

October 10, 2021

Hebrews 4:12-16

“Bravely Vulnerable”

Rudyard Kipling penned the inspirational poem, “If”. It begins,

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when everyone doubts you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:*

After three more remarkable paragraphs he ends with – “You’ll be a man, my son.”

The insight is real, and the meaning is true. But I have always found it easier to remember these words: “*If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, you obviously don't understand the situation.*”

This is not far off from our text in Hebrews today. Not because our author wants us to lose our heads – but because *we so easily misunderstand the situation*. In our culture **strength is honored and weakness is not**. We are especially hard on ourselves when we imagine we have been too weak. Often we can't change the circumstances, and our strength or weakness is immaterial. But we feel bad anyway. One of the ways we seek to preserve the illusion of strength is to **keep secrets**. We imagine if our foibles are not known – Our pretending will hold.

But our author today reminds us the whole notion of **building who we are on secrets** is folly – because “*you know who*” knows “*you know what*” already. I thought about titling this sermon, “*Naked in Church*” and decided that might be misunderstood. And truly, our author wouldn't be satisfied until we understand ***we are naked before God – always***. All the pretending, the hiding, the misleading, all the hoping no one will notice – none of it blinds God to who we are. It is as comical as Adam and Eve thinking they can hide in the garden from God. “*We're sorry, holy one, but Adam and Eve aren't at home right now...if you'll leave your name and number and a brief message, they'll get back to you as soon as...well...soon. Beep!*”

These values about strength and weakness are acquired from breathing in our culture. *Changing them requires the breath of the spirit*. The word of God brings truth to us and is not fooled by our façade. That sounds like we're in trouble. But

our author doesn't want us to panic. Our author wants us to *trust the one who is our interface with God – Jesus, the great high priest.*

Our natural reactions can vary depending on our personality. Some of us want to rush whatever the problem is and **fix it**. Some of us don't have the energy and instead of trying to fix what is before us we back away and **give up**. *Our author wants us to find the path of grace in the middle.* To follow that path we have to go against our instincts. We must be willing to be – at least metaphorically – *naked in church...and everywhere else.*

What we do matters. And everything is known by God. That sounds like there is a prescription for judgement here. Yet, judgement is really just God telling the truth – and while that can be uncomfortable - the answer to our being fully known isn't despair...it's trust. *“¹⁶ Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers.”*

We are both encouraged to understand we *can't pull the wool over God's eyes* – and that *we don't need to*. While standing naked before God feels intimidating, it does not stand in the way of approaching God's throne of Grace with courage to receive what we need.

Yes, we are vulnerable. No, we aren't normally very comfortable with that. But in the end, *the reality of life lived in God's presence overwhelms the unfortunate lessons we have learned in life.*

If we can keep our head when all those around us are losing theirs...perhaps it means we have found the courage to trust that no matter what is known or what happens – we can always get what we need from God who loves us.

Be brave. Embrace living as *vulnerable beloved* children of God. Take what you need from the outstretched hand of God who loves you. And perhaps Kipling had it right after all:

*“If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;*

Then – *you will be a child of God* – vulnerable and brave.