

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Hebrews 1:1-2:9
“What About All The Angels”
(3rd in a series on unlikely Christmas texts)

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(3rd Sunday of Advent)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

HEBREWS 1:1-2:9 "WHAT ABOUT ALL THE ANGELS?"

Christological Common Faith, Sophisticated Exordium

A) vv.1-4 PROLOGUE PART 1: OLD & NEW CONTRASTED (7 Assertions About The Son).

			vv.1-4 - One <i>Periodos</i> /Sentence (v.1, 5 Words Begin with P)
1	In many and various ways of old,		lit. <i>parts or piecemeal</i> , Theocentric, <i>Son</i> = Picture With Insight
	God spoke / to our fathers/ by the prophets;		OT/NT Summary, Divine Messengers, A Talking God!
2	<i>but</i> in "these last days"		Mic. 1:1, Num. 24:14, Shift Of Ages, Gal. 4:1-11
	he has spoken / to us/ by a Son,		Final Word, Superior Covenant: Divine Son/Personal Agent
			3 Part Scheme, Phil. 2:1-18, Above/Below/Above
Pre-existence	(1) <u>whom</u> he appointed the heir of all things,		Ps. 2:7-8, Inheritor Of All Creation, Future
	(2) through whom also he created the world ,	<i>the aeons</i> , Mediator Of Creation, Past, Prov. 8:22-31, Jn. 1:3	
3	(3) who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature (being);	Mirror/Imprint, <i>Wis. Sol. 7:24-27</i>	
	(4) upholding the universe by his word of power;	Col. 1:15-20, Son As The Upholder Of All Creation	
		Stark Leap From Pre-Existence (No. 1-4) To Cross (No. 5)	
Incarnation	(5) having made purification for sins,	Priestly Benefit: Cross As Purification Unrepeatable, 2 Pt. 1:9	
		Jesus Does What No Angel Can, Son/Priest Enthroned	
Exaltation	(6) he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,	Resurrection/Ascension/Session, Ps. 110, Acts 1:1-11	
4	(7) having become as much superior to angels	12:22, His Status: Above Angels (Intro. Topic, 1:5-2:18)	
	as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.	His Work/Name: More Excellent, Phil 2:5-11	
		Jesus Is Final Messenger Of God's Final Message	

B) vv.5-14 SUPPORTIVE ARGUMENTS FOR JESUS SUPERIORITY OVER ANGELS.

vv.5-14 = Seven Citations (5 Psalms [LXX], 2 Sam., Deut), O.T = God's Speech

1) vv.5-6 Two Questions About The Son: Angels Are Commanded To Worship Him.

			We Are In The Throne Room At Resurrection/ Ascension/ Session
5	(1) Q1 <u>For to what angel did God ever say,</u>		Psalms Read Christologically
	"Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee"?	(To None)	Ps. 2:7, Mk. 1:10-11
	Q2 Or again,		
	(2) "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"?	(To None)	2 Sam. 7:14
6	And again, when he brings the first-born into the world, he says ,		World To Come? Lk. 2:8-20
	(3) "Let all God's angels worship <i>him</i> ."		He Is Divine, Not Them, Dt. 32:43 (LXX), Ps. 97:7
			Nothing Compares To The Son

2) vv.7-12 Angels Are Servants; He Is The Son, Addressed As God & Lord.

7	(4) Of the angels he says ,		Angels Are As Transient As Wind/Fire
	"Who makes his angels winds,		//v.14a, Ps. 104:4
	and his <i>servants</i> flames of fire."		Eternal Kingdom Requires An Eternal Rule
8	(5) But of the Son he says ,		Strong Contrast: They Are Transient; He Is Permanent
	"Thy throne, <i>O God</i> , is for ever and ever,		Ps. 45:6-7 (Marriage Song), Jesus As Divine
	the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom.		The Kingdom Is His Kingdom
9	Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness;		He Shares God's Character
	therefore God, thy God,		
	has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades."		
10	(6) And (i.e. in a second quote)		Ps. 102:25-27 Adapted: Father Speaks To Son
	" <i>Thou, Lord</i> ,		He Is Lord And Creator
	didst found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of thy hands;		/1:2-3
			Angels Are Creatures, Not Creators
11	a they will perish,		Creation Is Contingent; God Is Not
	b but thou remainest;		He Is Everlasting God: Outlasts The Present Word
	a' they will all grow old like a garment,		They Have A Determined Life
12	like a mantle thou wilt roll them up, and they will be changed.		Kingdom Transformation
	b' But thou art the same, and thy years will never end.		Eternal God: Never End
			What Is Said About Yahweh Is Applied To Jesus

1') vv.13-14 Two Questions About The Angels: Jesus Alone Is Enthroned, Angels Serve.

