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Jeremiah 1:4-10

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

When I was a boy my parents regularly took my brother and me to the Baptist church. Our experience always included some form of Bible Study. And within Bible study was always included the exercise of memorizing scripture. As young people many of us were in total scorn of such silliness. While we complied with memorizing, we tried to appear as uninterested as possible. And yet, as I look back, many of those verses of scripture are engrained in my memory. It was that basis of familiarity with the scripture that formed the foundation for my later study as an adult.

In a similar way Jewish children, particularly in the past, were brought up hearing the stories of creation, of Abraham and Sarah, of Noah and the flood, of Moses taking the people out of Egypt, all the stories of the OT. By the time they had heard these stories over the years, those words were emblazoned in their memories for life. And not only the words were committed to memory, but the images that went with the words and the stories. And so often, when a Jewish adult heard the story of Moses in front of the burning bush, s/he could picture the fire of that bush in the mind's eye. They could picture the torrential rain and wind that was part of the story of the flood. They could picture a literal chariot of fire which took the prophet Elijah to heaven. And throughout the OT were fantastic stories and images, all committed to memory.

They were committed to memory, not because of great teachers. But more because of constant exposure to the words of scripture, more because they learned not only to study the scripture. They learned to live with it.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews in our epistle reading today is faced with a challenge. He is obviously writing to Jews who are familiar with the stories and images we have mentioned. But these Jews, in the recent past, had come into contact with followers of Jesus. If these Jews were like other such groups, there were some of them who were considering a more lasting commitment to this teacher from Nazareth. Some of them were not interested. Perhaps some were ambivalent. Perhaps some had signed on already.

Whatever their status the writer of Hebrews wants to utilize their knowledge of OT stories and images to advantage. And so the writer starts off by saying, “You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.” In other words the writer is saying in reference to all the stories they had heard, all the images that were in their minds, that their following Jesus Christ was different from the stories and images they had heard before.

So, the writer has set the stage for a contrast. He continues, “But you have come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God, to heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.”

And so, in contrast to the stories and pictures they had encountered before, the writer of Hebrews provides them with new stories, new images, and the possibility of a whole new life.

For those Jews who chose to be followers of Jesus, they had faced the contrast of their Jewish faith and the life in Christ. Whereas the stories and images of their Jewish faith had brought them to a certain point, the stories and images of the life in Christ placed before them the possibility of taking a radical step toward a new life in Jesus Christ.

I expect that for each one of them the way was a bit different. Because each one would have integrated the stories and images of Judaism in a slightly different way.

For example, a single man would have integrated stories and images in a different way than a married man with children. Or a young woman would have integrated stories and images in a way different than her mother would. And so all the individual differences of young and old, rich and poor, sick and healthy, and other differences would have come into play. Therefore, for any of them to consider adopting new images and stories, it would have been different in each case.

For all of them the stories of Adam and Eve, of King David, of Jacob wrestling with God, of Jonah and the fish represented a life in Judaism. Those stories and images represented a way of life that had been handed down by their ancestors for many generations.

So, you can see that the consideration of new stories and images, of a new life in Christ would have major, life altering consequences.

And the images of that new life: Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood of Jesus Christ – All those images were indicative of a whole new life.

It is one thing to speak of the contrast between Judaism and the life in Christ. But it is another thing to realize that any life can be contrasted to life in Christ. And even for those of us who have been immersed in the stories and images of the Christian life, there is still the possibility that our lives can be contrasted to his life. When we contemplate his life, his love, his mission. And when we contemplate our lives compared to his, how do we come off? When we see his devotion, his single mindedness, his commitment, even to death on a cross, how do we come off? In my life it is easy for me to avoid the contrast. Jesus is the Son of God. That is a status I would never claim for myself.

Therefore, the contrast of my life against his is meaningless because I could never attain to who he is as God's Son. And yet, his life is the standard, is the measuring stick against which we measure ourselves. And in our hearts of faith is the awareness that as we live and love and serve that we are to be like him. And that is the meaning of the contrast.

In our lives we are to be like him. In our lives we are to be more like him.

In our lives in the workplace, when we contrast our life there with the life of Jesus, how do we come off? In our lives as members of families, when we compare ourselves to Jesus, how do we come off? In our lives of love and service in the church, when we contrast our church life to his life, how do we come off?

For the Jews in the first century, it was a radical and scary thing to embrace this new life in Christ. It was a risky thing to step beyond the stories and images that they had always known. And yet many of them did just that. They contrasted and compared their lives to his. In the process they became like him. They became like him to the point that the church took root and spread across the world.

In our lives we could insist that there is no way for any of us to make that kind of comparison. And that the Christian life must be confined to whether we attend church or not. And for many Christians that is the case. Or we could realize as many others have realized before that to live the life of Christ is to risk that comparison to his life, is to risk something new and unknown, is to risk change, is to risk being more like him.

If we do, if we take that step, then we step more into the images of Bethlehem, more into the images of his life and work, more into his death and resurrection.

You know, it would make sense for Episcopalians to take such a step. We spend a good part of the liturgy reading readings like this one. We spend our time in the Eucharist remembering him. We spend a good part of our lives with his body and his blood.

Doesn't it make sense that in all that, that we would become more like him?

And yet, that requires a letting go of the past and a welcome embrace of the future.

To let go of comfort and routine, to be willing in Christ to become someone new.

And so, let us without reservation let go of what is past and embrace who we can become in Christ. For we have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice....But we have come to Mt Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.

Amen.

