

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

November 17, 2024

Hebrews 9:24-28, 10:12-14, 19-25; Proper 28 (Year B)

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

When the ground-level madness of our world threatens to overwhelm us, *look up!* Peer over the weeds and find wonder again at higher altitudes.² Whether hopeful or hurting, uncertain or unequivocal, *come to church!* Bring into our worship that stargazing spirit. Pull up the fences of our ordinary days and ponder the what-if's ... dare the what's-beyond's ... and muse the how-it-all-came-to-be's. Such unfettered curiosities join us to Love, Joy, and Wonder.

See, before Modernity granted us the misleading confidence that we could understand all mysteries, the authors of scripture wondered more humbly, and, therefore, braved to imagine and propose ideas about our connections to God and our connections to one another that exceeded the possibilities of their known science. Imagine that: ideas exceeding not only their known science, but a reach further, beyond even their known science's *possibilities*. The author of Hebrews imagines just this boldly, marveling the work of Christ and pointing us toward our meaningful participation in God's continuing revelation.

Though tradition identifies Hebrews' epistolist as the apostle Paul, contemporary scholarship deems that attribution unlikely given Hebrews' distinctive language and style. The unknown author witnesses an education in Greek rhetoric and Jewish liturgics, and may have been raised in the generation following the disciples who walked with Jesus, as indicated in the second chapter: "It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him"³ – *Jesus said it; they heard it; and then they told us.*

Fred Craddock observes, "The entire letter carries a tone of authority, of one who has the right and the obligation to remind, to instruct, to warn, and to encourage," implying "that the writer is one in a position of [significant] authority, either by reason of office or of long relationship."⁴ Though Hebrews has been wielded as a polemic against Judaism, the letter intends to encourage a specific community of Christians, not either to convert or to condemn the Jewish people. Craddock argues crisply, "The writer appeals to the Old Testament as a *living* Word of God and presents his case for the Christian faith as being *in continuity* with that Word. To read Hebrews as an attack on Judaism is to misread Hebrews."⁵

Our Epistle appointment⁶ concludes a three-chapter discourse on the cosmic nature and implications of Christ. Anticipating today's lesson, the eighth chapter opens:⁷

“Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.” Pausing there to interrogate those church words that can so easily wash over us: *Who is Jesus?* In this metaphor, *Jesus is a priest. And where is Jesus now? Jesus at God the Creator’s throne in heaven.* We continue:

“Jesus is a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer.” *So, what does Jesus do in heaven? Well, Jesus, the priest, offers continuing sacrifice, yet not at a mortal altar, but in the Divine Sanctuary itself.* Finally:

“Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one ...” *a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one.*⁸

The author draws on practices familiar to the congregation to whom they write – religious imagery of altars and priests and sacrifices – to draft this grand metaphor for the cosmic work and identity of Jesus as the Christ. Giving themselves to *wonder beyond the possibilities of their known science*, Hebrews draws heavily on the allegory of Plato’s cave. From a bleary-eyed September morning in a Humanities 101 course, you may remember this bit from Book VII of *The Republic*.

Plato explains his idea of the Forms with the image of prisoners sitting before a wall. Seated side-by-side in a row, “Here they have been from their childhood, and [they] have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and[, therefore,] can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads.”⁹

To conjure this scene here at Trinity Church, imagine a screen just in front of these two pillars. We sit immobilized [as Plato proposes] in a pew about halfway back between that screen and the Narthex, the foyer of the church. We’ve shaded all the windows on this side of the screen [we’re in a cave, remember], so that our only light enters through the main Copley Square doors and from above us, where a fire [carefully controlled, insurance-approved fire] flickers. Puppeteers have transformed the railing of the West Gallery just in front of the very safe fire into a stage, and they present a marionette drama. For us in the pews, this shadow play comprises our entire experience of the world.

In thirty-second shorthand, Plato proposes that the puppeteers carry the [capital “F”] Forms – the universals or archetypes – of the shadows they cast. Therefore, while we in the pew believe we see substantive objects, in fact, we see only “a sketch” of what exists in the higher realm.

In the context of Hebrews' metaphor and Plato's allegory in our Trinity Church imagination, Jesus, as "a minister in *the sanctuary and the true tent* of the Lord," offers praise in the West Gallery, if you will, La Farge's majesty window come to life! Jesus worships in that higher realm of the Forms, at the throne of the Creator. Indeed, Jesus worships *as Worship itself!* Jesus prays *as Prayer itself.* Here on earth – in our pews – we gather "in a sanctuary that is ... *a shadow* of that heavenly one."

Importantly, the author does not criticize us supplicants abiding either the inherited Mosaic precepts or the innovated Christian rubrics. Rather, our "offense" (so-called in the letter) is misunderstanding our worship as an end, rather than a means – as the Form, rather than a derivative; as *ultimate*, rather than *preliminary*. And when we approach our worship as an end, we confine our imaginations – we consent to a vision scarcely more spacious than that of Plato's chained prisoners. Perhaps especially tempting for us who have the blessing of gathering in this sparkling sanctuary, worship that speaks only its own beauty – no matter how lovely and appealing it might be – only sinks us deeper in derivatives. Our faith charges us to *look up*, to marvel a mystery beyond all beauty – indeed, that is Beauty itself.

Though we ache for that connection with the ultimate, we entrap ourselves in the preliminary. As Plato writes: "... when any of [the prisoners] is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn [their] neck round and walk and look towards the light, [they] will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress [them]... Will [they] not fancy that the shadows which [they] formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to [them]?"¹⁰ How often we allow the world's shadows to mark the limits of our hopefulness. Hebrews call us to a worship that points beyond all mortal experience.

In the language of Plato, the shadows *participate* in their Forms. According to Hebrews, so, too, our worship participates in Christ's heavenly action. *What an inspiring realization for our Christian devotions!* Even in this world that can weigh so heavy, a world that can leave our faithful efforts feeling so painfully meager – with every prayer and every hymn, with every offering lifted, we join Christ's devotions – *we participate in God's continuing, cosmic action!* Especially in seasons of uncertainty or disappointment, worship "that is a sketch" enlivens our imaginations and sets us free for other dimensions of existence.

Now, do I believe the Hebrews author supernaturally discerned the for-real metaphysics of the universe? No. No, I do not. Even so, I *do* believe the author of Hebrews righteously calls us to recognize this world as preliminary, and to realize Christ's work as ultimate and ongoing. And I can totally dig those ideas as rich enough to pray for a lifetime – for a thousand lifetimes.

So, when the ground-level madness of our world threatens to overwhelm us, *look up!* Peer over the weeds and find wonder again at higher altitudes.¹¹ Whether hopeful or hurting, uncertain or unequivocal, *come to church!* Bring into our worship that stargazing spirit. Pull up the fences of our ordinary days and ponder the what-if's ... dare

the what's-beyond's ... and muse the how-it-all-came-to-be's. Such unfettered curiosities join us to Love, Joy, and Wonder.

Held in common by this promise,
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² From “Holy Baptism” in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 308.

³ Hebrews 2:3.

⁴ Craddock, p. 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ To offer context to the epistle, today we included two Sundays worth of Hebrews – Proper 27 (9:24-28) and Proper 28 (10:11-14,19-25) – given we have not been exclusively on this track.

⁷ Hebrews 8:1-5a, 6.

⁸ And a verse further: “For Jesus has attained a more excellent ministry” – I appreciate the *Bill & Ted's* homage there: a *more excellent* ministry.

⁹ [Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Project Gutenberg, 2016.](#) Super handy HTML version of the text (though without line or page numbers).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ From “Holy Baptism” in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 308.