13	(7) Q1 <u>But to what angel has he ever said,</u>		God's Address To The King
	"Sit at my right hand, till I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet"?	(To None)	Ps. 110:1
14	Q2 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth <i>to serve</i> ,		Ps. 104:4
	for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?	(Yes!)	For Our Sake!

A') 2:1-4 PROLOGUE PART 2: NEW & OLD CONTRASTED(Assertions: The Son, Church).

Hortatory Section, Exhortation

2:1 Therefore (lit. *because of this*)
we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, **Alliterative P**
lest we drift away from it. **Nautical Term = Loose Your Anchor/Mooring, Slipping Away, Sober Warning!**
Vv.2-4 = One Long Sentence

2 *For* if the message declared by angels was valid **Jub. 1:27, 29, Acts 7:38, 53, Mediation Of The Law In Jewish Tradition**
and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, **This-Worldly, Fitting Consequences**

3 how shall *we* escape if *we* neglect such a great salvation?
4 Generations: 1) Lord, 2) Apostles, Eye-witnesses, 3) Us, 4) Letter Hearers
Author Includes Himself: We

It was declared at first by the Lord, **//Lk. 4:1-4, The Kingdom Ministry Of Jesus In Word & Deed**
and it was attested to us by those who heard him, **Eye-witness Apostles, Those Who Heard Them (3rd Generation)**

4 while God also bore witness by signs and wonders **God's Witness In The Holy Spirit, Cross-Generational**
and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will. **1 Cor. 12:11, Gal. 3:5 His Will**

B) vv.5-9 ANGELS ARE SERVANTS; JESUS IS SON, ADDRESSED AS GOD/LORD.

1) v.5 The World To Come (God's Kingdom) Is Not Subjected To The Angels.

5 *For* it was not to angels that God *subjected* the world to come, **Subjection- hypotasso, (4x: vv.5, 8a, b, c,)**
of which we are speaking. **//v.5**
Angels Are Not Agents Of Redemption Nor Its Beneficiaries

2) vv.6-8a Scriptural Argument: Temporary Lowering Of The Son For Work.

6 It has been testified somewhere, **Psalm 8 In Hebrew On Human Beings Lower Than God (Elohim), LXX angels**
Q "What is man that thou art mindful of him, **Praise Psalm, Ps. 8:4-6 [8:5-7 LXX]**
or the *son of man*, that thou carest for him? **Ps. 8 Read Christologically**
Title? Same Audience, Now Split

Pre-existence
7 Incarnation A Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels, **Incarnation, Economic Trinity**
Resurrection thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, **Resurrection Return To Essential, Pre-Existent Trinity**
8a Ascension putting everything in *subjection* under his feet." **Return: The Future Of The Cosmos Is Jesus Alone!**

1') vv.8b-9 The Entire World Is Subjected To Jesus =A Reality Yet To Be Revealed.

b Now in putting everything in *subjection* to him, **One Man- Jesus- Has Sovereign Control Over Creation, He Fulfills Our Destiny!**
Hope he left nothing outside his control. **Potential Objection To Thesis Of v.8a**
Jesus Is Now Lord! Double Assurance: Everything//Nothing

Realism As it is, **Victory Is Not Yet, This Side Of The Kingdom, Much Remains Outside His Effective Control**
c we do not yet see everything in *subjection* to him, **Honest Affirmation Of Our Limited Sight, Broken World**
9 but we see Jesus, **Intro His Name! Answer To Objection = Glorified Christ!**
who for a little while was made lower than the angels, **//v.21c, Incarnation**
crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, **Immersion, Why He Came Down!**
Crucifixion so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. **Deals With Our Greatest Enemy**
Mt. 16:28, Jn. 8:52
Jesus Is God In Flesh Come To Save: Worship Him, Sing To Him, Adore Him
Proper Response To Christ Is Awe, Wonder, Gratitude

WHAT ABOUT ALL THE ANGELS?

