

Lent V (Judica)

We have drawn nearly the end of this Lenten season. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the day which kicks off Holy Week and great and solemn observances which surround the Passover of our Lord Jesus.

This final week has an important role to play in setting that up, both in terms of a narrative and, more importantly, in terms of our theology. Luther's comments on the gospel reading today are particularly insightful. He calls this a text "rich in meaning" and one to which can "hardly do justice."

I cite a longer passage from his 1533 sermon under the gospel. Here I want to start with a briefer passage from a sermon he preached in 1534, a year later.

Luther

10. The third point is this: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad." And a little farther on: Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am." He does not say, Before Abraham was, I was; but rather, before Abraham was, I am. For that is an attribute belonging to God alone, to be neither created nor made like Abraham or other creatures. It is God's nature to be neither created nor made, but I AM, that is, of eternal essence, without beginning or end. For God was present at the beginning and it is his nature to be eternal and without end..

11. That really vexed the Jews to the core that Christ said he was God. They take it to be blasphemy against God and say, That is the very devil that this individual, born a human being, states that he is God; and they become so violently aroused that they take up stones to stone him to death.

12. For us, however, it is consolation and verification of the highest kind to know that Christ is the true and everlasting Son of God. And that is the ground for Christ's Word being so mighty and able to save all who believe it. For because he is the very one eternal God, he is able also to give life and salvation to all those who cling to and believe his Word.

13. In this connection we should also note that the Lord says, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad." That was tantamount to his saying, Abraham understood that I, the everlasting, almighty God was to become a man. And by his perception and trust of my Word, he was saved and did not see death. If he had not accepted and heeded my Word, he would have remained in everlasting death. But he saw my day, and because he saw it he was glad.

(The Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils. Vol. 1. Ed.: Baker Books, 1996. Pp. 362-365.)

Notice how Luther does a couple of things with this text. The Jews pick up stones to kill Jesus. They are aroused by this inordinate claim that Jesus makes for himself. In two weeks we will

celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the grave, but it is a grave into which he was put by this very opposition which our texts will notice for us today. That is the narrative element. There was plenty of anger directed at Jesus which will result in his death on a cross on Good Friday.

But the theological point to which Luther draws our attention is certainly more important and is why we will hear what we hear this day. The Jesus who climbs that hill to die, who rides in on a donkey, who gathers with disciples in an upper room, and who finally rises from the dead on Easter is the Son of God. The very claim which got him killed is the gospel for us who believe. God died for us. Abraham saw that, and he was glad.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, by Your great goodness mercifully look upon Your people that we may be governed and preserved evermore in body and soul; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer seems bland and not up to the task today. I don't know what you think, but it just doesn't grab me and ask me to think or feel. The words are fine, mind you, nothing wrong with it, but it doesn't seem like a terribly deep one.

God in his great goodness is asked to look upon his people with mercy. Mercy of course is a wonderful word. We have said this before. To cry for mercy is an act of a humble person. One cannot have mercy on the strong or the innocent, but only on the weak and the guilty. We want this merciful look from God because we want to be governed and preserved evermore in body and spirit. In the science labs on the third floor of Luther hall at Concordia University there are all these specimens preserved in various solutions. This is always what I think of when someone asks God to preserve me. I should perhaps be thinking of a life preserver, but I am remembering all the dead things preserved in the science lab or the gallons of berry preserves we have in jars in our basement. Do we really want to be preserved? Of course I know this is not what it means, but the word has associations linked to it.

God's governance and preservation seem too general to me. Can anyone rescue this prayer for me? I think the readings are far more exciting, perhaps that is alright that the prayer doesn't try to compete, but I would have thought something with bolder and stronger language would have been appropriate to this day. I would have thought that a message about hope or victory over death, et. al., would have been a good idea.

Readings

Genesis 22:1-18

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.



⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

This passage is found in Series B on the first Sunday in Lent. Here are the notes, lightly edited, from that Sunday.

