### “His Mercy” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 22, 2024

**Hebrews 10:5–9**

5Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; 6in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure. 7Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.’” 8When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings,” 9then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.

**Luke 1:39–53**

39In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

46And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

You’re probably used to the fact that passages from different books of the Bible can be very different. Some are intellectual and theoretical. Others are full of human emotion in a story. All of this shows that our Bible passages were written by different people, and they reflect their authors’ own characteristics. We have that situation today, with the very abstract Hebrews passage and the very emotional Luke story. Each one may connect with you in its own way.

The Hebrews passage can be a little confusing unless you realize that the author is saying that Christ was the author of Psalm 40. It seems that he saw Christ as the author of the whole Old Testament, though we don’t know for sure. He has Jesus uttering these words, the longest anti-sacrificial passage in the New Testament. It quotes a psalm that rejects sacrificial ritual and makes a sharp *contrast* between performing the ritual and deciding to accept God’s will. In the psalm, God says he desires that people do his will, *rather* than offering sacrificial rituals, and says that “he” (Hebrews probably means Christ) abolishes the need for the sacrificial ritual and establishes the doing of the will.

In our day and time, we recognize that our ancestors sought to appease God with sacrificial gifts. But doesn’t this make God a smaller, less loving deity who can be satisfied and appeased with gifts? We now know that these were old ways, that the coming of Jesus allows these old ways to fade away, allowing us to receive the joy of harmonizing with God’s will and love.

Hebrews is saying that Jesus has *replaced* the sacrificial ritual system. There is no longer any need for the ritual. Two chapters earlier, Hebrews had said the first covenant was now “obsolete” (8:13). The theology of Hebrews is a bit unusual because it is so thoroughly based upon a sacrificial metaphor, yet here it strongly asserts that the sacrificial system is now obsolete.

It’s hard to connect that passage to the gospel passage we read, unless we see it as a pivot point, the time where the joy of the new way (as revealed by Jesus) is coming into reality. The story in Luke shows Mary visiting her kinswoman, Elizabeth, and the baby leaping in Elizabeth’s womb when the pregnant Mary walks in. Elizabeth takes it as a sign of the significance of Mary’s baby. She is humbled and astonished that the mother of her Lord, that is, the coming Messiah, should come visit her. She also blesses Mary for believing the annunciation that was made to her.

Mary then launches into a long poem, most of which I’ve included in our Bible reading today. Her poem emphasizes God’s mercy, his uplifting the lowly and humbling the mighty. She doesn’t say anything about the life of her son-to-be, but *does* talk about the effect his life will have: scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, filling the hungry, and sending the rich, who were seeking only material gain, away empty. It explicitly says that the poor and hungry will be lifted up, and the powerful and haughty put down. Mary’s hymn says nothing about her Son needing to grow up and to die for others. It speaks only of how human relationships will be changed. Mary affirms God’s mercy, and we bless her for it.

By no means is it the same message as in Hebrews, but there is a *slight* similarity, in that Hebrews has the old covenant being replaced by a new covenant, while Luke has the old and powerful people being replaced, or perhaps equaled by, the formerly poor and hungry. Thus, both passages have to do with something radically new happening. These passages could be seen as fulfilling God’s promise to Isaiah: “new things I now declare . . . I am about to do a new thing . . . I will make a way in the wilderness” (42:9; 43:19).

The New Testament is truly a new thing, a new agreement between people and God, showing that while we reach up to God, God is at the same time reaching down to us. We don’t need to persuade God to reach out to us. Jesus pictured his message as new wine that has to be put into new wineskins (Matt 9:17; Mark 2:22), which means that new teachings require new ways of thinking. If we try to force the new teaching into old wineskins, old ways of thinking, our old minds will be burst apart! We need to have minds that can stretch in order to receive the new teaching.

We need to be able to leave behind what is obsolete. Of course, what we humans *usually* do is to take the new message and adapt it, assimilate it to our old ways of thinking. As soon as revelation enters the human mind, it gets altered and domesticated to fit our existing beliefs. Pouring new wine into old wineskins is *exactly* what people usually do.

The old wineskins pictured an angry and punishing God. Religion has carried a long heritage of fear. This was some of our ancient ancestors’ approach to God; their fear limited their understanding of the Father. When one’s relationship with God is characterized by fear, one’s theology is distorted. The message of Jesus has now been mingled with an old message of God’s supposedly dangerous and angry nature. To this day, many people have a concept of our Father of mingled love and fear. Divine revelation given by Jesus comes to banish that fear: “perfect love casts out fear,” says First John (4:18), but it takes a long time for the new message to sink in. Too many people have a concept of God as both terrifying and loving, both violent and merciful, of God as a holy terror. The new wine has been poured into old wineskins. This blending of the old and the new is a distortion. We need to grasp the *new*. It was new and startling when Jesus said “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27). It was very reasonable, but still new, when Jesus said “If you . . . know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt 7:11). Jesus proclaims that the Father gives *freely*, and not because sacrifice or payment has been made.

In one of the hymns we will sing today, we say “Lead us up the straight and narrow to brighter day” (“O Christ, Our Light,” fourth verse). In another one, we sing “in His name all oppression shall cease” (“O Holy Night,” third verse). These speak of the new and more righteous life that follows Jesus’ Incarnation, at least among those who seek to do his will.

Christianity is a new thing. The idea of serving God out of joy and gratitude, without any trace of fear, was unlike what any of the other religions taught. Will we some day be able to accept what the psalmist understood about God?—“Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but . . . I delight to do your will” (Ps 40:6, 8).

Will we have faith, as Mary had faith in Gabriel’s annunciation to her, and Elizabeth had faith that Mary’s child would be the deliverer? And as the psalmist had faith when he wrote “let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe for ever” (40:11).

Let God’s love fill you with joy in this season of hope, peace, and love. Know that you are loved. Harmony with God’s will is our goal. God wants to help us to harmonize. This is new wine, and it is intoxicating.