

The Divine Speaker

Hebrews

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Bible Text: Hebrews 1:1-2; Zechariah 3
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Let's take our Bibles and turn this morning to Hebrews 1. It's on page 1,001 if you're using the pew Bible from the rack in front of you. Hebrews 1:1,

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,

Heavenly Father, may your word be our guide, may your Spirit be our interpreter and may your glory be our supreme concern through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well, as we come to this great letter or exhortation as it's described within its own pages, the book of Hebrews, we reminded ourselves last week what it is we have in our hands before we even read Hebrews, whenever we're holding this book in our hands, as I hope you are doing right now, what is this book? We learned that it is prophetic and apostolic word. It is one word. Together it forms something set apart, something that is holy to God. That's why we call it Holy Scripture. In the providence of God over many years, the course of perhaps nearly 2,000 years, writing took place which ended up in this one book, a coherent revelation of God, that has come through a variety of sources, a variety of instruments, but which provides us with one coherent story that was in the making under the direction of God and his providence. And the third thing to say about it is that the Holy Spirit was active in inspiring men whether it was the prophets of the Old Testament or the apostles of the New, that we might have this word before us today.

So this is where we come and as we look at the gamut of Scripture, we discover that this word which took place over such a long period, falls into two parts. You can see that from the words "long ago" at the beginning of the sentence, and then at the beginning of verse 2, "in these last days." It's been going on a long time and the subject, the speaking subject of Scripture, the one who is revealing himself, communicating with us, the speaker whether it's long ago or in these last days, is one and the same, it is God. And if you look at the end of the sentence that we read this morning, it is what God has to say about his Son and through his Son.

So in the past, "God spoke to our fathers by the prophets," and you notice that he's writing to Christian people and he's writing about the prophets of the Old Testament, but

he refers to them, to the people they ministered to as "our fathers." In other words, there is no dis-junction in the faith of people in the Old Testament and people in the New Testament. They are our fathers. We are Christian people, these fathers of Israel are our fathers. The Holy Spirit spoke to our fathers by the prophets. That is part of the pre-story, the pretext behind the Christian faith. This did not happen out of the blue. This is not anything like two other religions that come to my mind this morning in which an individual had an experience they described as the experience of an angel, and in that experience, that private experience with an angel, received a written transcript of a holy book.

The Bible is nothing like that. In fact, if you even look at the sentence, it demonstrates there is nothing like that. "Long ago, in many ways, at various times, many times, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets." This is not a private matter. It is a public matter. It is part of the history of a people, Israel. It is impossible for us as the church of Jesus Christ to dismiss, disregard or in any way deny the place that the people of Israel had in the outworking of the story of God. It is absolutely vital in order for us to be where we are today. He spoke in times past to our fathers by the prophets, and in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. He has spoken a final word to us.

Now, why does he say at the beginning of this, "God spoke first to our fathers long ago"? It's because by the time the writer is writing, there has been an over 400 year period in which there was silence from heaven. From Malachi, the last prophet or as I like to call him ??, the first Italian prophet, from Malachi right down to John the Baptist, there was no word from God. There was no word from heaven. There was silence. The revelation had finished. It had ended. It had ceased for those 400 years, a period of time that exactly corresponds to the period of time in which there was no revelation, there was silence from God while Israel was in its bondage and captivity in Egypt.

So there were two great periods in the history of revelation where God was silent: Israel in bondage and Israel in exile for the exile continued from the fall of Babylon until Christ came. Exile even at home because they were under foreign persecutors. So in bondage in Egypt, in exile, silence from God until the word of God came again. And the point of this opening sentence is to remind us of the fact that it is the word of God that gives shape, direction, coherence and a climax to the great drama of God's self-expression, God's self-communication, God's letting us into who he is. It's the one God who has spoken through both the prophets and the apostles.

God is the singular speaking subject in the history of revelation and therein lies a problem as we shall see in a moment, and the problem is simply this: that if God speaks, how does God speak? Because Jesus once said to a woman and the story came from the woman. You can read it in John 4. She was the Samaritan woman. Jesus explained to this woman something about God that we all need to know because it defines the kind of being God is as opposed to the kinds of being we are. We are embodied beings but God is not an embodied being. God is spirit, Jesus said to that woman. God is spirit. He is pure spirit. He is perfect spirit. There are no limits to him. There is no end to him. There are no parts

to him. He is a simple being in the sense that there are no bits and pieces that you can subtract or add into the being of God.

