

GRADUATION SERMON 2009

HEBREWS 3:1—

“FIX YOUR THOUGHTS ON JESUS”

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Hebrews 3:1 Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, our Apostle and Great High Priest

It's not hard to lose focus, is it? I mean, has something like this ever happened to you? You sit down at your desk. You are firmly resolved to get some work done. “Ah, but first. . . let me check my email.” And then it's, “Let me Google something quick.” One click of the mouse leads to another and before you know it, you're in Cloud Cuckoo Land, lost in the great fog of the Internet, a million miles away from where you started. Maybe, if you're lucky, you can see still the shards of your shattered resolves, glinting on the earth far below. We're surrounded by so much labor-saving technology, it's a wonder we get anything done.

We can lose our focus in a spiritual sense, too, getting distracted from what really matters. After a long period of concentrated study, you men are about to graduate. In all those years you were surrounded by professors and classmates and friends and family who were constantly pointing you to Christ. Yet can you honestly tell me that even though you were surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, you never lost focus? Never became distracted? Never checked for scores on ESPN when maybe you should have been doing something else?

Now you're leaving the seminary. You are standing at the threshold of a new phase in your lives, away from seminary hill. Your resolve is keen. You are eager to be about the Lord's business. Think you'll never get distracted? You're going out to serve God in a world filled with distractions and temptations and cross and woe! But you knew that already. That's exactly why you choose as your motto, your class verse the words from Hebrews I just read. You wanted to hold them before your eyes at all times and in all places so you could:

FIX YOUR THOUGHTS ON JESUS

- I. God's Faithful Apostle
- II. God's Merciful High Priest

I. “And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,” we sing in the hymn, “Steals on the ear the distant triumph song. Then hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.” I’d like to tell you that those words are always true in a believer’s life. But they weren’t exactly true for the people to whom God addressed these words, and their experience serves as a warning for us too. Sometimes when God puts the mark of the cross on our lives and allows us to suffer trouble and woe, the effect on us is not positive. We stop hearing the distant triumph song. We listen to other voices. Hearts and hands grow weak. We lose our sense of purpose. That’s because we still have a sinful nature. The people in Rome to whom this letter was likely written had already been through many battles of faith. They had stood their ground. But now this latest round of persecution just seemed like one battle too many. They were getting weary of it all. The pressure was getting to them. It seemed so much easier to give up, to slack off. They were losing their focus.

How does our writer respond? By this marvelous letter in which he paints a glorious picture of our Savior! He fills his mouth with Christ. He urges them to turn away from the entangling doubts and debilitating fears and then to turn again to Jesus, “Fix your thoughts on him, God’s faithful apostle.” Did you know that this is the only time in the New Testament that the title “Apostle” is given to Jesus? It means someone sent by God, someone who has God’s commission. When he speaks, he speaks for God, with full authority. Here’s how the writer to the Hebrews puts it in the majestic opening of his letter, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Jesus is God’s final Word to us! There is no higher thought, no better revelation, no deeper insight that one can ever hear. God spoke through his Old Testament prophets in many ways and at various times. He spoke through dreams, through oracles, through visions, through sermons, through songs. Now he has spoken to us directly through a son, his Son, who is God from God, Light from Light.

I know that at this moment, as you are about to graduate, there is nothing more precious to you than God’s Word. You have traced all the loving contours of Jesus’ face in your biblical theology classes. You have been given clarity and certainty as you studied all the Bible’s teachings in your doctrinal classes. You have seen how God preserved his Word through trials and temptation in your church history classes. You have witnessed the power of the Word in peoples’ lives in your pastoral theology classes and during your vicar year. You want to leave this place as people who want to preach and teach not your own deep thoughts, but God’s authoritative Word. You want to preach Jesus!

But I know from my own experience, brothers, that there will come a time when you will be tempted to lose your focus. When what C. S. Lewis once called "the horror of the same old thing" comes creeping over you. There are many ways it can happen. Our own plans and schemes and methodologies can take pride of place in our hearts. We can become preoccupied with success and with numbers. "Last week 150 were in worship and I was a hero. This week only 75 and I'm a failure." Or we are tempted to preach a watered-down word because, well, everyone knows postmodern people can't think in anything deeper than bullet points anyway. You may begin to feel the pressure and burden of being this razzle dazzle communicator whose perfect words thrill people week after week as they throng to hear you.

Now of course I'm not talking against planning, and I'm not saying numbers don't matter in the kingdom. Obviously we will strive for excellence and give our best to him who gave us his best. We will work hard to communicate clearly and well. But all these worthy goals and practices can be misused. They can become distractions when they become voices from our sinful egos, calling us away from Jesus, tempting us to lose our focus on his Word.

