisions and policies which have profoundly influenced their lives, their parents lives and their children’s lives and they have not been invited into the room to participate in the decisions. These decisions which benefit only those in the room and offer no voice to those outside the room do not seem to be in keeping with our call to claim all as our kin; to express concern for the vulnerable in our society, our brothers and sisters in God’s creation.

The parabola of salvation pioneered by Jesus began when Creation began and continued as God came to earth and dwelled among us, descending to the lowest possible depth, experiencing pain and death so that no matter what we experience we know God’s love has gone there for us and can walk with us there. But the resurrection and ascension has completed the parabola as Christ now reigns again with the Father. The image is truly comforting and beautiful, but we have been called to a mission as well. As we come to the Table, invited by the one who claims us as his kin, who asks us to claim all others as our kin, the one we are told who is the pioneer of our salvation and the host of this holy meal, we need to truly explore this identity as citizens of his kin-dom and claim it for ourselves as our Lord arranges “the menus, the venue, the seating” so that all from east, west, north and south have a place at the table because of his sacrifice and love. It is his invitation that we accept—and we do not get to choose who else is invited. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.