“... but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son.”

The final language God speaks is Jesus- pure deity translated into real flesh.

HEBREWS 1 : 2

On July 4, 2012 something new was first seen, something fundamental to the universe. The particle had been theorized since 1964 by Dr. Peter Higgs to fill out the Standard Model of particle physics as the answer to where the mass of subatomic particles comes from, but it took nearly a half century and a billion dollar particle accelerator to experimentally confirm its existence as the model predicted. The Large Hadron Collider in Geneva Switzerland- the world’s largest atom smasher at 16.8 miles– was the tool that finally captured the subatomic collision that revealed the mysterious particle– the *Higgs boson*, thought to be the particle that gives mass to other particles as they pass through a Higg’s field, sort of a hidden molasses that fills the universe when all particles are removed so that a vacuum is not really a vacuum. Because of its basic nature, so close to the Big Band, the Higg’s bosom has popularly been labeled *The God Particle*.¹ In an article published three years before the discovery, the author says that physicists

“believe this subatomic particle allows all other particles in the universe to have mass and come together to form, well, basically everything. According to one theorist, without so-called God particles, atoms would have no integrity, so no chemical bonding, no stable structures, no liquids or solids, and– of course– no physicists and no reporters.”²

We now see the effects of a newly confirmed subatomic particle that acts as a

¹ For an new essay by a Christian philosopher, see William Lane Craig, “The God Particle,” www.reasonablefaith.org/the-god-particle-demember (December 15, 2015). For a brief video lecture see Brian Greene, “The God Particle,” *Aspen Ideas Festival 2012*, www.aspenideas.org/session/god-particle.

² Stephen Ford, "The Race for the Secret of the Universe," *Parade* (7-26-09), 4.

cosmic bond- an enabler of everything else, a discovery that advances the quest towards the illusive *Theory Of Everything*, which is the holy grail of physics. But having been found, and behaving as the Standard Model predicted, the Higg’s boson is not *The God Particle*, simply because- by definition- God is not a particle or part of creation and thus cannot be scientifically scrutinized in a machine.³ At a minimum, the one God of Jewish and Christian monotheism is holy and transcendent, meaning other than creation, intimately related to every particle and person, but not to be identified with them except at one point, the point of God’s willing identification in a single human life– but more on that later.

So let physicists with their toys learn all there is about the design of what is. Let them marvel at its mysteries and teach the rest of us in elegant equations. Let them honor one another with Nobel prizes, and let new technologies abound. And when the human mind has traced the building blocks of physics down to the foundation stones, they will still not be able to say, “Now we understand it all,” because to understand the *When?* and the *How?* of creation- which is the limited and proper work of science- is still not to grasp the *Who?* and the *Why?* of creation. The proper answer to the *Who* question is *God*, while the answer to the *Why* question is *Holy Love*. Science is not the only means of knowing, of having properly warranted knowledge. It is a powerful but narrow slice because it studies what can be repeated in a controlled laboratory environment. But life and history are about non-repeatable events with their own proper ways of knowing. What is scientific about falling in love? To say, “I think you have good DNA” is not an effective pickup line, whereas “My, you look beautiful tonight” is a good beginning! And if I ask a simple question like, “Why is the kettle whistling?” the scientific answer is that H²O has now reached 100 degrees Celsius. That’s why the water boils. Yes, but there’s another perfectly good answer using personal agency. The kettle is whistling because I want a cup of hot tea. Science says *the Higg’s boson* holds the world together. The church says God the Son as personal agent upholds and maintains the universe: a biblical and theological answer. One answers the *How?* question, the other the *Who?* question

The church has its own tested principles of understanding, told in the stories

³ The U.M Articles of Religion, “Article I- Of Faith in the Holy Trinity: There is but one living and true God, everlasting, *without body or parts*, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; *the maker and preserver of all things*, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” (*Discipline 2012*, 63-64).

