

Finding Grace
Hebrews 4:12-16
October 10, 2021

Our scripture passage today is rather bipolar. On one hand, it talks about God wielding a sword, a double-edged one designed for warfare, and on the other hand, it talks about God as a priest who cares for our souls. It appears there are two sides of God: the One who judges; the One who redeems. Let's read about these sides of God.

Read Hebrews 4:12-16

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Sometimes when I am thinking about a children's message, I will go online to get ideas. One children's message that went along with this passage said bring a knife and show it to the kids. Ask them how it can be used. I practically freaked out at the thought.

God's word is sharper than a two edged sword our passage says. This was a short sword used by a Roman soldier called a gladius. You recognize it in the word gladiator. It was designed for close combat in close spaces where any small movement would cut. Very effective and dangerous weapon.

When we say that God's word is like a sword or knife, it means that God's word has incredible power. It cannot be denied anywhere. One translation of the Bible says this:

"[God's Word] is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are. Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done."

That is a scary translation.

When Katie and I were in Greece, we visited the island of Patmos where the Apostle John was exiled for talking about Jesus. While there he had a vision, which he wrote down and eventually became the Book of Revelation. John tried to describe the vision of the One speaking to him. He said, "Out of his mouth came a sharp double edged sword."

This sword penetrates to our hearts, the core of our very being – our soul and spirit. It bares us open.

I think of Psalm 139 (which is the word of God):

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your Spirit?

For some, this may be very comforting. For others, it can be very uncomfortable.

Someone said this reminded them of the IRS, especially if you are audited. There is the fear that the IRS will not see things the same way as you did. An IRS audit is a time for fear and trembling because we are being laid bare before the IRS of which we are to account.

God's word is like a double-edged sword where everything is laid bare and uncovered from God's sight. God's word is living and active. There are no secrets from God.

When I watch TV shows about surgeons, they always show the cutting and opening up of the person. Even though I know it is fake, I have to look away or close my eyes. Once the person is open, I am fine. It is the cutting that gets to me.

God's word is sharper than a surgeon's scalpel. When we have surgery, the surgeon is hopefully someone we trust. We lay ourselves bare before the surgeon trusting the surgeon will remove the cancer, fix what is broken. The surgeon's knife is meant to heal even though it hurts.

As God's word cuts into our souls, this is when we need the high priest to heal.

Now to us, high priest doesn't mean much. But it had great meaning to the original audience it was written. The high priest dealt with a holy God, the one with the double-edged sword. The Jews took approaching this holy God very seriously.

In the Jewish temple was a place called the Holy of Holies. It was a closed off chamber reserved for the presence of God. Only one person could enter the Holy of Holies once a year...the High Priest. On one Holy day, the Day of Atonement, the priest readied himself to approach a Holy God. He cleansed himself and wore white linen. He tied a rope or bell around him, so when he entered into the Holy of Holies, if he got into trouble or died from meeting a holy God, he could be pulled out. Approaching God was serious stuff.

The High Priest's job as he entered the Holy of Holies was to seek forgiveness for the people of God. To atone for their sins. Imagine we had a closed off chamber here in the sanctuary, and once a year, Pastor Craig would go in that chamber to seek our forgiveness. It would be a holy and scary moment. All holding our breath wondering if Pastor Craig was going to come out again as he approached a holy God.

Today, the Jews still have the Day of Atonement. Also called Yom Kipper. The Jews honored it on September 15 whereby they fasted for 24 hours and went to synagogue to seek forgiveness. One day a year.

Fortunately, we don't have to wait for that one-day-a-year to seek forgiveness because we have a great high priest, greater than all the high priests of old. His name is Jesus. This high priest doesn't atone for our sins once a year, but once and for all on the cross. This high priest continues his work today on the Throne as we seek forgiveness each day.

This high priest understands us completely because God became one of us in Christ. God experienced hunger and thirst, grief and joy, weariness, disagreements and conflicts and anger, life and death.