This text has been an occasion for many to doubt the goodness of God. Perhaps the reason for that is obvious to you from the text and perhaps it has occasioned such thoughts for you. The preacher needs to be aware of this and be ready to engage that conversation. It is tough. I don't know why God would do something which looks so brutal to a young person. I was reading the "Lutheran Forum" some time ago and the editor quoted Luther on this passage. Luther said that he was unable to climb this mountain. He was down at the bottom with the rest of the asses, wondering what was going on. If Luther was perplexed by this, don't be surprised that you find yourself wondering what is happening here.

Here we might just find a little relieve by reading broadly. How old do you suppose Isaac was? Most of the Sunday School art I have seen depicts him as a young teen and Abraham as a robust and strong man holding his struggling son down. See the renaissance version I inserted into the readings above. Jewish tradition suggests that Isaac was actually 30 years old. It would have taken a full-grown man to carry all that wood up the mountain. The idea here is that the hero of this story is not only Abraham who believed, but also Isaac who willingly held out his hands to be bound and who climbed onto that pile of wood and submitted to the sacrifice.

Does that change the way you look at this?

Moriah is also known as Zion – this is the same mountain where the temple would be built and where Jesus would die. If this was indeed the mountain which would later come to be known as Zion, we also know that this was inhabited at this time. Melchizedek comes out of the city of Salem, the site of later Jerusalem, when Abraham comes back from rescuing Lot. We often have depicted for us that this whole scene took place somewhere off in the wilderness, without anyone else around. It may have happened in the middle of a town, in the square, with many witnesses.

"The Art of Reading Scripture" which is a collection of essays edited by Ellen Davis and Richard Hays has a great essay about this passage. In this essay the author notices that the ancients and the moderns read this text completely differently. The moderns as often as not are appalled by this text, wondering what sort of a God would ask a man to do this. The ancients never went there, they just did not say this. If you have not seen this text and are interested in Biblical interpretation, I highly recommend this collection.

That said, we need to have something to say here. Where does one start with this text? It is simply one of the most commented upon passages of the Old Testament, both in Jewish literature and Christian exegesis. This story grips us.

If you want another really interesting reading on it from an existential position, try Soren Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling." Despite the name, this is an engaging and interesting read, the sort of thing that preachers really ought to avail themselves of. Kirkegaard will have harsh words for the church of his day which he felt had reduced Christianity to a vague set of intellectual and cultural tenets but which had little room in its theology for a God who would do something like this and hence little expectation of actually changing someone's life. He did this by imagining what was going through Abraham's mind as he acted upon the command of God.

What thoughts passed through the mind of Abraham as he walked up that hill with Isaac? It is a good read.

The Jewish commentators also thought this story was important. In fact, you might hear this story called simply “The Akeda” for the word which was used for the “binding” of Isaac. This is the only place this particular Hebrew word occurs in the Bible. They parsed over every little phrase of this text, as they did all the texts of the OT, especially of the Torah. The opening line “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac” they took to reflect a conversation between God and Abraham which went a little like this:

God, “Abraham”

Abraham, “Here I am.”

God, “Take your son.”

Abraham, “Which of my sons? I have two.”

God, “Your only son.”

Abraham, “But I have two, Isaac and Ishmael.”

God, “The son whom you love.”

Abraham, “But I love them both.”

God, “Isaac! I want you to take Isaac!”

Our translation into English changes a little of the word order, but the Jewish readers were pondering and contemplating even this oddly phrased little string of descriptors which Hebrew piled up on the name Isaac and constructed this little scene to explain why it was in the text this way. This practice is called a Midrash. Paul was schooled in Midrash technique and it shows up in several places in his letters.

For Christians this passage has long fascinated us as we see Isaac, Abrahams “only” son carrying the wood of the sacrifice, meekly ascending a hill where he will be sacrificed. It just looks so much like Jesus that we cannot avoid it. Then, at the moment of the sacrifice, God stretches out his hand, and provides a ram, caught in the bushes by his horns. In the place of the whole nation of Israel, which is latent in the genetic code of Isaac, God has provided a sacrifice in its place. Just in case you missed the sledgehammer, the tradition is that this mountain in which Abraham did this was Moriah, which was also known later as Zion, the spot where the temple was built, the very hill on which Jesus would die, outside the walls, on an outcropping they called “The Skull.”

