

God's Big Brother/Sister Program

Hebrews 2:10-18

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WATCH/LISTEN: fbcjc.org/sermon/gods-big-brother-sister-program/

As long as humans have told stories, the world has needed saving. Long before Wonder Woman rescued the world from Ares, the god of war, and Superman defeated General Zod, ancient religions and mythologies offered their own ideas of world salvation. The Chinese archer God, Yi, and the Native American, Old Coyote, both saved the land, plants, oceans, humans, and animals from being consumed by fire, one with his bow and arrows, the other through the creation of water.¹

Christians believe that Jesus is the way God chose to bring salvation to the world. In today's Bible passage, the writer of Hebrews reminds the book's first readers about the peculiar way God brought salvation to the world through Jesus. Not with superpowers or magic tools. But, rather, through a baby boy born to Mary and Joseph. Three times in eight verses, the writer tells his readers that Jesus experienced human life in every way possible.²

Two thousand years of Christian tradition afford us many privileges, one of which is our understanding of Jesus as both fully divine and fully human. We often take for granted that our inherited theological understanding is the result of debate and discernment about Jesus' nature that took place over hundreds of years.

One night during a church history class in seminary, my professor was teaching us about these early church debates and councils about Jesus' nature. He drew a large rectangle on the board. On the top line of the rectangle, he wrote the word "divine". Beneath the bottom line of the rectangle he wrote "human". He moved his marker around inside the rectangle showing us that, eventually, church leaders decided the answer was somewhere inside this box. Some leaned more toward divinity, others toward humanity, and they could agree to disagree within the box.

My professor slowly put the top on his marker, set the marker on the tray beneath the board, turned to face the class, and crossed his hands in front of his body. This is how we knew he was about to stop teaching and start preaching.

"You know, right after Jesus' death, in the years of early Christianity, it was a struggle for people to accept the idea that this man they'd seen in the flesh was in some way divine." he said, "it's the opposite for us today, isn't it? We *primarily* understand Jesus as divine; that's what we've been taught. We struggle to understand Jesus as human."

Then he put his hand on his chin and tucked his arm under his elbow, full-on preacher mode.

¹ <https://scifi.stackexchange.com/questions/94622/who-was-the-first-protagonist-to-routinely-save-the-world>

² Hebrews 2: 14, 17, 18

“This is important, isn’t it? This really matters. Because if Jesus only looked like a man on the outside (his form), but was divine on the inside (substance) then it’s not really sacrifice and suffering is it? When Jesus was dying on the cross, and he cried out to God in a moment of godforsakenness, was he just making it look like agony?”

When he was publicly on trial, did Jesus experience humiliation and injustice, or was it for the sake of show?

When Jesus’ best friends turned their backs on him, neglecting and then deserting him at his darkest hour, did he actually experience betrayal?

When Jesus prayed in the garden, agonizing, grieving over what was to come asking God if there was some other way, did he experience anguish or were the sweat drops of blood for appearances only?

We can begin to hear and feel the significance of the explanation in today’s passage. We know very little about the people for whom Hebrews was written. What we do know based on what’s in the book is that they were struggling in their faith, maybe considering giving up on their Christian practice.³ We know they suffered and that it was likely the way that many first century Christians suffered: political and religious persecution, sporadic acts of violence and denigration, and a profound sense of isolation.⁴ It sounds like some of the believers’ homes had been looted, and some of them imprisoned.⁵

The writer knows they are ready to give up, and so he tells them—remember Jesus. Remember that he is like you in *every* way. Every humiliation, trial, loss, suffering, sacrifice, grief they are facing because of their practice, Jesus experienced that too. The writer even reminds them that Jesus endured the human experience even unto death, which I find to be sobering. “Because Jesus has been through what you’ve been through,” the writer says, “he can help you right where you are.”

The other day my best friend and I were sitting and talking over coffee about the title of today’s sermon (God’s Big Brother, Big Sister Program). She said “I was a Big Sister once. It was a flop. I was a terrible Big Sister. I was eighteen years old, out for a volunteer achievement for my resume, and was completely unprepared for the challenges my little sister was facing—the economic, academic, relational, emotional reality she was living. The odds stacked overwhelmingly against her ability to succeed.”