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of Scripture, then summarized in tightly worded statements of doctrine, which is simply the Latin word for *teaching: doctrina*. Physics has teaching; so does the church. We respect their answers to *When* and *How* questions, and we ask them to consider how we answer the even more mysterious and humane questions of *Who* and *Why*. Whatever the Higg’s boson does, it remains the tool of a Personal Creator who is every more wonderful than anything that is made. As Christians we rejoice in truth wherever we find it since the Creator has hidden his secrets everywhere and given us the universal language of math to describe it.

Admittedly, the new *kingdom physics of incarnation*- how God the Son assumed flesh in Jesus, and the new *kingdom physics of the resurrection*- how God transformed the physicality of the dead Jesus, are not available to current methodologies, and yet we claim they happened within the bubble of history we call *time* and to the stuff we call *matter*, and are in this sense properly public matters for which evidence may be assessed. Jesus arrived in a virginal womb and departed from an empty tomb by an act of God; the virginal conception and victorious resurrection are mirror images of one another; they are the left and right hand of God entering and injecting new possibilities into our long history of sin and bondage, and they have implications for literally everything. They change what is possible and what the world means. Christmas and Easter go together as the historical bookends of Jesus’ life. If there had been no Christmas, then there would have been no Easter since there would be no body to crucify and raise; and if there had been no Easter and a new, living Jesus, Christmas would be failed experiment that fizzled, then ended as a dud.

Now these are simply astounding claims on any reading, and yet we claim they are as consistent with God’s revealed nature as the current understanding of physics is consistent with whatever can be measured in the lab. Virgin birth and resurrection are both found in the two Great Creeds,⁴ meaning they are essentials, and neither can be touched without disturbing the dynamic balance of all that the Creeds offer.⁵

Our story is that Jesus came to us as an insider to the divine life; he then departed from us back into the circle of the divine life in the three great movements

⁴ *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 880 *Nicene* and No. 881 *Apostles*’.

⁵ On virginal conception and bodily resurrection as core elements of the early creedal tradition, see Jaroslav Pelican, *Credo* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), particularly “13.2. The Kerygma and Baptismal Symbols,” 377ff.

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of resurrection, ascension, and enthronement; and during the whole of the interim between those two acts, neither of which was seen by the human eye because they happened in the dark— one an unused womb, the other an unused tomb— he put his Father’s love and the Spirit’s power on public display under the banner of *the kingdom of God*. The sick were healed and the dead raised by the loving energies of the living God through Jesus, by an intensity of the power of love science cannot measure. The effects are seen, but the source cannot be captured or controlled because the source was God the Father through God the Spirit in God the Son.

At his baptism the heavens were ripped open over Jesus, and over every person Jesus healed the heavens also opened a bit, just enough to restore function for a season, after which the died— perhaps with the thought, “If he overcame my earlier problem, and if he is indeed alive, then he can take care of my dying as well.” Heaven was firing packets of loving energy at people, and it was Jesus who held the pistol and pulled the trigger. Every healing we read about in the Gospels and Acts was a little dose of resurrection life leaking through, not enough to cancel death but enough to push it back for a season as a preview of coming attractions. So when you contemplate the life and deeds of Jesus, do not think of them as *spiritual*— if for you that means *mystical* and *inward*, *unreal* and *otherworldly*. Rather, think of them as the new, kingdom physics making its effects felt behind enemy lines and in the prison camps of our present world. The energy of divine love is transforming.

With such an abundance of divine revelation dumped on them from above in the three years Jesus was on the road, it’s not surprising that the early church soon began to draw inferences about how Jesus is related to person and work of the One who sent him, which quickly involves us in theological topics like the origin and goal of creation and how it all holds together. Historical revelation- what God had done in real time with real stuff, soon led to speculative theology- to inferences about Jesus involvement in other divine matters. In fact, the opening four verses of the Book of Hebrews demonstrate that early on the church was trying to think its way into the vast implications of just who Jesus was.

Our writer first summarizes the languages God speaks, which are primarily two. God speaks through his messengers; God speaks *prophet*. But now God reveals a new language: God speaks *Son*. English and French, Prophet and Son: all are languages, two on earth, and two from above. Jesus is not just a new person but a new language, God’s new way of speaking. From sending messengers to speaking face-to-face; that’s the difference between the two phrases in verse 1: *God spoke of*

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old by the prophets and he has spoken to us by a Son. It's the difference between your boss sending a message through a secretary and walking into your office without warning, "We need to talk."