But even the story telling of this story is marvelous. Notice how the narrative slows down, almost to slow motion when the moment of sacrifice arrives. Abraham stretches forth his hand, grasps the knife, lifts the knife. Then, from thin air, the hand of God stays his arm, you can imagine just as the downward stroke begins.

The careful exegesis of the scholastics, both medieval and protestant, noticed that something funny is going on with the angel of the Lord in this text. What is the Angel of the Lord here? At times it seems to speak for God, at other times the voice which Abraham hears is simply called YHWH, the personal name of God. One who is the messenger of God and who is God, hmm....sounds like Jesus!

Modern readers of this text have also been fascinated by this passage but it is the fascination of a horror movie. It has become one of the proof texts of those who assert that religion is inherently violent and evil. Most modern commentators focus on the victim. We note that the feelings of Isaac are completely ignored. I have read entire books based on the fact that Isaac was traumatized by this event, explaining why he was such a poor father to Jacob and Esau, etc., and this goes on ad nauseam. The Bible is quiet about both Abraham's and Isaac's feelings in this whole thing. I find that explorations into them are hardly helpful. I also find that the whole conversation does not seem to really arise until the modern period. The ancients did not have a problem with God asking everything of us, even this. In this I think we find our own version of idolatry. God was within his rights, we have none. The modern image of "having a few questions to ask God when I get to heaven," would be simply laughable were it not so tragically wrong. God will be asking all the questions that day and I will be the one who must give answer for what has transpired, not him. To think that I can hold God accountable, even for what looks like such an egregiously evil act as child sacrifice, is to put myself into the position of God, at least on a par with him.

You can see that this text has been extremely fertile ground for the creative interpretation. What will we do with it, especially as we hear it in light of Jesus' own baptism, temptation, and the beginning of his ministry?

God sends forth his only Son to engage a foe against which even Abraham's most precious possible sacrifice was powerless. What will we give that our life be spared? What can we do that is not simply what is required of us? What can make recompense for our lives? No sinner, no sacrifice, no act of heroic virtue, nothing. This problem will take God to solve. On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.

Sermon Idea: On the Mountain of the Lord it will be provided. (OT and Gospel - That the hearer remember and rejoice in the good news that Jesus has won the victory that we could not win.)

Today we come to nearly the end of the long journey to Calvary and the passion of our Lord in the sure and certain hope that he has won the day. Where we were powerless and helpless before the strength of our foe, before the relentless onslaught of age and death, before the utter mess of this world and what has happened to it and what it is doing to us, God was not thus helpless and impotent. He was strong to save. There was no gift we could bring, there was no sacrifice we could make. Not even Abraham's sacrifice of his most precious son was enough to pay for

Abraham's sins. Had he given his son to death, he would have walked down that hill just as much a sinner and a mortal sinner as when we walked up it. Only God could offer the gift that he required and the gift which we require. Not even Isaac's gift of himself. He may have been 30 years old when this transpired, willingly crawling upon that pile of wood for his aged father to make this sacrifice that God demanded, but what would his own sacrifice really have bought? Your life? My life? Hardly. He would simply have been dead at the hands of his father.

In this strange and troubling event, God is pointing us ahead to another Son who gives his life, willingly. He is pointing our eyes toward the Jesus who died on Calvary and rose on Easter morning.

Two thousand years or so after Abraham and Isaac climbed that hill with the wood of that sacrifice strapped to Isaac's back, another son of Abraham walked up a hill, if the tradition is to be believed, the same hill, with a wooden cross laid upon his back. This time no ram would be given in his place, for he was the very sacrifice which would free this world of sin and death and brokenness. When his body was carried down that hill and laid in a tomb, everyone thought that it was over, but in truth it had just begun. For that death was death's undoing, and that sacrifice was the beginning of the end for Satan's hold on this world.

Today, Jesus is freeing sinners from Satan's grip, one absolution at a time. Jesus is feeding the hungry, one bowl of soup, one piece of bread at a time as Christians man the soup kitchens and give their gifts to relief agencies. Today, Jesus is comforting widows and widowers who feel so acutely the loss of their spouse or parents who grieve for a child or children who grieve for a parent. Today, through this congregation he is still about the job of announcing that victory, of freeing those captives, of proclaiming his kingdom. Come, this is the day to repent, to own our need for this Jesus. God has provided on his Holy Mountain!