I wonder if you’ve found yourself at a point on your journey where you felt totally unprepared or utterly overwhelmed? Specifically on your journey of faith.

³ Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word Commentary Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*, “Hebrews 2:10-18: Pastoral Perspective”, Westminster John Knox Press; 2011, 9. Dalen C. Jackson, *Hebrews Annual Bible Study Teaching Guide: Encouragement for a Life of Faith*, Smyth and Helwys: Macon, GA; 2016, 10-12.

⁴ Jackson, 10-12.

⁵ *Feasting on the Word*, 10.

We talk a lot in the church about the superhuman, supernatural aspects of salvation—resurrection, to name a big one. Where we sit in history, we hear the story with the end in mind—Jesus is raised from the dead, death is no longer the final word—which puts us at risk of skipping over what Jesus goes through before he arrives at resurrection, skipping over some vital elements of our own journeys of salvation.

We are living in a time sorely in need of humanity. People are hungry and thirsty, and in need of a safe place to live. People are exhausted and depleted, running on empty, in need of sacred rest. We are talking over each other, at each other, and have turned off our listening ears. We are prepared to tear each other apart, to sacrifice our relationships and our collective strength in order to be our own version of “right.” We are walking around with our eyes closed to the issues of violence, loneliness, and anxiety that even our children are grappling with in their daily lives. I am worried that we have not realized how totally unprepared we are for these utterly overwhelming times.

How does our theology of Jesus as fully divine *and* fully human translate into a practice that changes our lives? How can we respond *in faith* to the truth that Jesus is our “Big Brother”, like us in every way?

I wonder what would happen if 2020 is for each of us the year of humanity?

What if we spent this year reminding ourselves how Jesus is like us in every way: hungry and thirsty, tired and grumpy, lonely in a crowd, giddy and silly, full of love and longing, weeping and laughing, yelling and listening, grieving, overwhelmed and short on time, dreaming big in a small-minded world, in need of alone time and maybe a really strong cup of coffee? What if we re-read the Gospels, asking God to help us see and hear Jesus as *our* brother, *our* teacher, walking with us on the dusty, noisy roads of our lives, sitting with us around the dinner table, talking with us about our struggles, our longings, our dreams. Could that help us to experience Christ not only in the supernatural/super-powerful ways, but in each moment of each day?

What if, in embracing Christ’s humanity, 2020 is a year in which we are freed to embrace our humanity?

What if we eat simply and healthily this year? More water and less coffee? What if we sleep seven to eight most nights and limit our screen time? What if we nurture our relationships? Did you know that loneliness is becoming the great public health crisis of our time? What if we get a few minutes of exercise a few days a week? What if we focus on reducing the amount of things in our lives to make more room for God and people? What if we devote time each week to nurturing ourselves spiritually, practicing meditation, solitude, and silence; spiritual reading of scripture; maybe finding a prayer partner?

One thing I’ve noticed about myself is that my practice of caring for my wellbeing is directly correlated with my ability to have compassion and empathy for others. When I am depleted, I am impatient and unwilling to respond to the needs of others around me. I am unwilling to listen and am increasingly focused on myself.

What if embracing our humanity frees us to embrace others’ humanity?

What if 2020 is the year we listen more, allow God to transform divisive situations into opportunities to reconcile and compromise. What if we notice needs in our community and our world we've been ignoring. What if we ask and God to gives us a heart that is for others and hands that are open to give and to serve?

Friends, whatever change God is stirring and cultivating in your life, as the year rolls over this week, and you're given the chance to start afresh, remember this: Whenever you find yourself in the middle of striving or failure, when you are feeling hopeless and exhausted, remember that God brought salvation to us not by demanding that you shape your life to fit God's, that you somehow become superhuman, or that you meet an impossible list of demands. God brought us salvation by becoming like us in every way, by fitting into our lives through Jesus.⁶

We are not perfect, at times we're unprepared and overwhelmed. In those times, let us remember that Jesus has been there too, and can guide us, help us keep going. Because, as the scripture says, the light has shown in the darkness, and the darkness cannot put it out.

⁶ Jackson, 62