

*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.<sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.<sup>4</sup> So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*

<sup>5</sup> *For to which of the angels did God ever say,*

*"You are my Son;  
today I have become your Father"?*

*Or again,*

*"I will be his Father,  
and he will be my Son"?*

<sup>6</sup> *And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,*

*"Let all God's angels worship him."*

<sup>7</sup> *In speaking of the angels he says,*

*"He makes his angels winds,  
his servants flames of fire."*

<sup>8</sup> *But about the Son he says,*

*"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever,  
and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom.*

<sup>9</sup> *You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;  
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions  
by anointing you with the oil of joy." (Hebrews 1:1-9)*

### **Who is Lying in the Manger?**

I've read a lot of biographies. I enjoy following a famous person through all the twists and turns of their public life. I like to see how they interacted with their times and the challenges they faced. But you know what? All biographies end the same way. The guy you're reading about dies. Of course, all biographies begin the same way, too: the person you're reading about is born. I've often thought about holding George Washington or Abraham Lincoln in your arms when they were babies. Their mothers no doubt treasured holding those babies. They thought they were special. Maybe, they even imagined them growing up to do something great. But they couldn't possibly know who that child was going to be and what they were going to mean to the history of our country. Of course, I've held my own children in my own arms. I've imagined all kinds of great futures for them. None of which were based on anything but my dreams and my desires for them. You can't tell by looking at a baby who or what that child is going to be. That was just as true for Jesus as it was for any other human child. When we gather to celebrate the birth of Christ, we have to understand the answer to a very important question: **Who is lying in the manger?**

#### **I.**

The opening verses of the book of Hebrews are a meditation on the answer to that question. **Who is lying in the manger? Someone greater than any prophet.** The Jewish people had a long history of prophets. In one sense, you could say that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all been prophets. God had spoken to each one of them and given them a message to pass down to the generations who would come. Once the people of Israel

had multiplied and were living in Egypt, God sent Moses as the first recognized prophet of Israel. Many others followed: Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Malachi, just to name a few.

The book of Hebrews says, **“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, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”** God spoke to Moses in a burning bush and in a pillar of fire. The Bible says that Moses alone spoke to God face to face – God revealed his glory to Moses in a way that he never did for anyone else. God spoke to the other prophets in ways that fit their times and their missions. At times, they simply heard a voice. At other times, God showed them visions or gave them dreams and then worked in their hearts so that they understood what those visions and dreams meant. God gave many of the prophets beautiful Hebrew poetry. God worked through signs and wonders and showed the prophets his will. Whatever other ways we could find in the Bible, for over a thousand years, from the time of Moses until the time of Malachi, God spoke to the prophets at many times and in various ways.

All those prophets shared one purpose: they prepared the people for Jesus. So, all by itself, that means that the Christ child in the manger is greater than the prophets who pointed to him. That’s the point the book of Hebrews is making: Jesus is greater. For centuries, God spoke through those prophets. But now, he has spoken to us through his Son. Jesus was born. When the time was right, he began to preach and teach and do miracles. Then he died and rose and ascended. His words and ministry take us to a new level of God speaking to us.

God spoke to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. The Son of God obviously is God, just as my sons are obviously human beings. But what does it mean that God appointed him heir of all things? God won’t ever die. So he doesn’t need an heir to take over his estate when he’s gone. The idea here is the importance that an heir has in the affairs of his father. Even today, if someone owns a business and has a lot of dedicated employees, when his son or daughter starts to work there, everyone understands that the child of the owner will be treated differently. That child will move up quickly in the company and the day will come when that heir speaks with his or her father’s authority. He or she may formally take over every day operations and work in the name of his or her father and even people who have worked there much longer will have to do what the heir says. God appointed Jesus to the ultimate position of authority: the heir of God, the maker and owner of the universe.

It’s right that he did so, because God made the universe through Jesus. Jesus was there when the Father said, “Let there be light.” He worked alongside his Father, dividing day from night, making seas and dry lands, filling the sky with the sun, moon and stars. Jesus did all those things. The fact that he did tells us who he is: God himself, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity.