The preacher may want to mine the Gospel reading too – where Jesus claims to be the one whom Abraham saw and rejoiced. He rejoiced on the way down that hill walking beside his son, his son whom he was not called upon to kill. Abraham did not kill him because on the mountain of the Lord it was indeed provided – Jesus was provided. Abraham saw him because Jesus is I AM.

Psalm 43

¹ Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people,
from the deceitful and unjust man
deliver me!

² For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you rejected me?
Why do I go about mourning
because of the oppression of the enemy?

³ Send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;

let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling!

⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy,
and I will praise you with the lyre,
O God, my God.

⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.

Hebrews 9:11-14 (15-22)

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

¹⁵ Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. ¹⁶ *For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established.* ¹⁷ *For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.* ¹⁸ *Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood.* ¹⁹ *For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people,* ²⁰ *saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you."* ²¹ *And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship.* ²² *Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*

²³ *Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.* ²⁴ *For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.*

This text shows up in Series B, Proper 26. Since that likely is not emblazoned on your personal calendar, Proper 26 usually falls in the first week of November when many are preaching All

Saints Festival. Thus, while we have treated this reading, not many of us have had occasion to preach it. This is an edited version of what we said last time it came up.

These words of Hebrews are deep into the argument of this fascinating book. What you find below is substantively the handout I used for chapters 9 and 10 in my New Testament classes.

Hebrews illustrates the limits of our knowledge and the whole academic endeavor with regard to the New Testament. We know a lot about the first century, the early Christians, Jesus, Paul, John, and others. But there is still a great deal we do not know and probably never will know this side of heaven. Hebrews is a fine example of that. We have not a clue who wrote it. It is very early, probably prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the destruction of the temple because it talks about the Temple as if it is still there, but some argue that point as well. It was not Paul, while the material in here is not antithetical to Paul, it just does not sound like him. This person was probably trained in one of the great schools of rhetoric or persuasive speech that was in Alexandria, Egypt. He uses many of their rhetorical tools.

This person was also a great theologian, an equal of Paul or John. He could have held his own in a conversation with anyone in the New Testament except perhaps Jesus himself. He was brilliant and understood the very difficult concepts of Christology very well. He could also write. And still we don't know his or her name. (Some have proposed that it was Prisca, the woman Paul had teach Apollos in Acts 18) There are, you see, great gaps in what we know. Scholars like to tell us that that he/she has it figured out, at least that is how one's doctoral dissertation or book gets published. But asserting we know everything and knowing everything are two very different things. One of the lessons I hope that we have taught is that just because a scholar or a pastor or anyone says it is so, does not make it so. There are literally two billion and more people who consider this Bible to be important for the way that they live their life and it shapes their view of the world. That is how many professed Christians there are. Another billion Muslims consider Jesus to be a holy man and a great prophet, perhaps second only to Mohammed. While they may not like Christians, they like what Jesus says. That is half of the world's population. This is not the dry study of the academic but a living and vital force in the shaping of our world. It belongs to a lot of people, not just the academic.

The next lesson I hope that we have conveyed is that an Incarnational Christology (IC) is the best way to read this text. When I say that, I mean that the men who wrote it all believed in an IC. They believed that Jesus was not just another man who happened to have some good ideas about living life, but that his death upon a cross and subsequent resurrection from the dead had a profound impact on history itself, it changed the way the world works and the way people live. Most importantly it changed the way God sees us and the rest of the world. They believed that this Jesus was really the creator of the universe in human flesh. That is an Incarnational Christology.

When we turn our attention to the letter to the Hebrews, we discover a substantial and sustained argument for IC. The writer to the Hebrews has profound things to say about the whole Jesus

question, and on a level that exceeds any other author, he wrestles with the implications of calling Jesus God.