But as one simple being, if you can imagine, God is a being bigger than the universe and beyond. Everything that there is is God. He is such a great being. But if you can imagine that he is only one being, he doesn't talk to himself. He doesn't need to talk to himself. He has no voice. He has no larynx. He has no means of speaking. Speaking is something that belongs to creation; it belongs outside of God. But once God has made the world and once God has made creatures, speaking creatures, creatures who can hear but also speak to each other, what does God do? God creates a voice by which he might speak to them.

And from the beginning of the Bible story, from the beginning of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, we discover that God has been making personal overtures towards these speaking creatures. He was with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, spoke to them. Every evening, it seems, they had a little audience with God as he came down and met with them in the cool of the day. They had a personal relationship with a God who created a means by which he could speak to Adam and Eve. And the writer to the Hebrews is going to say the end of the story is that God himself is going to take on our humanity and speak to us with an embodied person in the person of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So here is the problem: how can God speak to us, problem 1. How can we see God, problem 2. God once said to Moses these words, "You cannot see my face for man cannot see me and live." There is the absolute statement in the Bible. You cannot see God as he is in himself. And yet the Bible also says that people like Abraham and Jacob and Hagar and Gideon and Manoah, the father of Samson, and Isaiah, all saw God. And after their initial surprise at seeing God, we're told they were terrified and perplexed that they were still alive because they believed nobody can see God and live. So is this a contradiction at the heart of the Bible? Is this a terrible confusion on the part of the Bible?

Somebody has put it like this: if one cannot see the Lord and live and yet people are seeing the Lord and not dying, who is this visible image of the Lord that is being seen? There you have the issue. Who is this visible image of the Lord that is being seen because it's all over the Bible? And the answer of the Bible is to point us in the direction of four created things. In other words, God creates means by which he can communicate with human beings and they're all designated in terms of their relationship to the LORD, all uppercase letters, that's Yahweh. In the Hebrew, it's the unpronounceable name as far as Jews are concerned, which is why I will not use it again in the sermon. But if you remember, that's the word I'm referring to whenever from this point on in the sermon I refer to the LORD. It is the name by which he identified himself to Israel, and it's the name by which his people are always identified throughout the Old Testament, and it's the name by which Jesus identifies himself. The angel of the LORD, the name of the LORD, the glory of the LORD, and the word of the LORD.

Now, let me point these out. First of all, you find this figure in the Old Testament called the angel of the LORD. In Genesis, the first time he turns up is when Hagar, who is a servant of Abraham, runs away from home. The background is that Abraham and Sarah, his wife, can't conceive and have children. Sarah is now past child-bearing age. She's barren. She cannot have children. She comes up with the bright idea that maybe if he lies with his slave girl and they have a baby, they could adopt the baby and it can be their baby and so on. Once that's happened, Sarah is not happy with the idea. It was her idea but she's not happy with the idea. Also, Hagar gets a bit upper-self and starts being a bit of a nuisance and eventually Sarah comes down on her like a ton of bricks and Hagar runs away into the desert and she's distraught and she's alone and she's feeling absolutely abandoned and she knows she's pregnant and she doesn't know what her future is going to be, and the angel of the LORD comes to her and he comforts her and he promises her, "I will multiply your offspring. You are going to be the mother of a great nation."

And after listening to the angel of the LORD, she responds by calling him the name, "the LORD," and then giving him another name, "the God of seeing," she calls him. The God of seeing because he had found her and he had seen her condition. Not only that, but the LORD who came to her was better than having an MRI, he was able to tell her that the baby she was carrying was a boy. She got to know that ahead of time. Not everybody got to know that in those days. So she calls him the God of seeing and then she wonders, she wonders as she asks herself, "Have I really seen him who sees me?" A remarkable thing.

Well, the angel of the LORD leaves Hagar. He goes to Abraham and he reassures Abraham that the LORD has spoken to her and the LORD has visited her and the LORD has promised her things. So here you have the first issue. The angel of the LORD appears and you're left asking the question. When he talks, he talks as if he's God. When he talks, he talks about God as if God is different from him or distinct from him. When people meet him, they think it's the LORD they have met. Which is it? Is it the invisible God? Is it the visible angel? What is going on in this story?

You go to chapter 18 of Genesis when we're told the LORD, singular, appears to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham lifts up his eyes and he sees three men coming towards him. The LORD, singular, is coming to visit him. The three men come. He gives them something to eat and drink. They start to speak to him and the LORD speaks to him for a little while both in the singular and the plural. Two of the men get up and they go and as they're going, we're told about these two men, that they were angels, that is, they are in angelic form. Angels are creatures, created things. God can only communicate with created things by using created means. That's the point. God is so big, he wouldn't fit into your head. He has to communicate with us through created means and in this case he uses the angel.

