

Heb 1:1 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Heb 1:5 For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father” ?

Or again,

“I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son” ?

Heb 1:6 And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,
“Let all God's angels worship him.”

Dear Friends In Christ,

It's Christmas Day and our sermon text is from the book of Hebrews. I started preparing this sermon a few days ago, and about half way between then and now I was researching some point or another, and there it was: a website. Mind you, it was the website of the very seminary I graduated from. It basically said, “On Christmas Day only a fool would preach on anything other than Luke chapter 2.” Well, I moved the cursor up to the little red X in the top right corner and sheepishly ducked out of that web site. For a moment, I considered changing my sermon text, but I was too far along. Besides, the bulletin had already been printed. Ya, that's it, the bulletin had been printed. It is written in stone.

But honestly, it wasn't the bulletin. A few weeks ago you had the Christmas pageant. Then on the 14th was the children's service. Last Sunday we watched Gabriel make an amazing announcement to Mary, and then just last night we heard the Christmas story straight from the Bible, without any preaching. Just God talking straight to us. The words from Hebrews chapter 1 tell us why hearing that Christmas story every year—even several times a year—is so important. It tells why we should celebrate that baby, and why the Wise Men were wise to worship that baby.

Let us look at that Baby and ponder this question which will forever be pondered in a Christmas carol:

What Child Is This?

I. This Bible passage points out one thing we can be thankful for. ***“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”*** (1-3). Before Jesus' birth, there was quite a bit of uncertainty about the Messiah. We touched on that in the Sunday sermon. His own mother didn't know what Jesus would be. Even the prophets were wondering, “I know that God told me to say that, but I'm not really sure what it means.” In the book of 1 Peter, the apostle tells us, *“Even angels long to look into these things”* (1:12). Even God's angels didn't really know what to expect in the Messiah! But we have it all laid out on the table. Old Testament believers had to be content with shadows on the wall. We get to peek over the edge of the feeding trough and look at reality – a baby. And when we see Jesus in a manger every year on this day, we rejoice to hear the story that runs from Christmas to Good Friday to

Easter. We rejoice to hear again how we were lost and without hope, literally headed to hell in a handbasket of our own weaving, and how Jesus rescued us.

The end point of all of Christmas was, as we read, ***“purification for sins.”*** Jesus Christ is the peg upon which human history turns. ***“He provided purification for sin.”*** That is why we are in church celebrating on a Thursday morning. Without this child, there would be no purification for our sin.

When we ask, What child is this? The first thing we learn is that he is the promised Savior from sin.

II. The next thing we learn is something we perhaps do not always think of with Christmas. It is what the children learned about in their children’s message. ***“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being”*** (3). Remember the Scotch tape? When we look at Jesus, we are looking at God. Sometimes people think about Jesus and God in two different ways. Jesus, so they think, is this warm loving buddy kind of guy, and God the Father is this surly stand-offish guy just waiting to drop the other shoe. That is neither fair nor accurate. Jesus is ***“the exact representation”*** of God the Father. Even better than a fingerprint on Scotch tape, and closer to what the writer had in mind, imagine this: Imagine in your change that you get a quarter fresh from the US mint. You can see the lines in the Washington’s hair. It is exactly like the die that stamped it. Walk with Jesus as he heals the sick, raises the dead, rebukes hypocrites, welcomes all and you will learn whom the God we worship is. And you can start with a feeding trough in Bethlehem and figure out how badly God wants you to be saved.

Jesus is ***“the radiance of God’s glory”***. Not only is Jesus an exact representation of God the Father and Holy Spirit, he is inseparable from him. The sun cannot exist without casting light and heat. Without that radiance, it would not be the sun. Such is Jesus in relation to the true God. Our triune God is not three separate beings. There is one God. But that is a sermon for Trinity Sunday.

The second thing we learn about what kind of child this is is that he intimately connected to God – closer than we can imagine – and therefore shows us who God is.

III. The third thing that we should learn about the Christ-child is what the writer spends the most time talking about.

Sometimes people imagine that the early Christian church didn’t have any problems. They think of the ancient Christian church as one big happy family, which would be wonderful had it ever been a reality. But only a couple decades after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, Christians were struggling to understand some of the key doctrines of the Bible. In fact, it took about 400 years before most of the Christian Church reached a formal agreement on exactly who Jesus was.

A lot of that discussion is rather technical and not really good sermon material, and not absolutely necessary to know, but it is important. You might compare it to an auto mechanic. You do not need to know how to fix a car to drive one. But you do need to know some basic things about a car, and it is necessary that *someone* knows how to fix a car. So I won’t try and get into those technical parts, what theologians call Christology. But I will try to tell you what every mature Christian should know.

The fact that the Son of God was born as a human immediately raised questions. People had good questions. They were trying to understand what it meant that the Son of God was born as a human. Everyone seemed to know that Jesus was more than human, but then what was he? To some it seemed a little too much like Greek mythology to say that Jesus was true God. So some thought of him as something like an angel. More than human, but still able to fit into a human body. So they put him on the shelf labelled “angels”.

By the way, this misunderstanding of Jesus did not go away with the end of the first or fifth century. Have you ever had Jehovah's Witnesses talk to you at length. Sooner or later they will do exactly what was happening among the Jewish recipients of this letter. They will say that Jesus is more than a man, *but* that he was still a created being; nothing more than a high ranking angel. Our reading doesn't allow this.

While the reading says it in many ways, let's look at a couple key points. Jesus' name points to him as something superior to all angels. Do you know what the word "angel" means? When the New Testament was written, the word "angel" meant simply "messenger". The original word carried the idea of service and subservience. Now the English word "angel" has almost the exact opposite meaning in popular thinking. It means something about being exalted, high up there.

Why is this a big deal? Because in verse 4 it says, "***[The Son] became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.***" Names and titles matter. If you think Jesus is just another one of the angels, then why is he called The Son of God. Angels are servants, he is the Son. Son—Servant, do you think they are the same thing?" If you are an employer, do you treat your 40-hour-a-week employee the same way you treat your daughter or son?

Here is something else in verse 6: "***Let all God's angels worship him.***" Not just people, but even the angels are supposed to worship the baby born in Bethlehem. One of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus found out there is a difference. Three decades after the first Christmas, Jesus ordered a storm to stop. Suddenly the wind and waves quit. When that happened, the twelve disciples bowed down in the boat and worshipped Jesus. And do you know what Jesus did? He let them worship him.

By contrast, one of those twelve disciples, John, got a tour of heaven a couple decades later and his guide was an angel. This is the book of Revelation. At the end of his experience, John was so overwhelmed with awe and emotion that he "*fell at [the angel's] feet to worship him.*" Do you know what the angel did? "*He said to [John], 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!'"*" (Rev 19:10). Weigh that out. When someone tried to worship an angel, the angel stopped him. When the same person tried to worship Jesus, Jesus accepted it as his right. Jesus is God himself.

All of which is not to tell you something you probably do not know. But this is what makes Christmas a celebration of Jesus. In a culture which has been predominantly Christian for centuries, we instinctively celebrate. Children don't go to school. Many people take some of their vacation time over these holidays. Families try to get together. We exchange gifts. And among those who have been given faith we do something else. We worship that baby lying in a manger.

Rejoice in the birth of your Savior! And when you have the chance, do what those shepherds did after witnesses the baby in the manger – tell someone else.

Amen.