What do we know about this intriguing book? The author was steeped in the Old Testament. He quotes obscure parts of the OT and makes use of Rabbinic methods of interpretation. He was obviously Jewish and apparently quite knowledgeably Jewish. So was his audience. He makes no effort to explain any of this. This is part of what makes this book difficult. In the same way that a scientist in a technical journal will assume we know the intricacies of chemical reactions or physics, the writer to the Hebrews assumes his audience understands all this obscure OT material as well and can follow his rabbinic methods. What is more, the obscure portions he quotes are almost all related to the priesthood. For this reason, many have thought that this letter was addressed to Jewish priests that had converted to Christianity. They are almost the only folks in the ancient world who would have understood this stuff. (Acts 6:7 tells us that many priests did indeed convert in the first years of the Christian movement)

The occasion for the letter, which again reads more like a sermon and may well have been one, seems to be that the audience was considering abandoning their Christian faith and returning to Judaism. This would make sense if they were priests. A Jewish priest held an inherited office. You were a priest because you came from a priestly family, whereas Christian leaders were drawn from any members, even Gentiles. These priestly men were highly regarded in the Jewish communities and often sat atop the Jewish social structure. What is more, after the initial conversions to Christianity in the first decades of the movement, it appears that there was considerable hostility against Jewish Christians arising in Jewish circles. Just observe what happened to Paul in Jerusalem. Matthew's Gospel, and John's later works imply a sharp break between Jews and Christians. As that break would happen, the Christian Jewish priests would have, at some point, had to make a tough decision about being a Jewish priest or being a Christian. It appears that initially they could be both!

That is somewhat speculative, based upon this book itself, but it answers most of the questions and does so better than most other suggestions.

The book has two major sections. The first and smaller section is an argument that Jesus is greater than the angels. It appears that angels were a big part of first century Judaism. We find them all over the Qumran documents and other literature of the time. The second, and much more involved argument is that Jesus is greater than Moses. (You would think that angels are greater than Moses which would render the second argument unnecessary, but this is not the way Jewish people thought. Moses was arguably the greatest of all!)

For us, things get really exciting in chapter 9. In chapter 9 the writer to the Hebrews makes his capstone argument. Again we have to delve into Jewish and this time Greek culture as well. As we have already noted the author seems to have had some training in the Alexandrian schools of rhetoric from the time. This makes sense. The city of Alexandria was 40% Jewish in the first century and was one of the intellectual centers of Judaism, especially as it intersected with Greek culture.

The Greek culture of the day and the Jews of Alexandria were very taken with Neo-Platonism, a dualistic way of looking at the world and interpreting the Bible. As we come to the topics of priests and temple, it would have worked like this. What we see on earth is a shadow of a heavenly reality. When you go to the temple and offer a sacrifice, it is a reflection or a shadow of the real act which is in heaven. The priest, the temple itself, the sacrifice, the worshipers, are in fact not entirely real. This all seems to have been born of a real question people asked. How can the sacrifice of a lamb or a goat on an altar actually do anything for me with God? How can sacrificing a goat or a lamb really take away sin? The Neo-platonic answer was that the goat did not take away the sins, but the goat was a shadow of another reality where that sin was actually taken away. That real world is heaven.

This is very alien to our largely Aristotelian/scientific world view that most people have; although, you will still find many people do have a dualistic world view to this day, even in North America. Most of us are not dualists, we are monists. We tend to think that reality is the stuff which is in front of us, the computer, the table, the chair we sit on, the light bulb, etc, it is all real. Many even subscribe to a materialism which suggests that this is the only reality.

If you start at verse 23 the writer starts to deal with these copies, these shadows of the heavenly realities, suggesting that they need to be purified through rituals because they are only copies. (All quotations are from the ESV)

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. [24] For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. [25] Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, [26] for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. [27] And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, [28] so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

But establishing that Jesus is a great sacrifice is not the whole of what the writer to the Hebrews has in mind here, and he goes on in chapter 10 to follow his own logic. If the sacrificial system of the Old Testament priests is the shadow, then Jesus must be the shadow caster. In Christ, the actual thing has left the heavenly realm and entered into the shadows of this world. When we see Christ, we do not see a shadow or a copy of the heavenly thing, we see the actual heavenly thing.

By doing this the writer to the Hebrews collapses the Neo-platonic dualism; the structure of Platonism is twisted into monism in Christ. He is of both realms. When we look at Jesus we don't see a shadow or sketch of the heavenly thing, we see the real thing.

