

First Sunday after Christmas

December 31, 2006

Hebrews 2:10-18

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Jesus Came to be our Brother

1. A human Brother
2. A high priestly Brother
3. A helping Brother

NIV Hebrews 2:10 In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises." ¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-- that is, the devil--¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We use the term "brother" in many different ways. I just called my male fellow Christians "brother." We call a male who shares the same parents with us "brother." In some cases, we call a male who shares the same nationality or the same race with us a "brother." Soldiers call each other "brother," as in "Band of Brothers," the book about World War II infantrymen by Stephen Ambrose. In labor unions, fellow union members call each other "brother." But can we call Jesus our brother? We just did. In the hymn we just finished, we sang,

***What harm can sin and death then do? The true God now abides
with you.***

***Let hell and Satan storm and rave, Christ is your brother, you are
safe.***

The Biblical precedent for referring to Jesus as our brother is not found in the Gospel narratives of the birth of Jesus. That precedent is here, in the book of Hebrews, and before that in some of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Christ. It's clear that the author of Hebrews wants us to know that through faith in Jesus we have a close relationship with him. He's our brother. So this morning let's explore for a few minutes what the Bible means when it says here that the Son of God, Jesus, came to be our brother.

1. A human Brother

We read the opening verses of Hebrews 1 on Christmas Day. There the author of this letter was declaring Jesus to be the Son of God, the one appointed by God to be the heir of all things, the one through whom God made the universe. He sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven and is far superior to the angels. Jesus is the Son of God.

But here in chapter 2, the author of Hebrews wants us to see that the Son of God became our human Brother. He asserts that *"both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family."* Then he backs up that assertion with something that would be very powerful for Hebrews: references drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. In Psalm 22, the Messiah said, *"I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."* And in Isaiah 8 the Messiah declares his trust in the LORD and states, *"Here am I, and the children God has given me."* It's on the basis of these passages that the author of Hebrews says, *"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity."*

What is stated so clearly here in Hebrews we also observe in the nativity narratives: the true humanity of Christ. Mary was expecting a child, then gave birth to a son. He appeared to be like any other human baby. He had the needs all human infants have: to be fed and kept warm and dry. Even when we see him in today's Gospel, listening to the teachers in the temple and asking them questions, he is still very much human. He's come to Jerusalem at age 12 to celebrate his first Passover, just like other Jewish boys did. When his parents don't find him in their midst on the way home, they're not immediately alarmed. They think he's with his friends and relatives, as any other boy of his age might be. He's a growing boy, like any other 12-year-old, capable of growth, not only in stature, but also in wisdom and in favor with God and man. Though we confess this infant, this 12-year-old, to be the very Son of God, we also see him as our Brother. He's like us in every way, except for sin. He's indisputably one of us.

But why is this so important? What difference would it make if the Son of God had not assumed a human nature, or if he had only adopted a human *appearance*, but not been truly human? Then he could not have carried out his mission, which Hebrews describes this way: *"that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."* The Son of God assumed a human nature and came into this world of ours so that he could die. Had he not

been truly human, he could not have died. And if he had not died, he could not have destroyed the devil. And if Jesus has not destroyed the devil, then you and I are still slaves to the fear of death. Jesus, our Brother, came to be our Substitute, in life, certainly, but also in death, to liberate us from the tyrant Satan, and his fearful hold on us. To do that he had to be human. He had to be our Brother.

As he continues here, the author of Hebrews points out another reason that it was important for our Savior to be not only the Son of God but also our human Brother. Looking at Jesus' mission from another angle, the Bible says here that he came to be our High Priest. He will develop this truth more fully in succeeding chapters, but this is where the author of Hebrews first states that Jesus is our high priestly Brother.

2. A high priestly Brother

It says here, *“For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”* Just a few chapters later in Hebrews we have this description of what a priest did in Old Testament times: **“Every priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”** (5:1) Priests represented God before the people and they represented the people before God. They were intermediaries, or middlemen.

It is particularly the priest's role in representing the people before God that's under discussion here. The fact that the people needed a priest at all was due to their alienation from God. God is holy; humans are not by nature holy. There's a rift between the holy God and unholy men, a separation caused by sin. So, in the Law of Moses, God made provision for priests who would intercede before God on behalf of sinful people. These priests would bring sacrifices for the people, bulls and goats and lambs. They would shed the blood of those animals and sacrifice them to God as burnt offerings. On the greatest religious festival of the year, the Day of Atonement, the high priest would carry the blood of a goat into the presence of God in the Most Holy Place, to atone for the sins of the people.

