

Scripture: Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Message: Confidence

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When you arrived at church this morning, you had confidence that there would actually be a worship service at 10 o'clock.

When you sat on the pew, you had confidence that it would hold you up.

When you went out to your car this morning to drive to church, you inserted the key into the ignition and had confidence that the car would start.

When you turned on the tap to take a shower this morning, you had confidence that there would be hot water.

OK. You get the idea. There are many things that we do, confident of an expected result.

The word confidence originates from the Latin word *confidere*, which is a combination of two words: *con*, meaning with, and *fidere* meaning faith or trust. To act with confidence means to act with faith or with trust that something will be true.

We gain confidence in a number of different ways. Personal confidence may come from successfully attempting something. When we have done something once or twice, we are confident that we can do it again.

Or when something repeatedly happens in a certain way, we become confident that it will continue to happen that way.

We gain confidence by facing our fears. As we overcome our fears, we are confident to try something else that is new or different.

Confidence grows through the encouragement of others. When others support us or our efforts, it gives us confidence to continue.

What about the confidence of faith in Jesus? What about the confidence of living as a child of God? What about the confidence of knowing Jesus is my brother and I can talk to my Father in heaven?

Do we base that confidence on personal experience or the words of others? My Sunday School teacher said it's true, so I can have confidence. Or the doctrines of the church state it, so that gives me confidence. Or I have believed it for so many years, so I can be confident that it will continue to be true.

But then something happens that erodes the confidence in the other person or in the church or in ourselves. Doubts arise about whether that person or institution can be

trustworthy. What if it's *not* true? What if I've been living with faith or trust, with confidence, in something that is not true?

That was what was happening with the people to whom the book of Hebrews is written. They had believed in Jesus, but various circumstances were eroding their confidence. It may have been ridicule of others, or opposition to their faith. It may have been some form of persecution or suffering that they were experiencing as followers of Jesus. It was leading them to question whether the message of Jesus was true or not.

The author has been explaining different reasons for maintaining that confidence: God has spoken to us throughout history and now in Jesus, who is the fulfilment of that revelation (ch.1); Jesus humbled himself to become like us, as a brother, in order to restore our relationship with God (ch.2).

In these verses that we read this morning, the author explains that we have confidence because Jesus is our great high priest.

Wonderful, I think. So what?! We aren't very familiar with high priests, so this doesn't necessarily say too much. We might want to change that reference and talk about a mediator. That's something we can understand. We see mediators at work in labour disputes or in international affairs or in marital breakdowns. Lawyers, diplomats, counselors, all function as mediators who try to get the two opposing sides together. Mediators are a standard part of life in this polarized world.

High priests? Not so much. But high priests are a particular kind of mediator. A mediator gets two sides talking and negotiating. A high priest takes specific action to bring about restoration of the relationship between sinful humans and a holy God. The Jewish religion knew that very well, as did many other ancient religions.

That was fine for those religions of the past, but why do we need a high priest? A high priest is necessary only if I admit that I am sinful and God is holy and something must be done to restore that relationship. I have to admit that my relationship with God is broken and I can't fix it. I need a high priest.

We do not have high priests in church anymore, because Jesus has come to be the great high priest, to fulfill that role once and for all. Jesus is the only one who can make peace between people (us, you, me) and God, a peace that will last.

Verse 14 says we can hold firmly to our faith, we can have confidence. Not because we are so good or because others have told us what is true or because of what we have done. We can have confidence because we know Jesus as our high priest.

To understand this, we have to think about the work of the high priest in the Old Testament. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would go through the curtain into the Most Holy Place in the temple in Jerusalem. He would bring the blood of sacrifice into God's presence as an assurance of forgiveness for the sins of the people.

Jesus has gone "through the heavens." He has not entered the earthly Most Holy Place, the symbol of God's presence with his people on earth. He has gone into the very presence of God, where he is today, having finished this work of forgiveness. He has offered the sacrifice of himself to pay for sin once and for all. Through the work of Jesus, the curtain to the Most Holy Place was torn in two. Access to God is open. No further action by any other high priest is needed. The final sacrifice for sin was made. "It is finished!" Jesus is the high priest who has fulfilled that work of priest once and for all.

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence."

The beginning of chapter 5 gives two reasons for Jesus being qualified to serve as this high priest. A high priest had to be selected from among the people. In other words, a high priest was human, in order to offer sacrifices for the people. Jesus qualifies as priest because he humbled himself to become human, like us.

But a high priest was not self-appointed. He was called by God into this service. We know that Aaron and his family were called by God to serve as high priests. Jesus was also called and appointed by God to serve in this role.

The author makes a strong point of the fact that Jesus qualifies as high priest because he identifies with the people. It is easy to focus on the majesty and greatness and glory of Jesus. But our confidence is not only based on the glorious Jesus, but also on the human Jesus.

Have confidence, "for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin." In times of uncertainty about whether the confidence of faith is valid, remember that Jesus understands. He knows what we are going through.

He was tempted to give up faith and trust in God. Remember his temptations in the wilderness, pushing Jesus to turn away from total trust in God. Or remember that dark night of prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted to turn his back on the whole suffering and dying for sin. "Is there another way? Do I have to go through with this?"

Jesus did not give in to temptation. He was without sin. Yet he was surely tempted in every way, just as we are. Yes, that also includes any temptation to give up on our faith. We

can have confidence in him because he understands.

The author takes this even further in verses 7-10 of chapter 5. Here's the Christmas story taken to a deeper level. This is the meaning of incarnation, Jesus becoming human.

“During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”

“Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”

This is tough language for a comfortable faith that always sees Jesus as the perfect, victorious Son of God. Jesus became human. He learned what obedience as a human being is like. He learned through temptations to avoid suffering and take the easy way of victory. He completely and perfectly identified with us, with humanity, through his suffering and obedience.

Therefore we can have confidence in Jesus as our high priest, as the one who restores our relationship with God. He has perfectly fulfilled this role as high priest, perfectly completing the task of representing us in matters relating to God. He couldn't do that until and unless he obeyed and suffered and died. Because he did all that perfectly, he has “become the source of eternal salvation....”

“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Not because I tell you that you can. Not because your parents or grandparents or Sunday School teacher told you. Not because Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism says that your only comfort in life and death is not your own but that you belong to your faithful Saviour.

Approach the throne of grace with confidence because we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens. This great high priest was tempted in every way just as we are, yet was without sin. This great high priest is called by God and also identified with us in every way, including suffering and tears. Through his perfect obedience, through his sacrifice, his life and death and resurrection, he is our source of eternal salvation. We can have confidence to come to God. We will find and receive grace and mercy.

This is God's word and revelation and promise. In that you can have confidence.

Amen.