[10:1] For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near...[14] For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

This then makes the argument for the writer to the Hebrews. His audience which is thinking about returning to the realm of the shadows would be foolish to do so. In worshipping Christ they have put aside the shadows and are worshipping the real thing.

[19] Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, [20] by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, [21] and since we have a great priest over the house of God, [22] let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. [23] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. [24] And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

And with that we will leave it. Has the writer to the Hebrews convinced? Can he still convince today? As we noted earlier half the world's population reads them as some sort of a revelation from God. Its primary character is Jesus and the claim it makes about him must either be believed or rejected by every individual. It continues to confront people in every generation.

John 8:42-59

⁴² Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." ⁵² The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" ⁵⁴ Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' ⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I

would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Luther

1. This is a beautiful Gospel lesson, its content too great to be treated in a single sermon. We shall, therefore, focus our attention only on its central theme, namely that Christ says we should gladly hear God’s Word; that whoever hears the Word belongs to God; that whoever does not hear it is not of God.

2. These words are spoken in such a simple fashion that no one gives thought to their rich meaning. But when we look closely at these words, carefully think them through, zealously ponder and meditate upon what it means “to be of God” and “not to be of God,” we must admit that Christ is speaking about something very important here. For it is true and beyond cavil that you cannot say anything more ultimate, and to judge a person more severely, than to say that he is not of God. To have someone call me a knave and a villain, or to cut my throat, is nothing compared to the horrible and terrible verdict of having the Lord say, as he does here plainly to the Jews, “Ye are not of God.” Therefore, everything hinges on our gladly hearing and keeping God’s Word.

5. Whoever will not hear God’s Word, or after hearing it will not adhere to it, becomes a liar, blasphemer, and persecutor. We see this in the papists. The longer they persist in what they are doing, the more wicked they become. And they will not desist from their blaspheming and persecuting, but finally resort to violence, take the sword in hand, and become murders.

6. There is nothing worse than this. When a person inclines toward sin and doing what is wrong, it is still possible to convince him of his sin and to desist from it. But the person whose sin is refusing to hear God’s Word and blaspheming it instead, cannot be dissuaded. Such people do a beautiful cover-up job and allow themselves to think they are doing right and are thereby serving God; in contrast to a sinner involved with other wrongdoing can, to his shame, be shown his sin and be led to repent of it.

7. It is, therefore, the accursed devil who himself is at work when a person despised God’s Word. For in such a situation it is inevitable that he will finally cast stones at Christ, yes, will also bring him to the cross, consider what he is doing as being completely right, and will want to get off scot-free when perpetrating such a great sin.

12. On the other hand, “to be of God” is to use one’s ears willingly to hear the preaching of the Word, willingly accept reproof when wrong as been committed, and also to pray, preach, instruct, comfort, reprimand, and give consolation with the tongue. Such ears and tongues are

of God and good, not only as far as the essence but also as far as the use is concerned, for they are engaged in doing things pleasing to God. When the heart, therefore, is disciplined and is concerned with helping the neighbor, and not being irritated with him, such a heart is of God. Thus the things created by God, as eyes, ears, mouth, and heart, are said to be “of God” when they are guided by God’s Word and do not wish to do, see, hear, speak, or think anything contrary to God. Although it happens from time to time that they err and say things that are profane when they ought to pray, and the heart is irritated when it ought to be cheerful, such things are, indeed, wrong. However, when we give up our evil ways and confess that we have done wrong and ask for mercy, this is what is known as stumbling or falling, but it is not called having the devil or being of the devil. For we are in the process of turning back and have resolved that we never want to commit the wrong again.

17. However, what is meant by keeping Christ’s Word? Nothing else than to believe what he promises us in the gospel concerning the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, that is true and that in faith we should hold fast to such hope. He who does this, says Christ, has eternal life and has anything to fear with respect to sin, death, hell, and final judgment, for in Christ are found grace and mercy in fullest measure. Man of course, will be overcome by death, but his soul will not see corruption. When man dies in God’s word, he will not die as horribly and dreadfully as those who die in the devil’s name and without God’s Word. These people die in sullen resentment, stomp and stumble about, roar like lions, for they do not wish to die, and yet must die since they cannot escape death. If it were possible, they would certainly try to build a mighty wall about themselves.

