

Bridging the Gap

A sermon series on the book of Hebrews

No one knows who wrote it, nor exactly who it was written to. The book of Hebrews reads as a sermon but concludes as a letter. It finds its place towards the end of the New Testament but quotes the Old extensively, showing how, as Luther put it, 'Jesus is the man to whom it applies, every bit of it.' Hebrews shows us how Jesus bridges the gap between Old Testament and New, between heaven and earth, between God and human beings. Each week during this series, there will be extra readings and reflection questions to assist with personal, family or small group study. I hope you enjoy delving into Hebrews with me in the coming weeks.

Sunday	Text	Theme	Extra Reading
October 3 Pentecost 19	Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12	The Last Word	Chapters 1-2
October 10 Pentecost 20	Hebrews 4:12-16	The Living Word	Chapters 3-4
October 17 Pentecost 21	Hebrews 5:1-10	The Perfect Priest	Chapters 5-6
October 24 Pentecost 22	Hebrews 7:23-28	The Permanent Priest	Chapter 7
October 31 Reformation	Hebrews 9:11-14	The Cleansing Blood	Chapter 8:1-9:14
November 7 All Saints	Hebrews 9:24-28	The Once for all Sacrifice	Chapter 9:15-10:10
November 14 Pentecost 25	Hebrews 10:11-25	The New and Living Way	Chapter 10:11-13:25

Week 2 Study

Read Hebrews 3-4, or the shorter section at 4:12-16, and the following sermon, before reflecting on the questions below.

1. How is repetition used in Hebrews to reinforce important points? What points are being emphasized in these chapters?
2. What words relating to Jesus are repeated from earlier chapters? Children may like to think about what it means when adults repeat themselves. When and why do they do this?
3. In what ways is God's word like a two-edged sword or knife? How have you experienced God's word working on you?
4. What is joyful and what is challenging about listening to Bible readings on a Sunday?
5. Why can we approach God with confidence? What is unique about his throne and the help he offers?
6. You could also re-watch the following introduction to Hebrews from the Bible Project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fNWTZZwgbs>. What stands out to you and why?

Close in prayer

Gracious Father, we thank you for calling us to approach your throne of grace to find rest for our souls. Help us to give time and attention to your word. Make us ready and open to receive your word, as both law and gospel. Help us to respond to your word with our own words of faith, witness, prayer, praise and thanksgiving. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

St Mark's Lutheran Church
Pentecost 20
Hebrews 4:12-16
Pastor Ben Pfeiffer

Introduction

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. Today we continue our sermon series on the book of Hebrews, a book that shows how Jesus bridges the gap between the Old Testament and New, between heaven and earth, between God and us. Our focus for today is on the Living Word of God. Let's pray.

We began our series last week by looking at several elements of God's word in Hebrews: its constant appeal to our imagination, its constant referencing of the Old Testament and the finality with which God speaks through Jesus. This week I would like us to explore three more elements of God's word in Hebrews, including its constant repetition, its razor-sharp ability to cut to the hearts of its hearers, and the way we are called to respond to it when it does.

The Repetition of the Word

First, its repetition. One thing you will notice if you read chapters 3 and 4 of Hebrews, which I encourage you to do this week, is the repeated words and themes that start to emerge: the creation of the world, the history of Israel, the faithfulness of Jesus and so on. Some of these themes will continue right through the book. This repetition is one reason people believe that Hebrews was intended more as a sermon to be heard, than a letter to be read. When we speak, we tend to repeat certain points for emphasis. We tend to repeat certain points for emphasis!

In the early chapters of Hebrews, the writer repeats the story of Israel, who were led by Moses through the wilderness towards the Promised Land and makes special mention of their lack of faith and obedience along the way, as a warning to the listeners. *'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts'* and later, God declared in his anger, *'They shall never enter my rest'* (Psalm 95:7-11). Those two quotes from Psalm 95 are repeated three times each and the word rest is repeated thirteen times in these two chapters alone.

We often see repetition as pointless, but this repetition is the exact opposite. It is very pointed. The point is: listen to the repeated words. Listen to the repeated themes of Israel's history and ours. Listen to what God wants for you and listen to the danger of hardening your heart to him and forfeiting your rest with him and don't let it happen.