To speak prophecy is to speak through others- indirectly and partially, but to speak by a Son is to speak continuously and personally in direct address. Prophets speak *for God*; the Son speaks *as God*, and when God comes and speaks personally, there's nothing more to say because there's no one higher to be sent. In this sense Jesus is the last thing God has to say; all else is explanation and exploration and application, which is one of the jobs of the Holy Spirit over time: to teach the church. New revealers are always distractions and distortions, whether they be Joseph Smith with his new holy book- *The Book of Mormon*, or the prophet Mohammed with his new holy book- *The Koran*, interesting as each are. As the sacred literature of others we study them in order to find common ground.

You see, friends, this is not silent God hiding far off but a talkative God. Creation is the physical echo of his creative Word; in the prophets his Word is overheard and passed on among the Jews, but in Jesus God's voice is heard not by echo or by hearsay but from his mouth to our ear without further intermediary, which is why reading and meditating on the Gospels is the way to transformation. To listen to Jesus is to hear God. Is this not what the writer means in the summary of verse 1? "In many and various ways, God spoke of old to our Jewish fathers and mothers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." That the prophets of old are still speaking with effect is evidenced by the fact that the church did not toss aside but preserved the Old Testament for reading and preaching. But the center of Christian faith is not Jeremiah or Ezekiel, but Jesus. The first are telegrams from God, the second a knock on the door. And here it gets even more interesting.

What God has done in Jesus is to reveal a new world that is already on the way: the kingdom of God. The Christian hope does not end with me going to heaven when I die but with heaven coming down to engulf, purge, and remake the whole creation. Heaven after death is a temporary and pleasant way station on the way to the full victory of God's rule right here on a remade earth.⁶ Jesus' life- and particularly his bodily resurrection- is a preview of coming attractions; we already know who owns the world and where it's headed, which is why line one of our Jesus poem is "whom

⁶ For a must read on these two stages, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008).

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he appointed the heir of all things.” The Son gets the inheritance, which is this case is all there is. And if creation’s future is Jesus, then guess what else we can say? Line 2 says the reason he gets it all back at the end is that he was the agent of creation itself, “...though whom he created the world.”

Creation was a cooperative event: God the Father, his Word Jesus, and the creative energies of the Spirit in one Trinitarian cooperative movement. Creation belongs to Jesus as his work, and he has come among us to stake his claim in a rebel world, and one day it all goes back in his portfolio. So if he is the goal of all creation and the origin of it, what about the present? How are we to understand Jesus now? Well, says our author in verse 3, he’s like the light from the sun; to see the rays is to see the sun- it’s full overflow; or- to use a second image- he is the exact imprint of God’s person or nature.⁷

The image of Caesar was stamped onto coins to show his ownership as a divine being- not just of the coin but of the world, and Jesus is that for God, only better. Stamping coins is always imprecise, but Jesus is the spittin’ image as when he says in John, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.”⁸

So if someone in that world asked, How is Jesus related to God? you had two options, two word pictures. Option 1: look at the sun and explain that we see all things in the light of the sun but we only see the sun through its rays. Option 2: take a Roman coin out of your pocket. The sun reaches us through its rays; Caesar extends his rule through his image, and Jesus is God’s coinage spread around in the world. Both sun and coins are analogies and carry different types of freight, but both make the same point: to deal with Jesus is to deal at the level of being and engagement with God, not a junior god, not a lackey, not a messenger boy, but with God ontologically, at the most basic level of being. And if the world- as the Bible teaches- comes from God, then one thing is for sure: it is not self-sustaining but remains ever-dependent on the One who made it, and should God for a nano-second not sustain it- which the physicists might understand as cancelling the glue function of the Higgs boson, it would all come apart, which bring us to line four of our little poem, “...upholding the universe by his word of power.”

⁷ On the sun and coin imagery, see Ben Witherington, *Letters And Homilies for Jewish Christians: Hebrews* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2007), 103ff.

