



First United Church of Oak Park

From the Very First

Hebrews 12:1-3

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The Book of Hebrews describes Jesus in a unique way in the Christian Scriptures. It imagines the heavenly realms and the courts of God, not as a throne room but as a vast temple. Drawing on the imagery of the religious practices of the day, the great hereafter is like a temple full to the brim with the faithful. And the High Priest officiating this temple service is the risen Christ who—in a bit of a brain bender of an image—is at once the priest making an offering and also the gift being placed upon the divine altar.

And as the Book of Hebrews describes this temple service in heaven's courts, all around the High Priest is a great cloud of witnesses, of worshipers, of the faithful. God is surrounded always by a great cloud of witnesses who are part of a sweet and wonderful offering being made before God.

And it is a who's who of the great figures of the faith—here is Abraham of the promise beside Moses of the great call to freedom; here is Sarah who bore the entire people of God in her body; here is Joseph in his dreams, and there is Rahab in her daring. And at the head of the procession, first to enter the temple for praise is...Abel. Abel is given pride of place.

Abel's is an old story, set at the very beginning of humankind's walk upon the earth. He lived long enough to take up his own work, as a shepherd, long enough to raise a flock. Abel has the distinction of being the first to make an offering before God, one of the lambs of his flock—a distinction he shares with his brother Cain. Abel has the solitary and melancholy distinction of being the very first person to die. Abel was young enough that his parents—Adam and Eve—were still living.

This means that there has not been a single generation of humanity, not a single generation of humanity that has been spared the pain of grief. Not even Adam and Eve escaped the pain of grief. To live is to know grief. It has been for every generation ever to live.

These are not history texts. They are not even genealogies or family lore-books. These stories from the rich and ancient soil of Scripture are meant to talk about what it is to be human, what life on the earth is like. There is deep truth in these stories. To live is to know grief. It has been for every generation ever to live—even Adam and Eve who were made instead of born—even they knew grief.

To live, to be mortal. This is the human lot. And the glory of the mortal is to live as God intended and the end of every mortal is to die, as God intended. We have each of us, each

here gathered, each of us has known what it is to be parted from a loved one by the impenetrable veil of death. To live is to know grief, this is true.

It is of course sufficient for Scripture to simply reveal what it true. That is enough. But the Book of Hebrews takes up this truth and fashions of it something new. For the heavenly court, the vision of Christ as high priest in the temple of eternity, the very first witness to enter at the head of the procession, is Abel. That first loss and grief is the first to be redeemed. Because God does not forget. The passage of years and the waning of millennia does not dim the memory of the almighty. The temple of heaven where Christ stands as high priest has a center but no limit, no boundaries that say well, I'm sorry, there is no room anymore. In the procession of those welcomed into the courts of praise, the Book of Hebrews lifts up and redeems even the very first grief. Those who have died, those faithful whom I grieve, they walk in the procession with Abel at its head. Those who you grieve, they have entered the courts of praise where Christ the high priest has offered all that will be needed. There is room in that temple to hold all of our grief, and there is a place in that procession for me, too, I don't know where. There is a place in that holy temple of God, too, for you.

Amen.