

FIRST LESSON: Amos 5:10-15
SECOND LESSON: Hebrews 4:12-16
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“Nothing Is Hidden in God’s Sight”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

We’ve all pretty much had the same nightmare. We’re standing in school or work or church, and suddenly we realize that we’re in our underwear. We have no idea where our clothes are, but everyone is looking at us. I’ve dreamed that church is about to start and I’m in my office still in my bathrobe! Our insecurity about being exposed or unprepared seems to be universal.

I don’t often choose to preach from Hebrews because it comes from a world so different from ours that a lot of explaining is generally required. We don’t live in an environment where there are temples and high priests and sacrifices. We are not surrounded by Roman soldiers carrying deadly swords, although the gun violence in our nation is actually far worse. But the images that would have been so vivid and accessible for these people are academic for us. The message, however, is very, very important, so let’s try to break through and understand what is being said.

“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.” The word of God is the living spoken word of God, the God who spoke creation into being. It is alive and active, and sharper than any double-edged sword. This sword was the short sword. It had two names, one in Greek and one in Latin. Because it was not too heavy and cumbersome, soldiers could wield this sword to great effect. It was the standard piece of equipment for the Roman soldier. And of course it was sharpened on both sides. This was not a knife used for cutting, but a sword used to slice through. If the language makes you uncomfortable it should.

We are first told that the word of God can cut through right to the center of our being dividing our soul, or earthly psychological make-up, from our spirit, our spiritual center. I could not begin to separate the two myself. I can’t tell where my psychology ends and my spirit begins, but God can. And the word or sword of God also cuts right through to the center of our thoughts. How many of us have thought when we’re in an awkward situation, “Well it’s a good thing they can’t read my mind!”? **God can.** Every thought, every emotion, every careful deliberation we make, is known by God. And not only our thoughts, but the intentions behind those thoughts. *And most of us don’t even recognize these for ourselves.* We’re so exceptionally good at rationalization that

we usually hide from ourselves our true motivations of selfishness or greed or lust. But God sees it ALL. Every level within us, every inner contradiction, every fear and hope, everything that is ugly and everything that is beautiful.

Nothing is hidden from God.

Feeling exposed yet? Oh wait, it gets worse. Hebrews says, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” The English translation we read softens things. But there are two words. The first word means to be stripped naked or almost naked. Think standing in your underwear. The second word translated as “laid bare” refers to a sacrifice. It literally means to be held down exposing our throat in order to be slain. All of this imagery just flies right by us because we don’t know what’s really being said, but these words are truly enough to freak people out. This is not comfortable stuff. This is really, really alarming.

Then, just as all is lost, we are given hope. Hebrews tells us, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”

“We don’t have a high priest.” In fact, even the terminology sounds more like Indiana Jones than reality. But the high priest in Israel was an extremely powerful man, combining religious and secular authority. Only the high priest was allowed into the Holy of Holies, the place where it was believed God dwelt, and only once a year. The high priest was the intermediary between the people and God. The high priest carried out sacrifices on the people’s behalf that made them right with God again. The role was central to forgiveness. But Jesus is our high priest, without the limitations of any other high priest. He passed through the heavens and intercedes for us not just one day a year, but for all time.

Jesus, our high priest, also knows what it is to be human. He knows what temptation feels like firsthand. He can sympathize with our weaknesses. He has walked in our shoes and knows what it is to be us, every ache and pain and moment of weakness and struggle with temptation. And we can be sure that Jesus was tempted not just in the wilderness, but every day. The devil wouldn’t give up that easily. Satan would have done anything to undermine Jesus and derail salvation. But Jesus did not sin. That is the difference. He understands why we made the decisions we did, but he did not make the same decisions. But because he truly understands Jesus has ultimate compassion and knowledge. **We do not need to fear.** Fear would be the expected thing. We have been totally exposed. God knows it all. Of course, we think that God would reject us, except that in Christ, God does the opposite.

Shame is a very powerful force. Guilt says, “I did something bad.” Shame says, “I am bad.” We live in a society full of toxic shame. As far as we might imagine we have come, we are immersed in it. We wield shame like a weapon in the public sphere. Politicians go out of their way to cast shame on their opponents. And there is no real answer to shame because it sticks. We can deal with guilt. We can apologize and make restitution. We can change our ways.

But we can't change our identity. There are things that society will forgive us for, but there is no grace for someone who is viewed as inherently bad or flawed. We are cruel to those who don't measure up. We cast them out. And so many of us live in fear thinking, "If they only knew what I was really like . . . if they knew what I did . . . they would want nothing to do with me." And tragically, as far as society is concerned, this is often true. **But it is not true of God.** GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING. Jesus died for us. Through the grace of God in the cross there is life and healing and freedom. God wants us to be truly free, which means being free of shame.

In 1945 as World War II was drawing to a close, a young German soldier sat broken inside a POW camp. He had been a soldier in Hitler's army and now sat inside a prison in Scotland. The cities of his homeland had been reduced to rubble. But then came the worst revelation of all. In September, all of the German POWs were confronted with pictures of Belsen and Auschwitz. They were pinned up in one of the huts, without comment. The soldier saw himself mirrored in the eyes of the Nazi victims. His profound depression was now overwhelmed with even greater shame. It felt like a stranglehold choking him. The only future he could see filled him with despair. But in the midst of this shame and despair a visiting chaplain gave the soldier a Bible and, with little else to do, he began reading it. In the Psalms he heard voices he could relate to, the agony of people who felt God had abandoned them. In the story of Christ crucified he encountered a God who knew what it was to experience suffering, abandonment, and shame. Feeling utterly forsaken himself, the German soldier found a friend in the One who cried "my God my God why have you forsaken me".

In 1947, he was given permission to attend a Christian conference that brought together young people from across the world. The Dutch participants asked to meet with the German POWs who had fought in the Netherlands. The young soldier was one of them. He went to the meeting full of fear, guilt and shame, feelings that intensified as the Dutch Christians spoke of the pain Hitler had inflicted, of the dread the Gestapo bred in their hearts, of the family and friends they had lost, of the disruption and damage to their communities. Yet the Dutch Christians came to offer forgiveness not condemnation. It was completely unexpected. These Dutch Christians embodied the love the Christ.

That German soldier was Juergen Moltmann, who would go on to become one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. Years later he would write these words, "We are waited for as the prodigal son in the parable is waited for by his father. We are accepted and received, as a mother takes her children into her arms and comforts them. God is our last hope because we are God's first love." Amen.

Amos 5:10-15

¹⁰ There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth.

11 You levy a straw tax on the poor
and impose a tax on their grain.
Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.
12 For I know how many are your offenses
and how great your sins.
There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes
and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.
13 Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times,
for the times are evil.
14 Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.
Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.
15 Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts.

Hebrews 4:12-16

12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. **13** Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.
14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. **16** Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.