If that ever happens to you, I pray by God's grace that the Spirit will call you back, back to himself. Maybe he will stir in you and remind you of this passage again. Maybe a colleague or your spouse will remind you of what does and does not count in the kingdom, and encourage you again to "Fix your thoughts on Jesus." Not just because he's a great example of someone faithful to the Word (which of course he is), but much more because he offered up his entire life of unbroken obedience to God as your perfect substitute.

We think of how, on trial for his life, he stood before the High Priest who asked him, "Are you the Christ?" Faithful to his Father, he looked the High Priest right in the eye. Holding nothing back, he said, "Yes, it is as you say, and you will see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of glory." He made his good confession. And he did it all for you, so that you could claim his perfect life as your own. That's what makes you holy. That's what makes you heirs of a heavenly calling. That means that so far as your relationship with God is concerned, you have nothing to prove. Jesus has clothed you with himself in Baptism and said, "Here, take my life! It was all for you!"

This in turn will be the driving power within you. You will make your good confession too. With the mighty word of God's own Son in your mouth—God's heaven-sent and final Word,—you cannot fail! Through you God means to re-make the world, one heart at a time.

II. And as you fix your eyes on Jesus, remember too that he is also your merciful High Priest. Brothers, when you go out to preach the

Word, I hope you never forget that we live in a world full of sadness and woe. We have been forcefully reminded of this truth in these past few days. We think of those two fine young men studying at MLC. They offered such bright promise of being wonderful pastors, wonderful servants of God. Yet their lives were tragically cut short. From our human perspective, it doesn't make sense. It doesn't seem fair. Or we think on this glad day of how all of you are graduating, all of you have successfully completed your course of studies, all you are presenting yourselves to the church and saying, "Here am I, send me, send me!" But sadly, not all are being immediately sent. Some have been called to serve. Some have been called to wait. Again, from an earthbound perspective, it doesn't make sense. It doesn't seem fair.

Sometimes we may be tempted to think that the problems we face are so much worse than those of any generation that went before us, but that's just not true. It was ever so. The world has always been filled with death and the Devil with his accusations. If there's anything different about the current scene, it's simply this. For more and more people with a modern mindset and a modern worldview, God just seems gone. He doesn't even enter their calculations or considerations. Far from keeping their focus on God as they consider their problems, they don't even think of him at all. Or if they do, God seems lost behind a thousand stars. A vague, shadowy something.

And when God seems gone, all human problems become huge. We lose all perspective on our earthly landscapes. That's exactly why our writer holds up before the eyes of his people Jesus our great High Priest we confess. He "is the exact representation of God's being." (Heb 1:3). Our God and Maker. Yet he did not remain aloof and apart, lost behind a thousand stars. He was born of a human mother. He was given a name—Jesus. He became our flesh and blood brother.

As he develops this theme, our writer emphasizes what this means for us in two ways. Both thoughts find their focus in our High Priest's great compassion for us poor sinners. First of all he points to what Jesus did *then* when he first came to earth. Unlike the priests of old, he did not have to bring sacrifices again and again, offering the blood of bulls and goats first for his own sins and then for the sins of his people. He made one perfect offering, one perfect sacrifice—once and for all and forever—for the sins of the whole world. As our perfect substitute, he offered up himself. He said, "Let their death be my death. Let their sin be my sin. Let them go free." And so he set us free forever from the power of death that haunts our lives.

But it's not just about what Jesus did then. He is still at God's right hand now as our great and exalted High Priest. He knows we still struggle with sin and death and trial and woe. He can sympathize

with our weakness. He was tempted in every way, yet was without sin. That means he was tempted and overcame. And he is near and strong to be our strength and to uphold and uplift us when we are tempted. We come to the throne of grace through him with complete confidence. We're not talking to a vague something. But to the God and Father of our brother Jesus.

That's the word God has given you to preach. Point your people to Jesus in every time of sorrow and trouble. Tell them to fix their eyes on him. We have a merciful High Priest. He is not far. Not lost. Not gone. But near to help and bless. It's something we do well to remember, too, in these days when our own synod is making its way through some tough times. We turn our eyes from Jesus, and all our problems seem so huge. So much more than human sized. How can we reduce our budget from 38 to 30 million? What will it all mean for our schools? For our missions? For our ministries? Oh woe is us! Whatever will we do? Like Peter, we hear the roar of the wind, we see the size of the waves, we stare at the depth of the seas that threaten to engulf us. And we sink!

But there is a God in heaven. And he gave us his heart when he gave us Jesus. He is God's last word to us. He came down from heaven to be one with us and to make us one with God. He has gripped us now and will never let us go. Nothing will ever separate us from his love. He is near, near, near to help and bless. And he will never leave our side.

Brothers, keep your eyes on him. Fill your mind with him. Fix your thoughts on him. And then fill your mouth with him! Preach him to the joy and building up of God's holy people. Amen.