The book of Hebrews continues, **“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”** Jesus shows us the Father. I said before that Moses saw the glory of God. But even for Moses, God hid his face because no sinner could see God’s face and live. But in Christ, we do see God. We see God the Son certainly. He is the glory of the Father and the exact representation of the being of God. But because of the mystery of the Trinity, we don’t only see the Son. We see the Father and Holy Spirit, too. We see him doing what only God can do: sustaining all things by his powerful word. That leads us back to the prophets again. They spoke to the people. God spoke to them. God worked through them just as he works through pastors and teachers who proclaim the word of God today. And God did miraculous things. But Christ speaks as the Son of God, for the entire Trinity, and his words uphold and maintain the entire universe. His words make us children of God.

What did this, God’s greatest spokesman teach? The simple message of the gospel – as the book of Hebrews says, **“After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”** Bethlehem is about what Jesus came here to do just as much as it’s about who he is. He came to provide purification for sins. Jesus came to wash us clean of the sin that we were born with, the sin that corrupts all that we are, the sin that drags us down to hell. In God’s sight, we are filthy with sin. Every day, we think evil, selfish, angry or lustful thoughts. Every day, we say things that deny our God and put us ahead of every other person. We hurt people we love. We’re rude to people who don’t deserve it. We act on our selfishness and our self-love and we make the world a more painful place. We sin. That filth of our sin should drag us straight down to hell.

But the baby who was born in the stable and laid in the manger lived a perfect life in our place. He was never selfish or evil or lustful. He never hurt people because he was thoughtless. He had no sinful nature, so he

never indulged any sinful desires. God counts his perfect life as ours. Then he died and he paid for all the selfishness, all the lust, all the hurt that we have committed. He died and he rose and God washed our sin away. He provided purification and then he sat down at the right hand of God to rule all things as the heir of the Father. His purpose is to spread that message through all the earth so that we sinners have eternal life with him. That is the person who was lying in the manger on the first Christmas morning.

## II.

He was so much greater than any Old Testament prophet, so much greater than any New Testament pastor. He was the Son of God made flesh. So the writer to the Hebrews takes the thought a little farther. Prophets and preachers are messengers sent from God. So are angels. As I told you last Sunday, the Greek word *angelos* which means “angel” literally means “messenger.” That’s what the Hebrew word for angel literally means, too. God sends his holy angels to deliver his messages. But just as the Christ child is a greater messenger than any human prophet, so he is greater than any angel could ever be. So when we contemplate the baby of Bethlehem, we need to know **who is lying in the manger: someone greater than any angel.**

Lots of people in history have failed to grasp this point. To this day, sects like the Jehovah’s Witnesses essentially make Jesus some kind of super angel. So the book of Hebrews quotes several Old Testament passages to show us just how much greater Jesus really is. The first pair of quotations don’t speak of the manger in Bethlehem. They speak of what theologians call “the eternal generation of the Son.” What that means is that before time began, Jesus was born of the Father. That’s why God is “God the Father.” First and foremost, he’s the Father of Jesus. But God did that outside of time. The Son of God is eternal, he has no beginning or ending. So he is the true, only begotten Son of God and he always existed. How that can be true, I will let God explain to you when you get to heaven. But it is what the Scriptures teach. The writer to the Hebrews points out that Jesus is not just an angel, because God never said to an angel, **“You are my Son; today I have begotten you”** which, by the way, is the translation in the footnote of your Bible and it’s a much better translation. God didn’t “beget” or give birth to the angels. He made them. But Jesus is his Son.

The next passage does point us to Bethlehem. Again, to show how much greater Jesus is than any angel, or archangel, the book of Hebrews says, **“And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’”** On the day he was born, all God’s angels sang his praises. You heard that last night, if you were here for our service of lessons and carols, and last Sunday when the children proclaimed the gospel. The angels sang to the shepherds, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” That was praise for Jesus coming to win eternal life for us.

The last quote says, **“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.”** The book of Hebrews says that this is about the Son. The Old Testament calls the Son “God” and speaks of his eternal throne. And then it speaks of his God, God the Father, anointing him. Jesus is no super angel. He is God. He is the ruler of the universe. He is the anointed Savior sent by God.

Now, I realize that seems like some pretty heavy theology. And it is. The Son of God coming in the flesh, is the most advanced theology there is. But its purpose is as simple as the gospel can be: to show us that the baby in the manger is our Savior. He had the power to conquer sin and death and hell for us. He had the value to God to pay for all the sins of all the world. He had the love to reach down from heaven and make himself one of us and then take our place so that we will live. That is the story God is telling us. It’s not a biography. It’s the message of how to escape from sin and death and hell through the work of Jesus. That story begins on Christmas with the birth of Christ. Amen.