

Be Still, Be Mindful, and Be Lifted

(more than vapor)

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Hebrews Chapters 1 and 2

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Long ago...

Long ago God...

Long ago God spoke...

The words from the book of Hebrews draw us into a warm night, the sounds of the campfire, and a thousand stars visible in the sky. The words draw us into a place of quiet where what is so often lost among the sounds of our lives is heard. It is a place of stillness set apart by the words, long ago, taking us out of the now, the immediate, and the pressures of time.

Take in a long breath and let it go.

The Holy Spirit excitement of a couple of weeks ago was good and fun. We bounced and clapped and let loose the doves. It was a great celebration, a great welcoming of the Holy Spirit. But after a couple of weeks, just maybe, for some, that Holy Spirit fire has diminished. These words are for you.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.

Long ago, God spoke. In these days, God speaks. No longer by prophets... through a Son.

What follows in the Word is how God speaks through that Son...how God speaks through the Son to those for whom the Holy Spirit fire has diminished...to those who are sometimes world weary, to those who wonder from time to time why it is so hard, to those who have lost faith in some part of themselves or with one they love or with one they work with or with people in general, to those who wonder if God cares enough to still be around.

For those who have been married awhile but not long enough, you may recognize the feeling. It is that midlife question birthed from our childhood experience...does he, does she really care about me? Then why is the laundry not yet done...why did he just say that...why doesn't she ever stop and simply be with me? Show me you care!

Similarly those of us who have followed Jesus for awhile, but not long enough ... we too start to wonder. Why did God allow this pain to enter into my life? Why was I not saved from this trouble? If God doesn't show me God's self when I most am in need, why should I care about God?! Oh God, show me you care!

You are not the first to have the fire found in faith, found

in love, found in believing the world can be better... diminish.

The musical, Hair, was my introduction to Hamlet of which I know one quotation very well. Let me confess, I've not yet seen the musical, all I know are the lyrics from an album my parents had when I was young. Here is what I heard growing up...

What a piece of work is man

How noble in reason

How infinite in faculties

In form and moving

How express and admirable

In action how like an angel

In apprehension how like a god

The beauty of the world

The paragon of animals

When I was young, those were the words I remembered.

But the song goes on...I hear now what I did not then...

I have of late

But wherefore I know not

Lost all my mirth

This goodly frame

The earth

Seems to me a sterile promontory

This most excellent canopy

The air-- look you!

This brave o'erhanging firmament

This majestical roof

Fretted with golden fire

Why it appears no other thing to me

Than a foul and pestilent congregation

Of vapors

Hamlet's speech, quoted in Hair, reveals the fight between knowing the beauty of what has been created and being overwhelmed by melancholy, unable to speak of the beauty without irony.

I think there are days or maybe moments in a day that we enter into Hamlet's fatigue. Those times we know we should be appreciating all that is around us, but we are fed up.

On my bookshelf is a loan from Kipp, a book called Restore Breathing written by Ben Sherman.

Ben describes something akin to Hamlet's fatigue found in the corporate world. He writes,

For twenty-five years, I have been meeting workers and managers in various companies. Top-down power structures have left many of them injured and hurting. People seem to be bleeding all over each other while the world is in a mania of mobility.

...

I've found that the pain people suffer in today's workplace has reduced worker storytelling to defending themselves, making excuses, blaming others, complaining or criticizing....Scratch the surface of a cynic and you'll find a frustrated idealist.

...

So...perhaps you recognize yourself? I wonder, what are your end-of-the-day stories?

Ben goes on to offer that which begins the healing.

As an Army field medic during the Vietnam War, my advance training was ten weeks at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. Though many of us were drafted and not real happy about it, the technical and emotional preparation we received from the "lifers" at Fort Sam was excellent. In my case alone, what they taught in ten weeks repeatedly saved my life and lives of others....

The first and last lesson we were taught was "Restore Breathing, Stop Bleeding, Make Mobile." This was our only job.

In recent years, companies have been hiring me to initiate their healing process. Sometimes I feel like I'm back in a war zone, responding to the wounded as they scream for help. There is bleeding to stop, there are casualties to be made mobile, but then I remember: restore breathing first.

Hey Hamlet. Be still. Breathe. And listen.

I would like to reread Hamlet. Maybe there are some of you who would join me. Even though I remember very little, I suspect Hamlet was a man who could not sit still. Similarly, I suspect the tribe depicted in Hair couldn't sit still without inhaling.

Be still, breathe, and listen.

Hebrews, by its very nature, calls us into stillness. If you look at the commentaries on Hebrews, they all begin with how poetic is this work, how artfully crafted. At least one makes the "astute" observation that the one who wrote this must have been very smart and concludes Christianity wasn't just for the illiterate. Okay. Let's try on another perspective. Perhaps the author of Hebrews crafts his introduction, because it, like a poem, is meant to be read

slowly, again and again, meditated upon in stillness.

