

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Proper 18, Hebrews 10:11-28 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

For weeks here at St. David's, we cut out the psalm and epistle readings because we were trying to shorten the service. I put them back in this week because COVID numbers are better in our region right now, thanks be to God. Because we had limited the readings, you all wouldn't know that our epistle this morning is the last of seven readings from the letter to the Hebrews. Next week we move on to the Reign of Christ Sunday and the following Sunday a new church year begins, so we won't hear from Hebrews again until next summer. This tempts me to pack a lot of Hebrews into one sermon.

The letter to Hebrews is really one long sermon from a preacher to his church, from which he has been separated. Scholars like to call the author of Hebrews "the Preacher." The letter as a whole indicates that the congregation is exhausted. Does that sound familiar? We had a vestry meeting last Tuesday. Our wonderful vestry was tired. This was mostly because it was two days past the time change so felt like an hour later, but also, they have worked so hard trying to keep church going during these difficult times.

The vestry is exhausted, and most of you are exhausted. What we have been dealing with in the past two years wears us out. Hector got the freezer fixed and then the fridge stopped working. Amy not only heads up outreach and helps her mother with coffee hour every single weekend: she seeks out needs in the church and meets them, all on top of running a business. Jay teaches during the week and was here running the stream every single week when we were shut down. These three are rotating off the vestry, and they are exhausted. We are all tired.

This letter to the Hebrews was written to a congregation something like us: people who were tired. When we get weary, we can become discouraged.

Does church ever feel like a job to you? We want church to be a respite. A comfort. A joy. A challenge...but never a job.

Hebrews is the only epistle that describes Jesus as a priest. Perhaps that's why I like it: I'm a priest too, and I like thinking about Jesus in that way because normally Jesus speaks disparagingly about religious leaders like me. I also like that for Jesus, being a priest wasn't a job. The way Hebrews talks about Jesus' priesthood encourages me. Today's reading talks about priests standing day after day offering the same sacrifices. That sounds more like a job, right? I remember a friend once said to me about a priest at his church, "When he celebrates the Eucharist, it seems like he's doing the laundry."

What we do in here shouldn't feel that way. We come here and hear the word and share a holy meal. We sing. We pray. Sometimes we feel uplifted, and sometimes we are weary. But it's not a job. It's worship.

The preacher of Hebrews says that Christ sat down on the right hand of God. He sat down, *unlike* those priests who were standing up doing the same thing service after service, day after day. That's not how Jesus did it: he sat down. And, we hear in Hebrews, "Therefore, my friends...we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus."

First, I love how this preacher calls his congregation friends. I have called you friends, Jesus said. A priest standing day after day doesn't sound like a friend; but this preacher, who is aware of how exhausted his congregation is: he calls them friends.

The preacher writes about having the confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus. Just last week, as Dana Blackman prepared to speak to Sunday School about the parts of the church, she and I discussed how "sanctuary" is not actually a description of this entire room dedicated to worship in a church building: "sanctuary" technically describes this area behind the altar rail. This holy area that we reverence when we enter at the beginning of the service and when we leave at the end.

Sometimes people are nervous coming up here behind the altar rail. You know who loves it? Kids. They love coming up here. They revel in that specialness, that holiness, and that's how we are all called to act. This area is set aside for some special things, but those special things—reading scripture, baptism, Eucharist—those special things are for *all* of us. I am a priest, and Jesus, according to the preacher in Hebrews, was a priest; and, we are *all* priests. We are all ministers because we have been baptized. We were all baptized into the priesthood of all believers. Bill and I aren't "above" all of you because we wear these bizarre pieces of plastic in our shirts. We have special functions in the congregation, but we aren't any holier than anyone else. My primary special function as a priest is leading worship with you all.

The preacher in Hebrews shows Jesus as a priest who sits down, and the Holy Spirit as someone who testifies for us and forgives us.

The preacher calls us friends, but also calls us not to neglect to meet together. We are called to worship together, and I pray that worship will never feel like a job for any of us. Many of us are tired right now, which is not as excuse to neglect worship, but a call to come together and pray. And encourage each other. Being exhausted is a call to listen to the word of God and carry it out into the weary world.

Are you tired right now? What do you do when you are tired? How can worship help to reinvigorate you?