God understands our every weakness. Scripture says he went through every temptation that we experience. We know about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness – there were 3 of them: hunger, power, testing God. But are there others. I came across this list of the every day temptations Jesus faced...just like us. (List by John Piper)

Jesus could have dishonored his parents when they were more strict than others.
He could have coveted all the nice things Zacchaeus owned.
He could have lusted when Mary wiped his feet with her hair
He could have murmured at God when John the Baptist was killed at the whim of a dancing girl.
He could have pouted with self-pity when the disciples fell asleep when he told them to stay awake.
He would have taken revenge when he was wrongly accused
He could have lied to save his life.

But our scripture passage says that this high priest who was tempted each day did not give in; Jesus was without sin.

Therefore, we don't need to fear the double-edged sword. Yes, it opens us up and reveals what is inside, but it is more like a scalpel that heals rather than harms. Because Jesus understands human vulnerability, Jesus' response to us is one of grace, which brings healing.

Therefore we can draw near the throne with boldness to find mercy and grace in our time of need because we have a High Priest who understands completely. We don't need Pastor Craig to do it for us. It is quite a privilege we have been given to approach our Holy God this way.

Because of all this, the passage says we can hold firmly to the faith we profess. In other words, hold fast to Christ. In a few chapters later in Hebrews (7:25), it says that Jesus "lives to intercede for us." Jesus, our High Priest, has a ministry of intercessory prayer. No matter your life; no matter how desperate, how hopeless, how overwhelming, boring, depressing, stressful, painful, you can be sure that Christ, your High Priest, is praying for you. And, you will receive mercy and grace to help you in your time of need.

Knowing and believing this, let us approach our High Priest in a time of confession together as a Body of Christ. You will find the confession in your bulletin. In the midst of the confession is a song. When we come to it the first time, Wes will play it one time through and then we will sing it.

So let us approach the Throne of God with confidence to receive grace and mercy.

Call to Confession

L: Friends, our high priest, Jesus Christ, knows all our weaknesses, and can sympathize, because he was tested in every way we are, only without sinning. So let's come boldly to the throne of grace, where we can find mercy and grace to help when we need it most.

P: (sung response, 437)

You are the Lord, giver of mercy!
You are the Christ, giver of mercy!
You are the Lord, giver of mercy!

(silence)

Confession

Lord, we look for you in the wrong places. We put our trust in material things. We worry about things we cannot change. We wonder if you are even there at all. For all the times we have doubted you, Lord, forgive us. For all the ways we have neglected your word and ignored your people, forgive us. Do not be far from us, Lord. There is no one else we can turn to for help. Renew our fickle hearts and help us put our trust in you.

**You are the Lord, giver of mercy!
You are the Christ, giver of mercy!
You are the Lord, giver of mercy!**

Assurance of Pardon

There is no wrong that God cannot make right. There is no chasm that can separate us from God's love. The Lord is patient and kind, generous and good. God will not forsake you or leave you. Turn to the Lord with confidence and put your faith in God's great mercy. By the power of Jesus Christ, we are made whole. Amen.

***Hymn**

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

465

Children's Message:

Invite the children to the baptismal font where there is placed a crystal bowl and pitcher. Point out the bowl and pitcher to the children.

Now, if you were to run around up here around this crystal bowl and pitcher, you might hear someone say, "Be careful! Don't break it. Stay away." Do you have anything at home like that you have to be careful around?

A long time ago, people used to approach God that way. They had to be very careful around a holy God. Until Jesus came. God came to be with us in Christ. And Jesus showed us what God is like.

Even today, some people feel God is not to be bothered or approached because God is busy running the universe and doesn't have time for you and me. But Jesus said that is not the case at all. We can call God father. We can pray to God anytime. Jesus said God cares about the sparrow, how much more will God care about you.

There is no "Do Not Touch" sign on God. We can approach God with love and joy. Let's do that now.

Dear God, thank you we can talk to you any time. Thank you for hearing us. Thank you for caring and loving us always. We are blessed. Amen.