⁸ 14:9.

So Jesus is God's second language, the language of Son- known always in heaven and only lately- meaning the last two thousand years- heard on the earth. The Son is all bound up with the creation of which he became a part. He is its assured future and its primal origin, its end and its beginning. He fully shares the divine nature, and at this very moment he is holding it all together lest it lapse back into primeval chaos. Jesus is much bigger than you thought, isn't he? It's OK to have sweet, sentimental feeling for baby Jesus in the manger- so helpless and meek and mild- but only so long as you don't forget that the one Mary holds envelops the world. The star that shines is his star. The angels who sing to shepherds are his angels. He made his own mother before she knit him together in the matrix of her womb. He made the tree from which his cross was hewn. The limestone cave in which he was temporarily housed was his stone, and he made you to know him now and forever. Our own Charles Wesley got it right, "Veiled in flesh, the godhead see; hail the incarnate deity; pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel. Hark the herald angels sing; glory to the newborn King."⁹

For long years God spoke through Jewish prophets, but in the last days- at just the right time- he has spoken to us intimately and personally by a Son- a personal agent- and if you want to know who he is, this is what you must say. He is the One

"whom he appointed the heir of all things,
through whom he created the world,
who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his being,
upholding the universe by his word of power."

Now I have some missionary friends who criticize the Great Creeds for jumping over the life of Jesus. They say things like, "We jump from *born of the Virgin Mary* to *crucified under Pontius Pilate*, from his birth to his death without a word on all that came between? Doesn't that make people ignore the life of Jesus and all this teachings about the kingdom? Let's just give new Christians the Bible and let them work out the faith for themselves."

Very bad idea, naive to the core. Underneath- I suspect- is a prejudice against anything that must be repeated or feels vaguely Catholic, and a second idea that all you really need is the Bible, not this other thing called *The Trinitarian Faith*. But the

⁹ *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 240.

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Creeds are not a substitute for the Book; they are an account of our Trinitarian vision of God and of the bare minimum of intellectual commitments that make us who we are, and both a Bible and a Creed are necessary to have a church. The Baptists say they don't have a creed, but they do; it's called *The Baptist Faith And Mission Statement*, and they use it all the time to include and exclude beliefs and people that don't conform. Any church that says *Nothing but the Bible* is fudging, because if you take time to listen they will tell you what's in their hidden creed, even if they don't write it down and go public with it. You can't memorize the whole of the Bible, but you can memorize a meaty summary of the faith as a tool for witnessing and to alert you against false ideas- thus a Creed. Without the list of books that make up the Bible, we don't know what to read and preach in worship, and without the Creeds we don't know what the faith is and why some ideas are more central than others.¹⁰

So my dear friends are wrong, and now that I have spend the past week with the first four verses of Hebrews I 've found a new ally within the New Testament. The author of Hebrews is even worse in this regard; he jumps from the pre-existence of the Son with the Father in creation to the *purification for sins*- to the cross of Jesus- without even mentioning the birth, so there! The creeds did it because the Bible did it first, and so I convince them on their own first principles. They will not be happy, but think I have found the high ground. I do not expect to convince them, but the debate keeps us all sharp!

Now if I was to do what the author of Hebrews did and make a list of seven things to say about God's Son, I might make a different list to speak to the needs and concerns of my day, and that would be a good thing to do- perhaps you should try it with a question: If I could say only seven things about Jesus, what would they be? Well, lets's be honest and cut it down to five, because if you leave out the cross and the resurrection you omit what cannot be omitted and keep our identity. But to speak to the challenges of his world, our author- for the sake of elegance and brevity- minimized references to the earthly life of Jesus down to one- the purifying effects of Jesus' self-sacrifice, and maximized statements about who he was both before and after his earthly life. He gives us four lines on pre-existence and creation, one on the cross, one line on the ascension and enthronement- which assumes the resurrection, "...he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," and one on his status relevant to the angels, "...having become as much superior to the angels as the name

¹⁰ For a treatment of these ideas, see William J. Abraham, et. al., *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2008).

he has obtained is more excellent than theirs,” which makes seven.