18. It will not be thus, Christ says, with my followers who hear and keep my Word. Even though they must lie down on their beds and die, they will not experience such fear and anxiety. In their hearts they will be at peace with God and hope for a better life. They will fall asleep in this hope and depart from this life without fear and trembling. For even though death will overpower their bodies, its power will so weak that they will feel nothing of it, but peacefully fall asleep as though lying on a couch with their head resting on a pillow.

19. Therefore, consider, dear children, what benefits are yours when you gladly and diligently hear God’s Word. First you know that you are of God and have overcome the devil and hell, and that neither sin nor God’s judgment can harm you. Whatever other kind of trouble you may encounter, you will be able to deal with it.

20. To be sure, Christians will have to suffer a whole lot at the hands of the devil and the world who oppose them and subject them to hurts and against life and limb, possessions, and honor. How is it possible for them to bear all this with patience? In no other way than by holding steadfastly to the Word and affirming: Let happen what may; I am not of the world but of God, else the world would comport itself differently toward me; but I much prefer that it hate and harass me on every hand than that it be fond of me and I be not of God. Where the heart is so

mindful, there all tribulation and adversity pass over, just like clouds in the skies and birds of the air; for a while we see them and then they are gone.

21. Our sole comfort in this life must be that we possess the power of the Word, particularly when our final hour approaches, so that death then becomes a sleep. It will be as though we are entering a dense fog, unaware of a murderer, and he is shot dead and murdered before he is aware of what has happened...The devil is a murderer and is determined to slay us, as we well know. But while we have the Word and hold steadfastly to it, we shall not really become aware of being involved in a death struggle. For the Word produces fine, gentle people and quite, joyful hearts, which in times of anxiety do not despair or become fretful but pass through everything buoyantly, taking comfort alone in this, that through Christ they have a gracious heavenly Father.

24. Thus the chief lesson to be learned from today's Gospel is that we diligently hold to the Word, gladly hear it, and receive it in faith. If we do this, we shall conquer sin, death, devil, and hell. Even though death consume us, we yet shall not feel its sharp fangs, for Christ's Word is our armor that supplies us with a confident life and a quiet, peaceful death and eternal life.

25. On the other hand, we could wish no greater judgment on the godless who despise God's Word than that which they already have hanging around their necks, namely, that they are not of God, nor are they God's children. No more terrible judgment could be pronounced upon them...This is not something to be taken lightly. I would rather be in the hands of the executioner of the Turk than to be a child of the devil. For then I am in the hands of the arch-murderer and the liar who leads me astray and into eternal death. Beware of him, dear children, and take this to heart, I beg you. It is a priceless gospel. Amen

(The Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils. Vol. 1. Ed.: Eugene Klug. Baker Publishing, 1996. Pp. 354-361.)

In Series C this text starting at verse 48 falls on the Festival of Trinity.

"Are we not right..." No, frankly they are not. They have gotten it terribly wrong. Jesus is not a Samaritan and he does not have a demon, rather the demons acknowledge him with fear. What is more, by this point in the book, John is aware that you know it too. He is about to discuss the great mystery of Jesus, the incarnation, and he wants you to be aware of just how far you have come since the first chapters of his book. He does this by putting forward this mistake by the Pharisees in a way that every reader can correct. Voicing the correction, verbalizing the "No!" is part of the process of theological formation. John seems to know it and regularly puts these places in his text.

Jesus honors the Father but they dishonor Jesus. This would have been really offensive to Jesus' contemporaries who had staked so much of their identity on the fact that they had gotten it right where their pre-exilic forefathers had gotten it wrong. But in a much more terrible sense, they

are about to get it far more wrong. Where their fathers had murdered the prophets, they are about to murder the Son. It is that claim which we want to pay attention to as we come to Holy Week.