In these last days [God] has spoken to us by a Son, whom [God] appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

Be mindful. God speaks through a Son.

In our reading from Hebrews, we skipped over all the proof texting about the relative place of angels in the heavenly court. But you should know that the writer spends much time proving that angels are less in the heavenly hierarchy than is Jesus. The need to argue the case suggests, even then, it was tempting to drift to another way to meet God. Those to whom the author speaks most likely thought angels were their best path to knowing God's ways. The author doesn't deny angels exist but he insists these messengers are not the exact imprint of God's very being...that imprint is placed upon a Son.

There are many 'easier' ways to seek God than through the Son, a man who suffered and died and was resurrected. We are often tempted to travel these paths. Stillness is a beginning. It opens us to seek a relationship with the One who created all. In stillness, we seek to touch, to be touched by the eternal. It is up to us to be mindful about who we seek.

As Hebrews chides, "We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it."

Be mindful when you are quiet. You are reaching out to God who made his love known through a man who suffered and died and was resurrected.

There's a series of children's books called Percy Jackson and the Olympians. It uses the Greek pantheon of gods as the basis for an alternative world. The gods are pictured as being powerful and immortal. They are also jealous and often ridiculous. They seem to delight in revealing human's lesser abilities--lesser status. I appreciate the author's, Rick Riordan's, approach for he reminds us that lesser gods are powerful and always around. He also reminds us that it is the way of gods to diminish human life as that which is fleeting, that which matters not.

Be mindful. To reach out to God is not to reach out for power or favor or to quell an immortal's anger. To reach out to God in the stillness is to reach out to one who revealed to humankind that we are not imprisoned by suffering or by dying or by anything of this world. It is to reach out to one who values you more than all of creation.

The quotation used by Hair, taken from Shakespeare, spoken in Hebrews comes from Psalm 8.

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
Or mortals, that you care for them?
You have made them for a little while lower than the
angels;

You have crowned them with glory and honor,
Subjecting all things under their feet.

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing
outside their control, argues Hebrews.

God left nothing outside of whose control? Not the gods,
not the angels, not any eternal creature ... mortals.

And listen further...

As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them,
but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower
than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor...

Did you hear the parallel?

You have made them, mortals, for a little while lower
than the angels; You have crowned them with glory and
honor....

We ... see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower
than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor....

Because...because of the suffering of death. By God's
grace, says our scripture, Jesus tasted death for everyone.
Jesus died and it wasn't the end.

So perhaps it follows that it is by our very limitations, our
mortality, our suffering, our living and dying that we enter
into the place of Christ, where we can be lifted higher
than the angels. Jesus went, we go, where angels cannot.
Mere messengers, immortals, do not get to experience life
or death or glory. God sent Jesus to live and die and
raised him to glory...God chose to make the pioneer of
our salvation, Jesus, perfect through suffering.

Instead of blaming God for allowing wrong into your
life, wonder, meditate in the stillness, mindful of the one
who sent Jesus...listen for how God is directing you to
use this time, this moment, for your salvation. Unlike the
Greek pantheon of gods, God places the highest value on
mortals. God left nothing outside of their control, even
their own will.

Be still...so you can hear.

Be mindful...you seek the one who sent Jesus, who lived,
died, and was resurrected.

Be lifted...allow God to use your current challenge to
save you, to save those around you.

God has left nothing outside of your control.

I offer one last reference to Hamlet's speech. In Star Trek,
the Next Generation, there is an immortal character,
carved out of the same stuff as the Greek gods, named

Q. He decides one day to put humanity on trial for their
crimes to the universe. At the end of the hour, Picard and
his crew have, in Qs eyes, unhappily passed the test and so
are allowed to live. And Picard, acted by Patrick Stewart,
a former Shakespearean actor gets his moment.

To Q, as a last testimony to what is humanity, Picard
preaches..."What Hamlet says with irony I say with
conviction...

What a piece of work is man

How noble in reason

How infinite in faculties

In form and moving

How express and admirable

In action how like an angel

In apprehension how like a god

Picard's defense, a praise of humans, yes, and yet be
reminded he speaks in a spaceship wandering within the
vastness of the galaxies... In the timeless space...it is
easy to recognize just who gets the glory.

We end where all of the texts began...

Psalm 8

When I look at your heavens, the
Work of your fingers,

The moon and stars that you

Have established;

What are human beings that you

Are mindful of them,

Mortals that you care for

Them?

You have made them a little

Lower than God,

And crowned them with glory

And honor.

You have given them dominion

Over the works of your

Hands;

You have put all things under

Their feet,

All sheep and oxen,

And also the beasts of the field,

The birds of the air, and the fish of

The sea,

Whatever passes along the paths

Of the seas.

O LORD, our Sovereign,

How majestic is your name in all the earth!