You see, if you can only say seven things, you can't say everything's that true but only what's true that addresses the challenge you now face- and you have to have the cross and resurrection of Jesus . You also have to have the full deity of the Son, plus the fact that he now shares the rule of the universe and that one day everything will be back under control, so the options get narrow in a hurry. To me- it should be clear by now- the Creeds cannot be improved on. What they aim to do, they do better than anything else, and if we did not have them, we'd have to create them afresh and likely not do as good a job.

So why did our author say the one thing he did about the earthly life of Jesus, and why so briefly as a dependent clause for Jesus' enthronement? I think I have the grammar right, "... when he had made purification for sins (dependent clause), he sat down (main verb) at the right hand...."

Priests make offerings for purification, and kings sit on thrones. So this Son-one of a kind- is also a Priest and a King, and the offering he makes to remove the stain and moral defilement of our sin is not some sheep or ox but himself.

This is so important: in Jesus God is taking responsibility for our rupture of relationship by taking the full penalty into himself. Jesus is not a nice Jewish boy with a good momma that God recruited to beat up and kill to express his anger and let us off the hook. No. Jesus- our author emphasizes- is full deity and the only one who can do the required work. Our sin is first not against one another but against God, and so only God can set it right again, first by revealing what a truly ugly thing it is, and secondly by not letting it block our relationship any longer - which is what forgiveness means. Jesus does not come to change the heart of God or to make God more forgiving and less wrathful; no, that's terrible theology. Jesus comes into history to fully reveal the heart of God and the price God personally pays to remove the awful barrier that stands between us and our Maker. Sin not only makes us guilty and blind; it stains and defiles us. For the guilt of sin there is forgiveness; for the blindness fresh illumination, and for the defilement cleansing.

The cross of Jesus is not divine child abuse. It's not an angry God beating up an innocent victim, then saying, "There, I feel better now. My wrath is satisfied. I have gone through catharsis. I can now be kind to the rest of my children for the sake of my whipping boy Jesus." Such a God is a moral monster. What Jesus does, which

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is come and live and love and teach and suffer with us, and yes- finally die from blood loss and too much fluid in his lungs because they fixed him in a position where it was impossible to get a breath, he does as God the Son, the same one who shaped creation and in whom it all holds together to this day.

For a little while then, our author says, the Son was *made a bit lower than the angels*. There was not always a Jesus since the name applies to the man within a history that began at conception, but there was always God the Son, and the union between the two is a permanent one. *A little while lower than the angels*: that's incarnation; that's Christmas; that Jesus' virginal conception and bloody, human birth; it's how he arrived from where he was before. Angels sing in the heavens to shepherds while he is wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a feeding trough. For a little while then- a bit more than thirty years- the Son is lower than the angels if you think of creation as having layers and an up-and-down orientation. God at the top of the pyramid, then below God everything in creation, and in the *everything else* part there are two layers of intelligent beings: first angels, then human beings.¹¹ They are smarter and more agile than us, have all been here since the start; they neither age, die or reproduce as we do, and the good ones who did not join in the Great Rebellion that preceded our own treachery are warriors and messengers who work on our behalf, thus verse 14: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?"

And our author- odd as it seems to us who rarely speak about angels- spends a great deal of effort in verses 5 through 14 making the case that while Jesus was- for a little while- below the angels when he was among us, but it was not his permanent status. Jesus is the Son, not them (v.5). They worship him, not he them (v.6). They are powerful, yet ephemeral as wind and fire; he- by contrast- rules forever (vv.7-9). They are comrades in the work; he their king (vv.8-9). They are his creatures, and he their Creator (vv.10-12) . Everything in creation is prone to wear out like and old coat, but not the Son, verse 12: "But thou art the same, and thy years will never end." And to no angel did God every say, "You are my Son," or, "have a seat here, till all your enemies have the divine foot on their throat" (vv.5, 13).

God the Son in assuming our flesh- his coming down through the layers of

¹¹ On angels, see the article by S.F. Noll, "Angel, Heavenly Beings, Angel Christology," Raph Martin & Peter Davids, *The Dictionary Of The Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1997), 44-48.

