

They call him “the pioneer”

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

One of the Scripture lessons for today is from the book called Hebrews. It's not really a letter although it's called "The Letter to the Hebrews." We don't know much about the original setting of this book. We don't know the author. We don't know when it was written or where. It has some of the most beautiful and the most difficult Greek in the New Testament.

To be sure, there are some problems in the book. Luther found serious difficulties in it. And yet it's thirteen chapters long, and in it are verses that you likely learned in Sunday School or confirmation but may not remember where they are from.

Today we're going to tackle this book. It's not as difficult as you might think if we identify the key to it. In Hebrews 2:10 it says Jesus is "the pioneer" of our salvation, and that's the key to what this is about. That wasn't so difficult.

What does it mean to be a pioneer? A pioneer is often an explorer or an adventurer. Someone like Davey Crockett or Daniel Boone. Perhaps some of your own ancestors were pioneers in this country from countries across the ocean. Perhaps you have relatives from several generations ago who came to this new land for religious freedom, or political freedom, or just the chance to build a future more prosperous than the old country allowed.

There's a novel by James Fenimore Cooper called *The Pathfinder*, 1840, the one who finds the path, the way forward. The one who builds a homestead in the face of hardships of all kinds.

What does it mean to be a pioneer? You may be amused to learn that the word in German for pioneer is pioneer. Ha! It's a very particular concept. You find it in Greek because the Greeks were people who lived on the islands of the Mediterranean. They were those who went out, explored, and settled the islands. They were pioneers.

In the Old Testament Abraham was a pioneer. The Lord said: "Go" and he went. He went four hundred miles across the bare desert, according to the Lord's command.

It says in the Book of Hebrews that Jesus is the pioneer. It's helpful that the other place where this word is found is in Hebrews 12:2. There it says he is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. What does that mean? What did he do?

Hebrews chapters one and two are complicated and too much to read now, but they offer a remarkable account of what's at stake. They say he was the one who was the Son of God,

and we, by adoption, are also children. Therefore, it goes on to say he was flesh and blood just like us. Therefore, he was the one who went before, who suffered and was tempted, who was like us in every way.

Think of the beloved hymn, "What a friend we have in Jesus." It says he "knows our every weakness." I am nervous about that because it makes Jesus a bit too much like us.

Listen to how Hebrews puts it: Hebrews 4:15 says he was like us in every respect, tempted as we are, except without sin. That is the difference. That's why he could be the one who was "the pioneer," the one who went ahead.

What exactly did he do? It says in Hebrews 2:9, and 17 that he took on the sin as a sacrifice. You recall what Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." And in Romans 8:3 Paul writes that he came in the likeness of sinful flesh as a sin offering, that is, he is the one who made it right. How did he do that?

That comes in this complicated verse, Hebrews 2:14: Like us he was flesh and blood, he shared the same nature, that "through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."

Though he was not a sinner himself, he took on sin and death. Also, it's important to keep in mind that sin and death are the same thing. We don't often say that so directly, but they are. By conquering death, he was the pioneer, the one who perfected what it was about. The same thing is said in 1 Cor 15:26: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith; he is the one who has made it all different.

What has that done for you and me lately? It seems to be all in the past, so then so what? To go to that other place in Hebrews 12:2 where the word "pioneer" is used, it says: "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." That tells us again what it means to be a pioneer. The pioneer blazed the trail ahead because of the joy that was set before him. In other words, the future.

This brings us to a verse you are familiar with, Hebrews 13:14: "For here we have no abiding city, but we seek the city which is to come." In other words, this world isn't all there is and it isn't what it's really about. To be sure, this is where Jesus died and rose again and changed everything. But he did that here because of "forever," because of the joy that is set before. And another, Heb 12:1:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also set aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the

race set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

This brings us to another well-known verse you probably learned in Sunday school, Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In the Book of Hebrews, the word “faith” means “hope,” as it says in 1 Peter 1:3: “By his great mercy we have been born anew to **a living hope**, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.”

Jesus, the pioneer, has defeated sin and death, broken new ground and perfected it, that is, made it ready for us. For this reason, we have a living and sure hope. Amen