Meanwhile, the one angel was left. The LORD speaks again to Abraham both in the singular and in the plural. The two that go off, they go to Sodom. They visit Sodom in order to rescue Abraham's nephew, Lot. They go after him and while they're there, one of the angels says he has the power to overthrow these cities and to bring destruction. Then we're told the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur from heaven. So there is

identity, the angel of the LORD speaks and acts as the LORD, does what the LORD does, brings judgment on the people, and yet at the same time he can talk about the LORD as being distinct. Which is it?

Now, this goes on and on right throughout the Bible. In chapter 22 when Abraham is obeying God and he builds an altar and he's going to offer his son, Isaac, on the altar in obedience to God's word, he's about to sacrifice Isaac when he's interrupted and the text says the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, "Don't lay a hand on him, for now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love. You fear God but you have not withheld from me," the angel says. The angel is both the same as God and distinct from God.

In Exodus 3, we're told that the angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. Moses turned aside to see the burning bush and as he's standing there, we're told in the text, God calls out to him and says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." And Moses' reaction? He hid his face. He is afraid to look on God. Who is in the bush? The angel of the LORD. Who is Moses afraid of? God in the bush. What does the New Testament suggest? It was the Lord Jesus who was speaking to Moses.

So the angel of the LORD represents God. He is a created being that God uses to communicate with his people, but who is in the angel? The one who normally makes the moves towards humans? The Son. That's what Hebrews is going to be showing us once we get into it; that the God who has spoken has spoken in these last days by a Son. He was always doing it but now in these last days he's spoken to us by his Son who has flesh and blood as we do.

The second created thing is the creation of the name of the LORD. When God comes to Moses in Exodus 23, God says to him, "Behold, I'm going to send an angel to guard you on your way and to bring you to the place that I've prepared for you. And this angel, you need to pay attention to him and not rebel against him for he will not pardon your transgression for my name is in him." In other words, this angel has my name in him and, therefore, he has my authority either to pardon you or condemn you. This angel can do what only God can do. We know that that's what Jews believe from the very beginning because later on when the Son of Man takes on flesh and he comes into the world and he forgives people, the people around him say, "Nobody can forgive sins except God alone." This is the Son of God in a pre-Incarnate way using a created thing, the name of the LORD to come and speak to people.

In chapter 34, Moses says to God, "I'm going to ask you for something I really want. I really really want it. I want to see you. I want to see your glory." And God says, "Well, I'm not going to let you see my glory. I'm going to come by and I'm going to go past you and I'll hide you in the rock and then when I'm past, I'll let you out and you can see the afterburners as I pass by. But this is what I will do, I will proclaim my name to you." That's what he did. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and

faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." That's what the name of the LORD is. That's what the name of the LORD does. Here's the LORD proclaiming about the name of the LORD, "The LORD, the LORD." There is distinction and yet there is identity.

When eventually the children of Israel would reach the Promised Land in Deuteronomy, God says, "When you get there and when eventually you have rest from all of your enemies, I want you to build a place where you can gather to worship, and that place that your LORD, your God, shall choose for you is the place where I will make my name dwell and you'll worship me there."

So fast-forward to the time of King Solomon. King David has been along. King David had defeated the enemies. There is peace in the land. Solomon says, "I intend to build a house for the name of the LORD my God." Build a house for the name and that place will be called the house for my name, as God said. Solomon builds the temple and the one who does not dwell in the heavens or the heaven of heavens, dwells on the earth and that temple becomes the place where he says, "That is where my name is."

So the name of the LORD is a created thing. It's a created mental entity. It's a created category in order to communicate something of the being of God. The being of God can be thought like this: there is God and there is his name, the means by which we know him. And that somehow the means by which we know God is a created means. We come to know God by means of something God creates or makes that is exterior to himself.

This becomes even clearer when we come to the next thing, our next means that God uses: it's the means of the glory, the glory of the LORD. Back in Exodus 16. I know you're looking a bit blank. That's fine. You'll get over it once you've heard this about 20 times. You'll be fine. This is your homework for the week.

