

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA November 30, 2014

The Surpassing Christ: Greater than the Prophets

- 1. The Surpassing Christ?**
- 2. The Cycle Begins**
- 3. The Surpassing Prophet**

**Hymns: *Where the Promise Shines* – 1 –
Distribution: 14, 32 –
Closing: 12**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

Up until this point, it had just been rumors. You had heard that there were Christians around the Empire who were being persecuted; being hunted; being treated in incomprehensible ways. But rumors can be ignored, rumors can be exaggerated, rumors can be wrong. But then one day, it is no longer a rumor. You were just down the street when the persecution came to your Christian brother's door. You saw the members of the Legion approach his house dressed ready for battle. You saw them break down the door and emerge with your friend bound in chains. You saw him ripped away from his family, led away to be "tried" and put to death. Since that day, you've spent every moment in public looking over your shoulder and every moment at home wondering when the door will burst open, wondering when your day will come!

That was the apprehension that 1st century Christians lived with during the government-sponsored persecution of Christians under Roman Emperor Nero from 64-70 A.D. It was a fear that caused many converts to Christianity to wonder whether it was worth it. For Jewish Christians, in particular, there was a great dilemma. Under Nero's rule, Christianity was illegal and its practice was condemned. Judaism, on the other hand, was legal, and more importantly, its practice was a state protected right. For years, those Jewish converts had faced pressure from family and friends to revert back to their old way of life, and now the Roman government and the real threat of persecution seemed to be giving that final push, "Go back to what is established and familiar; go back to what is safe and easy; turn back from Christ and Christianity."

It was in response to that pressure, that the writer to the Hebrews penned the letter that we are going to

focus on during our Sundays of Advent preparation this year. And the advice that the writer gave to these pressured Christians was simple: "Don't revert; don't go back. Christ is better." Again and again through the letter to the Hebrews, the author uses the word "better" as he portrays Christianity as the one true religion, the perfect and final revelation of God to man.

What a reminder that is for us. Though it is not the persecution of an Emperor, each of us faces constant pressures as Christians. There is pressure to backslide, pressure to pick an easier way of life, pressure to join with the world around us; there is pressure placed on us constantly by our sinful nature, which is prodded by the devil and persuaded by the world to go a different route as we go through this life. In the face of that pressure, use this Advent season, and the message given to us in Hebrews as a reminder that there is no better way, because we have "The Surpassing Christ."

Our first reminder of that truth comes from Hebrews 1:1-3:

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.

Today, the cycle starts again. Today is the beginning of the church year. It starts with these weeks of Advent preparation as we get ready for Christmas. And from there, you know exactly what comes next. Through Epiphany, we come to Lent, which gets us ready for Holy Week. We will celebrate Easter sometime in the spring, and then Pentecost 50 days later. It will happen just like it does every year. So, how are you feeling as another church year springs upon us?

Certainly, the temptation is to say, "Here we go again, same old, same old that I already know...I know the stories, I know the lessons, I even have a pretty good idea what Pastor is going to say." There won't be any new twists to the story, no alternate endings. In our services, we will hear of Jesus' birth and his life, we will see his suffering and death, we will be joyful in his resurrection and ascension, and we will consider again what it all means for us. And it is easy to say, "I know it..."

But this start of the church year is also an opportunity for us to shout with thanks and joy, "I know it!" Today, the journey starts! I get to see and hear again ALL that God has done for me! What a

privilege it is to know the complete story, because it wasn't always that way for God's people.

That is the reminder that is given to us New Testament Christians in the opening verse of Hebrews. We are told, ***"In the past God spoke to our fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways."*** Since the beginning of the world, God has always spoken to his people. For most of the time before Jesus came, that was through the prophets, men who were chosen to be the mouthpieces for God. Turn through the pages of the Old Testament and you see the accounts of these great men and "the various ways" in which God spoke through them.

Immediately, we think of Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, men who were called by God, men who faithfully and powerfully proclaimed God's Word, but there were so many other prophets with unique stories. There was Hosea, whose marriage and continued love to an adulterous wife showed the people of Israel their sin and God's forgiving and steadfast love. There was Ezekiel, who had his lips touched by God to give confidence to his message. There was Jonah whose prophetic journey took a detour in the belly of a whale. Looking through the work of the prophets, it is amazing to see the many ways in which God used these men to bless his people and show them how the Promise would be fulfilled.

However, despite the fascinating work of the prophets and the blessing that their work brought, it also created a great longing. The writer to the Hebrews uses an interesting phrase to describe those messages that came from the prophets. Literally, he says that they spoke "in many fragments." As great as the prophets were, the messages that they delivered never gave the complete picture of salvation.

Through the prophets, God only gave glimpses of what was to come. Some of those scenes were very specific (like Isaiah describing the virgin birth or Micah naming Bethlehem as the birthplace), but the people always had to put the prophecies together: A detail from this prophet, and a bit of info from that prophet; piece them all together, and a picture starts to form. Yet even then, the people only had a shadow of what was to come. The words of the prophets always left the people saying, "Give us more." That was the unsatisfied itch that came with the prophets' messages. They didn't know exactly how or when God was going to make their salvation happen.

That uncertainty is something that we do not have to struggle with. That was how it was in the past, the writer to the Hebrews tells us. But now, it is so much different. Now, ***"in these last days, God has spoken to us through his Son."*** In contrast to the way that God once spoke to the people, through prophets, in

different pieces and in different ways, now God speaks through Jesus, whom John calls the Word made flesh, whom God tells us is the Greatest Prophet.

The writer to the Hebrews spends verses two and three giving support for the Surpassing Greatness of Jesus as prophet. First, he points to the person and work of Jesus before his birth. "He is heir of all things. he made the universe." From all eternity, this prophet who speaks to us has been in possession of all things, including the plan of salvation, and he has been in control of all things, even the very creation of the world that he was coming into. While the prophets of old needed the plan revealed to them, while they could only speak as a mouthpiece of God; Jesus himself is the author of the plan.

Not only did this Prophet author the plan, he would also come to earth, not just to make the plan known, but to carry it out. As God's own Son, Jesus the prophet reveals God's glory and perfection, he upholds the Words of God through his power, he makes the prophecies complete by his work.

In every way, Jesus is a prophet that surpasses every prophet that came before him. Through this Son that we look at here in Hebrews, God speaks to us. Jesus is God's last word to this world, and it stands forever.

As the cycle begins again, rejoice in what Christ our prophet has made known to us. At Christmas time we stand at the manger of Bethlehem. There, through the newborn baby, God speaks to us. On the cross of Calvary, through the dying Savior, God speaks to us. Outside the empty tomb, in the risen Lord, God speaks to us. Through this Prophet, we hear the complete words of God's love, his mercy, his pardon, his peace, and his salvation.

God had spoken these words before, he delivered them in the past through his prophets in many parts and in many ways. But until Jesus came, he had never spoken those words with such completeness, and that is the gift that we have been given: no parts to put together, no fragments of a whole, no pictures to interpret; we know the story that is about to be told again during this church year; we have the Word itself and rejoice that it is time for him to again tell us of all that he has done for us! Amen.