To help us find rest with God is one of the great goals of the book of Hebrews. The writer says, *'There remains, then, a sabbath-rest for the people of God... Let us... make every effort to enter that rest'* (4:9-11). What started with Israel, continues with us. They wandered the wilderness in search of peace, safety and a land of their own. We wander this world in search of much the same thing.

To find rest with God is not just about reaching heaven but it starts here and now. Saint Augustine says, 'You have made us for yourself [O Lord], and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you' (Confessions, 1.1.1). To find rest with God is not just to stop work but to stop our work so that God can start his work in us. That's why the Jews observe the Sabbath. That's why we observe a day of rest and come to church. We are forever working on ourselves, working to please God and others. When we come here, God says, 'Stop. Let me work on you for a while. Experience a Sabbath rest.'

The Razor Sharpness of the Word

All that recounting and repeating is the backdrop to today's text, but without it the next part doesn't make much sense. It's like coming in halfway through a movie. The next thing we hear about is the razor sharpness of the word of God. *'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'* (4:12).

Martin Luther says that the reason we have a Sabbath as Christians is so that we do not despise God's word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it (Small Catechism). We come here to encounter God in his word. We come here, not to study his word primarily, but to let his word study us, which is a wonderful and beautiful and sometimes frightful thing! Because his word is alive! It's living. It's an active agent.

Not only that, but it cuts through anything, any pretense, any bravado, any pride, any despondency, any sin, any excuse, any attitude, and gets to the heart of any matter, like we see Jesus doing with the rich young ruler in today's Gospel reading. The comparison of God's word to a double-edged sword is to something incredibly sharp, that pierces however and whatever it strikes. And while it seems like an almost violent piece of imagery, I was reading one commentator during the week who said that 'sword,' could also be translated as 'knife,' like a surgeon's knife or scalpel.

That seems to fit the context in which the word is not wielded mercilessly or indiscriminately but with great purpose and precision. It cuts carefully. It cuts just enough, in just the right place, to promote the health of the whole person. We tend to be either too hard or too easy on ourselves and others. God's knife cuts just the right amount. It may not always be pleasant but at least he knows what he's doing and is imminently trustworthy.

As we listen to the Bible readings each week, it is good for us to do so with a ready and willing and prayerful spirit, and to take note of how God's word is working on us. It's not always easy being the patient. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes we don't know what the spiritual surgeon is up to and why. But he promises that his word is sharp and discerning and living and active and does not return to him empty, but accomplishes the purpose for which he sends it (Isaiah 55:11).

The Response to the Word

So, we find ourselves encountering God in his word, coming under his surgical knife, both confronted and comforted by what we hear. How do we respond? In today's final verses we are reminded that since we have a high priest like Jesus, and we'll explore that theme more in the coming weeks, who has ascended to be with God, there are two ways we should respond.

Number one is *'let us hold firmly to the faith we profess'* (4:14). Let us confess our faith and keep confessing our faith and never let anyone or anything stop us from confessing our faith. The words we say in response to the words God says, matter. That's why we say the Apostle's or Nicene Creeds week in and week out and usually after the readings or the sermon. It's our response. Repeating to God and ourselves and the world what we believe.

The number two response is here: *'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'* (4:16). Let us come to God, continually, daily, and with confidence. Why? Because he is a God of grace and mercy who is always ready and willing to help. Spending time in God's presence, in God's word, in God's church, is one of the few times in our week, when we can feel completely confident and peaceful that we are where we are meant to be.

The rest of the week, we're often questioning ourselves. We go to work. We think we should be at home. We go home. We think we should be at work. We go for a run. We think we should be home cleaning up. We go home and clean up. We think we should be off to the shops.

God says, 'Stop. Come with confidence and find rest in my presence.' God sits on his throne and Jesus sits next to him and we approach by faith. But what we find is that this is not the throne of a tyrant or an angry judge or someone who wants to make our life harder. Far from it. This is a throne of grace, through which we have access to the best things heaven has to offer, even now. *'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'* Come to him, all you who weary or carrying heavy burdens. He will give you rest.