Exodus 16. Aaron, the first high priest, calls the people to come before the LORD because they have been complaining all the time. He says, "Come to the LORD," and he spoke to the whole congregation and as he's speaking to them, they all turned around and looked and across the wilderness they saw the glory of the LORD appear in a cloud. Now, let me tell you something about the glory of the LORD, the Shekinah glory of the LORD. It appeared. The language is always the language of it appeared to be, it looked like. It looked like a pillar of flame or fire and the smoke that it was giving off, and that pillar of fire with the smoke surrounding it, became known as the glory of the LORD. It appeared out of the blue. It came racing across the desert towards them, towards the camp of Israel. And when Moses went on Mount Sinai, the glory of the LORD came down and the smoke covered the mountain and they couldn't see the top of the mountain. Moses went up the mountain and went into the smoke into the presence of God, symbolized by this created object, the glory of the LORD. And by means of that created entity of the glory, the fire, the smoke, they got to understand that God was awesome, that God was blazing fire, that God was a consuming fire. You could not merely just walk into God's presence unannounced or uninvited, that God is scary, that God is frightening in many ways. But also that wherever they went, God went with them. He went in front of them as

they are walking through the desert. While they are camped at night, he's there in the middle of the camp, part of their worship place. He is giving them a reminder that wherever his people are, wherever they gather, he is there all the time. They have this visual representation of his presence in this created object, the glory of the LORD.

And when they eventually build their tabernacle, the LORD descends and they can't even get into the tabernacle because of the glory of the LORD. And when they build the temple and Solomon dedicates the temple, they have to evacuate the temple because the glory of the LORD comes and fills the entire house and nobody dare enter because God in his glory was present in the temple.

You go to the book of Ezekiel and Ezekiel has a vision, a day vision. He's wide awake and he sees what looks like a throne, and he sees the throne occupied by the glory, the Shekinah, the telltale things. It's the fire and it's the smoke, but he sees into the fire something that he hasn't seen before. As he's looking into the fire, he sees a figure. He sees a person. It looks like a man, he says, and he goes to describe it. From the waist up he looks like fire, and from the waist down he looks like fire. He says it has the appearance of these things but it looked like a man that was sitting on the throne of God, the glory of God. It's a man.

Let me read a little bit of Ezekiel to you about this. Of the universe, above the universe over their heads, there is the likeness of a throne and seated above the likeness of the throne is a likeness with a human appearance. It has the appearance of metal and fire enclosed all around, and downward it was fire and brightness all around like the appearance of the rainbow after the rain, was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and worshiped. A voice spoke to me. And the Spirit of the Lord lifted me up and enabled me to hear the voice, a voice like a great earthquake, "Blessed be the glory of the LORD from this place."

So he sees the glory enthroned. He sees a man enthroned in the glory of God, sitting on the throne of God. Three days later, he's somewhere else and the glory turns up, this time not sitting on a throne, now this time as the man with all the fire and all the rest of it going on at the same time. But now it's the man coming and the man comes to him and speaks to him. The glory of the LORD stood there like the glory that I had seen earlier and I fell on my face and the Spirit entered into me, lifted me up and enabled me to listen and hear what the glory would say.

Later on in a second vision in Ezekiel 10, we have another vision of the man, this time clothed in white linen, entering the sanctuary of God and the cloud of glory filling the entire court. The glory of the LORD.

What is going on here? In this vision of the glory of God, you're seeing the same phenomenon of fire as we see when Israel's in the desert, but now as we go through the Bible as we get nearer D-Day, as we get nearer Christmas Day, we discover that this vision of glory is beginning to take on human shape, human form. The one who speaks

from the glory could be a man. That's what he's saying. It could be a man and that's precisely as the picture of the God of Israel in Exodus. You can compare Ezekiel's vision with Exodus 24 and there are many of the similarities there as Moses and Aaron and Nahab and Abihu and the 70 elders of Israel went up into the cloud, into the mountain, and they sat down and they ate and drank with God as with a man.

Do you see what's happening in this story so far? You take the story from Ezekiel, here is the glory of God sitting on the throne of God with the appearance of a man, and leaving the throne of God and coming down to where Ezekiel is that he might talk to him face-to-face, one-on-one, where he is. And already you're seeing a kind of preview of what the Son of God would do in leaving the glory, coming down and humble himself, take on our human nature, be found in the likeness of a servant, and approach us at the point of our need and in our station as one of us. Already, there's a preview, Old Testament, as we see the Son of God taking these created shapes and forms in order to teach lesson and prepare us to receive him. But when he comes finally, he comes not as a cloud of glory or blazing fire or as an angel, even, that scares people but he comes as a little baby thing. It's amazing, isn't it? That God should do that in Christ for us?

