“***The Fear of Death***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Dec. 29, 2019

**Hebrews 2:11–17**

11For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, 12saying, “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.” 13And again . . . “Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.

**Matthew 2:16–23**

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20”Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” 21Then Joseph went to the land of Israel. . . 23 and made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Matthew gives us this horrifying story of the Slaughter of the Innocents, in which Herod the *so-called* “Great” tries to kill the promised child. Herod had learned about this expected “king of the Jews” from the magi (Matt 2:2–3), but they wouldn’t help him actually find the child. Herod, who feels threatened by the prophecy, orders the massacre. The baby Jesus escapes death because an angel warns Joseph in a dream of the danger, and they flee to Egypt, a week’s journey away. They are refugees in Egypt for a couple of years. Eventually, in 4 b.c., Herod dies. Joseph, again, hears from an angel in a dream, learning that it is now safe to go back. The family returns to its home in Nazareth, in the northern Jewish territories. They had only been in Bethlehem for the census.

The story about Herod fits with what other sources say about him. He was a violent and paranoid tyrant. He was not completely devoid of the finer feelings. He definitely loved his wife, Mariamne. But his paranoia got the better of him. He suspected her of plotting against him, had her put on trial, and then executed. Herod’s son, Herod Antipas, was not much better. This reading has been very grim. Our other reading, Hebrews, talks about the *fear* of death, and I want to take a look at that now.

First of all, what *is* the book of Hebrews? It is really a sermon, not a letter. It has none of the personal greetings that come in a letter. Further, it is anonymous. Since we do not know the author, we call him “Hebrews” for convenience, the same as we call the work. Hebrews starts by saying Jesus brought “many children to glory,” and that he “is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (2:10–11). So Jesus is both our brother and our father. Hebrews sees Jesus actually *speaking* through the Old Testament, “saying, ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’ And again . . . ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me’” (2:12–13). Hebrews is saying that Jesus is the actual *source* and *speaker* of these lines from Psalm 22:22 and Isaiah 8:18, and maybe of the whole Old Testament! He sees Jesus foretelling the fact that he would lead his children in this life, and the afterlife. So now the meaning of the Old Testament is clear, for Hebrews: it was Jesus all along, foretelling the salvation he would bring.

How does Hebrews spell out Jesus’ solidarity with us, his “brothers and sisters”? He says that Jesus shared our “flesh and blood,” that he conquered the devil, and so freed us from slavery to “the fear of death” (Heb 2:14–15). This is a remarkable and exciting passage, although it is not 100% clear. First of all, it does not say we are freed from the fear of death, but from *slavery to the fear of death*.A normal fear of death may remain, but it no longer determines our actions, no longer makes us do shameful things to save our lives. The fear of death now ceases to enslave us or run our lives in any way.

But what exactly *was* it that freed us from slavery to fear? It seems to be the fact that the divine Son became enfleshed like us, suffered like us, and learned to be sympathetic to us. He goes on to say that “he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” (2:17). He has walked a mile in our shoes.

In chapter 4, Hebrews will go on to say: “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). Hebrews emphasizes Jesus’ ability to sympathize, since he was tested by life, as we are, and suffered, as we do, and more. Although he never gave in to sin, he knew the difficulties of life, he endured the vulnerabilities of the material frame, and he can sympathize with our weaknesses.

It seems that the Incarnation itself was the saving event. The term “Incarnation” refers to the divine Word, the divine Son, becoming a human being. And so it refers to the *whole* of Jesus’ life, not just one event, like the crucifixion. The Son of God lived a fully human life and death, and therefore we can say that God really understands us, from the *inside,* and from beginning to end.

Jesus had to become fully human. By sharing our lot, he was able to understand and sympathize with us, and so to qualify as a worthy and merciful high priest. Hebrews really believes that God appointed high priests, and appointed Jesus the greatest and truest high priest, a priest who saves. Only in Hebrews is Jesus called a high priest, but it is a crucial idea for him.

But why was slavery to the fear of death even brought up? Hebrews seems to be alluding to Christian martyrs who demonstrated fearlessness. Here he is actually very close to the Stoic philosophy of those days, which held up the ideal of overcoming one’s passions, including the fear of death. Hebrews promises that we, too, can overcome fear of death, or at least enslavement by it. The key difference is that he makes it a by-product of Jesus’ Incarnation. Probably it is also a by-product of our trust in the fact that Jesus has prepared a place for us in the afterlife, and that we are profoundly safe, no matter what happens to us down here.

Again, the Incarnation is central to all this teaching, and Jesus’ wisdom and sympathy are central to Hebrews’ notion of the Incarnation. If we take away the priestly idea, the rest of the message is consistent with the whole New Testament, but Hebrews spells out the meaning of the Incarnation more thoroughly than any other New Testament author.

Let’s look at the implications here. The Son of God incarnated as a human being among other humans. He endured limitation, hardship, and suffering, and *that* is why he can truly empathize with us. This is remarkable. It means that Jesus’ life, his self-humbling, his compassion and sympathy have saving power. But this had to be developed through *experience*, through sharing the life of flesh and blood. In fact, the Son of God’s compassion is also God’s compassion. So, ultimately, it is God’s mercy that saves us. “He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect,” Hebrews says, so that he might show mercy and faithfulness (2:17).

It’s the same message you’ve heard before: the love of God saves us. Nothing that happens to us down here can separate us from the eternal love of God. The Incarnation of the Word in a human life was an act of love. The *whole life* was a revelation, a disclosure, of God.

If we believe Jesus’ promise that he has prepared a place for us to live in the next life, then we can be free from slavery to the fear of death. We can really live and love and thrive in *this* lifetime.