The Jews say that his message is that of a demon. He claims to be the one for whom Abraham longed and indeed whom Abraham saw. They are stuck trying to get their heads around the chronology, but Jesus shrugs it off with a claim to eternity and takes the divine name to himself, the “I AM” of Exodus 3. To God all times are present tense – there is no past or future for God, all time is now. That is a pretty serious claim which has tremendous impact on what will transpire in Holy Week, especially Good Friday. God climbs that hill with a cross on his back.

The preacher will probably want to focus on the relationship of the Son to the Father which he elaborates in verses 54-55. He knows the Father, the Father glorifies him, hence the glory of Jesus is significant. Jesus knows him so he keeps the Father's word. To deny this knowledge would make him a liar, like them. (I am sure that last part went over quite well with this audience, but it sounds like Jesus was already preaching to a hostile crowd.)

The response of the Jews to Jesus words is also important. They are ready to kill him here, but Jesus hides from their sight until another day when the time is right and they will lay hands on him in a garden. The reason they kill Jesus is because he claims to be righteous One, the Holy One of Israel. He claims here to have known Abraham, which if you think about it would give all of us a moment to pause. If one of us started talking about when we used to sit at Luther's house and drink beer with the Reformer, we might all wonder if he was a little deranged. The Jewish reaction is not simply pig-headedness. It is rational. It is Jesus claim that seems to be a little off the rails. But for the Christian, this claim is the very heart of the Gospel, as Luther notes above. This word conquers our death.

Sermon Idea: Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death. (That the hearer would trust Jesus' words and confidently face every trial of life.)

We are coming up to Holy Week. We know the story. Jesus rides into town on a donkey of all things. He teaches in the temple, Judas betrays him. He institutes the Lord's Supper, gets arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, tried, beaten, crucified, died, and buried. Will we say yada yada yada?

We know the story so well, but do we really know it?

Jesus makes a startling claim today which prompts the Jews to pick up stones to kill him. And well they should have if what he said was not true. Jesus claims the name of God which the Lord shared with Moses at the burning bush. He claims to be “I AM” the one whom Abraham worshiped and who split the Red Sea. No wonder they picked up a stone to throw at him. People who claim to be God are dangerous. And Jesus was dangerous. Dangerous to them and dangerous to sin, death, and devil because when he claimed it, he was neither kidding nor delusional. He meant it and was simply being honest.

Today we want to examine that other amazing claim he makes. That the one who keeps his word will not see death. That is a bold claim which seems to contradict everything we have seen. After all, are not countless churches set in the middle of cemeteries? Do not Christians suffer from the same mortality rate as non-Christians? 100%! Life is terminal!

But read the quote carefully. It is not that they will not die. Jesus admits as much in chapter 11 when says, “even if he dies, I will raise him again.” What he says here is that they won’t see death. Luther likens us to walking in a fog and death happens without us even knowing it. The powerful tool of our adversary, fear, has been stripped from his hand. He waves death in front of God’s people and they shrug their shoulders and say, “Meh!” That is not just stupidity or blindness on our part, it is because this promise of Jesus is not just empty words. We see something else. We see life, even when we are dying. Here the preacher will want the experiences of attending his flock as they die. I am thinking as I write this of Kay Gray who was struck with a vicious cancer and smiled all the way to death. You have your own stories to tell. She did not see death. I am sure she did see it, in a sense, but she saw through it to what Christ had promised her. It was translucent that way. Our Lord’s bright and beautiful life shown through its otherwise impenetrable gloom. And Kay smiled to see it.

That is possible because the claim which Jesus makes throughout this text is true. He is I AM, not I was, but I AM. All times are present to him, even Abraham’s time and our time and the day of resurrection. And that day when this Jesus, this I AM shouldered that cross to Calvary’s height, his suffering death, and subsequent resurrection not make this word of promise particularly powerful for us.

Jesus has spoken to us a sweet word to us. It riled up his Jewish audience in the first century and it should rile us up too, but for very different reasons. They heard him claim to be God and could not believe it. They were not keeping his word. But for two thousand years people from every tribe and nation have heard those words and kept them, as we do today. Jesus speaks his peace to us. We are forgiven. We shall not see death, but through its gaping maw which would devour all men, Jesus smiles upon us. He has gone through that portal, broken its hold. We see life.