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angels to earth- is not a statement of his worth or dignity, as if he was *always below the angels* in status and only now was it revealed. No. It was a temporary necessity for the sake of what we all needed, not a little improvement here and there, not a bit more instruction or education, not a warning and a threat, but a *great salvation which we neglect to our peril*. God himself in the person of the Son, doing what only he could do, and when the work was done returning to where he came through a life-giving resurrection, a heaven-returning ascension, and an enthronement that promises a day when he shall in fact be the only ruler there is.

Now, as our author frankly admits in verse 8 because he is a pastoral realist, “As it is, we do not yet *see everything* in subjection to him.” Our world remains a wreck, and if he has come, then why has not more changed? The world is still a mean, rough neighborhood, and it takes all the work we can do to keep the chaos somewhat at bay: law, government, family, church, charity, education and the like. Yes, the kingdom is still future, but the flag has already been planted and the church is moving out into the every piece of the human mosaic with the news of Jesus and his new world. What we do see now is Jesus- our hope and our help— coming down from the Father, living among us as one of us, tasting and draining the cup of a bitter, unjust death down to the dregs, then overcoming it in a mighty resurrection, that- in the words of our author- *he might taste death for every man and woman*. What he did, he did for all. So what did he do?

He came down, and for a season was made lower than the angels.
He came down from deity,
down through the layers of angels, for a little while made lower than they were,
down into the virgin’s womb,
down into the broken human situation,
down into a small Jewish village,
down into a humble family with brother and sisters,
down into the indignities, the bumps and bruises of daily life,
down into being misunderstood because of his odd birth and never marrying,
down into earning a living by the sweat of his brow,
down into hunger and loss as famines came and friends died,
down into a calling that distanced him from his family as oldest brother,
down into the water of John’s baptism as if he were just another sinner,
down into the Judean wilderness for the fight of his life,
down into daily battles with ignorant disciples and multiple detractors,
down into the accumulated misery of the sick and tormented,

down into the mess our sins have caused us all,
down into the ignorance of the crowds who wanted him to be what he was not,
down one last time to Jerusalem,
down to betrayal,
down into Gethsemane,
down to Caiaphas's hearing room and Pilate's court room,
down to the shame of nakedness,
down into mockery and whipping,
down to the gates as he walked out of the city,
down on his back as the nails went in,
down into six long hours of agony of body and anguish of soul,
and finally, finally, down to his last great breath,
down to his last heartbeat,
then down again, down into death,
down into silence and darkness,
down from the cross,
down to a borrowed tomb,
down past the gates of death,
down to dungeon of death from which no one else has ever come back.

Down, down, down. It was the humble direction of the whole story, one long, voluntary, loving descent from deity down to into death. As the Nicene Creed states it directionally, "For us and for our salvation *he came down....*"

Being made for a little *lower than the angels* was not the only step but only the first that set him on a downward course of humility. So as we celebrate the joys and festivities of Christmas with all its hopes of peace and plenty, let's not be naive. The kingdom is not yet here. The incarnation was one- but only one- of a long series of downward moves that did not stop but followed one another like tumbling dominoes till there were no more to fall. The going down did not stop till Jesus hit rock bottom of being wherever the dead are. The story that commences at the manger of Bethlehem ends with angels viewing a dead Jesus and wondering, What's next?

He was made a little lower than the angels, but only for *a little while*, and in the long view thirty years plus a few is only *a little while*, and since you all know what happened next, how the great descent was more than matched by a surprising ascent, I will not rehearse it at this time but end with a story.

CONCLUSION

Author Brennan Manning has a story about how he got his first name. While growing up, his best friend was Ray. They did everything together: bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated together, went to school together. They even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together, fought on the front lines together.

One night while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. A live grenade fell into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the grenade. It exploded, killing Ray; Brennan's life was spared.

When Brennan later became a Catholic priest he was instructed to take the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan, so he took on the name.

Years later he went to visit Ray's mother. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?"

Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?"

At that moment Manning experienced an epiphany. He saw himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, *Does God really love me?* And Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?"¹²

He came down, all the way down. Isn't that enough evidence that he loves each of us as if we were the only one? It had better be because it's all God has to say. The language of the Son is God's last word, so get used to it. You are loved this much; I am loved this much; the good angels are all on our side, and there is much work to do. This is what Christmas means.

¹² Adapted from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2009), 142.
