

## Learning Obedience

The text we know as the Letter to the Hebrews represents some of the most beautiful expressions describing what God's love for us has done. It also represents the struggle that those first believers had understanding how God's plan for the redemption of the world—for all of humanity was to be achieved through the life of Jesus. Those who were likely the first to receive this message as presented in this text were those raised in the traditions of the Hebrew faith, the promises made of a Messiah who would come to redeem them. Yet in the way of humankind since the beginning, their understanding associated that redemption to a return to an earthly kingdom and the reign of a powerful nation state on earth in which their tradition would hold the power instead of Rome. They did not remember the words found in their own prophetic tradition written in the Isaiah scroll during the time of the Babylonian exile which remind them: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." That is still an observation that hold true today when we try to understand God's grace and mercy. Throughout the history of humanity and the relationship with God, God has been trying to teach and mold this much loved creature into living and following the ways God has desired for him to live from the beginning—the ways found in the covenant promises—the ones in the reminders given by many prophets sent to the people about those promises about how they were to live in caring communities where none were left out. Our two readings today describe God's plan of redemption, our struggle to understand it through the words of the Hebrews text, and our resistance to it as shown when Jesus' acceptance and obedience to his mission was explained to his disciples repeatedly, as illustrated in the reactions of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. As I was preparing for this week's texts and how to present them, I encountered a commentary on Hebrews which mentioned something the author called a "marketing phenomenon" which he had noticed in some major magazines. There was something going on in churches the magazines called "marketing Jesus." The author of the commentary thought that was a rather silly idea, questioning why would anyone feel that they had to "market Jesus"? His questions were "How would you go about "selling" eternal life? Asking, why would you think there would be a need to market "grace"? Yet it seems that we are not doing a very good job of explaining Jesus' mission and its meaning for our lives if it seems that "marketing" and "programming" are what we need to be doing. And since today's headlines are proclaiming that the current issues with supply chains and shortages are endangering Christmas...evidently a great many folks don't know what Christmas...and therefore Jesus...is about. The Hebrew text is a discussion of the purpose of the incarnation—which is what Christmas is actually about...that event we will begin commemorating anew before too long whether the supply chain is working or not. The incarnation was God's way to show us what God is like. The New Testament tells us that Jesus is God incarnate; and Jesus, God incarnate, not only means that Jesus really and truly shows us what God is like; it also means Jesus shows us that God really and truly understand what it is like to be fully human. The incarnation means that by fully entering our reality and fully sharing our humanity, God has done all that needs to be done to fully redeem us all. Of course, the incarnation is also about something more...it is not only about who God is, it's also about what

God is doing—God is in the process of restoring all things. In the Mark passage today, verse 45, we read that Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” The “many” is basically a blanket inclusion for everybody...for the world. The Hebrews text explains it this way, that through what Jesus suffered, he became the source of “eternal salvation”. Throughout history many have asked questions about why this was necessary...why didn’t God just give us the necessary information and let us pull ourselves out of our own mess. Well, read the history of the wilderness journey of the people out of Egypt...the writings of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos...the Hebrew Scriptures provide us with ample evidence that giving us the information really didn’t work very well...we just don’t learn the to adopt and live the way that God desires for us to live very well or very often...this love thy neighbor as thy self is not our most often chosen way. So the answer to the need for this to be the way lays in the choices that humanity choses most often...so do otherwise requires a restoration of a magnitude that only God can accomplish. We cannot do it for ourselves. God desires to restore us to an experience of human life as God created it to be—and this can only be done from within—by God entering it and pouring out the love that can change us all. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus did just that—he went into the abyss of human suffering in order to redeem all of us who have been trapped in it. There is no depth of suffering in human experience that Jesus did not reach. And the profound love he poured out for all of us at the cross changes everything. But there is another dimension to this. Jesus also restores all human life by pouring new life into it. Through his life and death—and the resurrection that follows it, Jesus also effectively “plants” the “new life” of the resurrection in this world. In one of his parables, Jesus compared the new life of the Kingdom implanted in this world to mustard seed. If you’ve ever worked any property which has been invaded by the mustard plant, you know that mustard is a weed that people try to get rid of, but it is like another well-known plant—kudzu. It spreads like crazy and is ineradicable. And this is also true of the life that has been transformed by Jesus. The new life Jesus “implanted” in this world changed everything. These changes have been talked about and debated and people from many walks of life have doubted them...the book of Hebrews talks about sacrifices and cleansing, scholars and theologians talk about propitiation and expiation. There are three theories about this which are called the Theories of Atonement—broken down saying they describe how God is at One with Us. I don’t think it really matters what words you use to describe it...because you will never be able to encompass the meaning and wonderment of it. What we need to focus on is that God became human; a true example of what God intended humanity to be like in the life he lived as Jesus of Nazareth. In doing so, Jesus experienced it all...Jesus chose to experience it all...he was obedient to the plan...he cared for others...when he was tired he showed compassion...when he was falsely accused...when he was suffering...he chose to serve...he placed himself last in line...he lived the example he calls us to follow. What we need from the narrative found in Hebrews is an understanding of the depth of God’s love; from that we can find the strength to change our lives knowing how truly we are loved. Know God’s love for us, we can find the courage that comes from having faith and hope that there is something more to this life than just the endless return of “the way things are.” In Jesus, God acts to give us those gifts. In Jesus, God pours out a love that is able to change even the most stubborn of us. Unfortunately, we are still as were the people in the desert of Sinai...“a stiff-

necked people”, a people not inclined to learn obedience to God’s inclusive ways of love, a people more inclined to seek favors for ourselves, always wanting to move to the front of the line rather than find ways to serve. We are people who more closely resemble the disciples James and John, the sons of Zebedee, than those we like to imaging ourselves to be...yet because Jesus was indeed fully human as well as fully divine, he understands our struggles so he became the perfect source for eternal salvation and freely offers God’s grace to us...forgiving us for our failings and always seeking to restore us into right relationship and citizenship in God’s kingdom according to God’s design for humankind. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.