But—do you know something?—all those offerings, all those sacrifices, all those animals dedicated to God never atoned for one single sin. They only pointed ahead to the one valid, effective sacrifice for sin that Jesus, our great High Priest would make when he would offer his own life at the cross to atone for our sins and appease God's righteous anger at us sinners. He had to be our Brother to do this effectively. He had to be human to be our Substitute—and he had to be the Son of God so that his sacrifice at the cross would count for everyone.

Jesus is our Brother. The word implies closeness, doesn't it? We've all heard people say, “He's like a brother to me.” But brothers aren't always close, are they? Think of Jacob and Esau, not only brothers, but twin brothers, yet as different as night and day. Jacob's penchant for taking advantage of Esau incited

Esau to hate Jacob and want to kill his brother. And it was even worse in the next generation, with Jacob's sons, Joseph and his eleven brothers. These were brothers who sold their own flesh and blood into slavery and didn't seem to care what became of him. Jesus, then, we could say is the ideal Brother, because he not only shares our humanity, he is a Brother who has come to help us.

3. A helping Brother

The author of Hebrews makes this point about Jesus in two verses in this section. *"For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants."* (That is, those who share the faith of Abraham—believers.) And later he writes, *"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."* The word "help" each time it occurs here is a picturesque word. It means, literally, to seize or grab someone. It's used in the New Testament to describe people being arrested. But there's one usage of this word that I think beautifully describes the thought here in Hebrews. Do you remember that incident in Jesus' ministry where his disciples are trying to row their boat across the Sea of Galilee, but they were having trouble because the wind was against them? Jesus was not in the boat. He had stayed behind to pray. Then, in the pre-dawn hours, the disciples see someone walking on the lake. They're afraid and think it might be a ghost. But Jesus calls out to them and identifies himself. Peter responded, **"Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water."** Jesus said, **"Come."** So Peter got down out of the boat and began to walk toward Jesus. But then he also saw the wind and he was afraid and he began to sink. It's then that St. Matthew uses this word that's translated "help" here in Hebrews. **"Jesus reached out his hand and caught (Peter)."** Jesus helped Peter, alright. He grabbed him and pulled him out of the drink, the way a rescue swimmer grabs a drowning man, the way a fire fighter grabs a victim of smoke inhalation.

Understand that this letter to the Hebrews was written in the context of suffering and temptation. These people of a Hebrew background had come to faith in Jesus, but they were beginning to pay a steep price for their faith. They had already been insulted and persecuted. Some of them had suffered the confiscation of their property. No one had shed blood yet in this persecution, but there was the potential for that to happen. Under these circumstances, there was a strong temptation to forsake Jesus, to disavow their confession of him as their Lord and Savior. So this letter was written to bolster the flagging faith of the Hebrews, to encourage them to persevere in their faith, and to fix their eyes on Jesus, their helping Brother.

I have no idea what specific events lie ahead for us in 2007, whether it will in fact be the "better" year that some of you have said you are hoping for, or what exactly the next 12 months will hold. But I know all of us will face temptations—the temptation, perhaps, to deny or disown Jesus in the face of insults or persecution; the temptation to give up meeting together to hear God's Word and receive his Sacrament; the temptation to think we've got no more growing to do as Christians; the temptation to violate God's commandments in the mistaken

belief that disobedience will bring us pleasure. That's when we'll want to remember that Jesus "*is able to help those who are being tempted.*" That's the time to seek his face in prayer and to listen as he speaks to us in his Word. This Brother of ours, who atoned for our sins, lives to help us. He's sympathetic to our plight because he himself suffered when he was tempted. We can approach his throne of grace confidently to find mercy and grace to help us in our time of temptation.

Monday afternoon I was sitting at the dinner table enjoying the afterglow of a nice day. We had come together for Christmas Day worship. Three of our children were home and the fourth would be shortly. It had been a very nice day. Then the phone rang. The caller said that one of our pastors and his wife and daughter had been in a bad car accident. The wife had died instantly. The pastor and his daughter were seriously injured. My first reaction was to think, "How horrible—and on Christmas Day, of all days!" But as I was taking it in, the caller reminded me that Jesus had come to overcome death. And the following day I learned that another of the pastor's daughters had reacted to news of the accident with understandable sadness but also with these words: "Mom just got the best Christmas present that anyone could have." You can't say that unless you believe that Jesus is our Brother, the one who by his death atoned for our sins and thus freed us from our slavery to the fear of death. Jesus is our Brother, the one who helps us in every circumstance of life, the one who leads us to sing about heaven as we did in our opening hymn today: "*Oh, that we were there! Oh, that we were there!*" Amen.