Daniel has a similar vision when he sees one like the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven coming to the Ancient of Days, being presented to the Ancient of Days, sitting on the throne of the Ancient of Days. Here the Son of Man sitting on the same throne as God, in other words, he has all the authority, majesty, power, dominion, that God has. There is not one scintilla of difference, subordination, inferiority, at all. He is as Son of Man acting with/alongside as God from his throne.

Who is this one? Jesus uses this Son of Man language all the time. The prophet, David as the prophet, was given to see this. "The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." Which is LORD? Both are LORD. Are there many LORDS? There is only one God. That is the repeated mantra of Israel, "Hear, O Israel, your God is one." But within the unity and identity of the one God, you see, there are distinct elements. What all that means is not going to be clear until Jesus comes into the world, but nonetheless, it's there in the Old Testament. This is where the early church fathers got their Trinity from. They got it from the Old Testament. They saw Jesus throughout the Old Testament, not just in the ways I'm describing this morning but in many ways.

Then, I suppose, the ultimate description in the Old Testament of the Messiah is in this phrase, "the word of the LORD." The word of Yahweh. Jeremiah writes about it, "The word of the LORD came to me saying before I formed you in the womb, I knew you and I consecrated you and appointed you a prophet." And I said, "Ah, LORD God." The word of God is the voice of God. It's God who's speaking and God says to Jeremiah, "I have put my words in your mouth." The word of the LORD is Elohim Adonai. He is the LORD God. So there is a distinction between the LORD and the word of the LORD but the word of the LORD speaks as God with God's word to the people of God. So what I'm trying to do this morning is show you that throughout the Bible there are these revelations of God, self-expressions of God, that contain two elements: one distinct, an identity.

Let me wind up by referring to Zechariah, one of the last books in the Bible. In Zechariah, the word of the LORD visits the prophet Zechariah and shows him a number of visions concerning the coming Messiah. It calls him the branch, that is the branch out of the old stump of the tree called the line of David. David's line had virtually died out but there was a little, first of all, a little sprout and it had grown and grown and grown until you could describe it as a branch. The Messiah was going to be descended from David. And this branch is called the LORD, all uppercase letters, the LORD. He's also called the one who is pierced for the transgressions of his people. That's in Zechariah 12 and 13.

Earlier in chapter 3, Joshua, the high priest, finds himself before the angel of the LORD who is a judge in a courtroom. He's standing there before the angel of the LORD, his garments, his high priestly garments are muddied and dirtied, his own weakness, his own sin. And Satan, the adversary, Satan, the accuser, the prosecutor of the brethren is there, prosecuting the case against Joshua in the presence of the angel of the LORD. That's what the devil always does, by the way. Satan accuses us. Sometimes he accuses us to other people. Often he accuses us to our own conscience. He brings up your failures and your inadequacies and your weaknesses and your sins and your record and he throws it in your face. He wants to demoralize you. He wants to destroy you. He wants to undermine you as a believer. He wants you to feel miserable as a believer. He wants you to lose your hope as a believer, your confidence as a believer.

The devil does that all the time and that's what he was doing to this man, Joshua, and the angel of the LORD intervenes. The angel of the LORD said. No, that's not what it says. When the angel begins to speak, it says, "The LORD said to Satan, the LORD rebuke you, O Satan." It was David who gave us, the one you were talking about, God, you could talk about the LORD saying something to my LORD. The Lord talking to the Lord. That's where all of this came from, David. And here's the LORD speaking about the LORD once more. The LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, O Satan." Joshua stands before the angel of the LORD but it's the LORD who is doing the talking.

And the vision goes on. Joshua was standing before the angel clothed in filthy garments and the angel of the LORD said to him, to those who were standing, "Remove the filthy garments." And to Joshua, the angel of the LORD said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity from you. I have taken your iniquity from you and I will clothe you in pure vestments." Here is this man, Joshua, he stands with the angel, Yahweh, as Israel was, filthy with sin, accused by Satan, and the angel of the LORD declares his sins forgiven.

And the angel goes on to say this, he assures Joshua, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, Behold, I will bring my Sent, the branch, and I will remove iniquity in this land on a single day." One of the great prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. "I will remove iniquity on a single day."

Now, what do we gather from this, this morning? Well, it's this: that Christianity does not believe in a kind of...we don't believe in fairies. Angels are not fairies. It's not a fairytale.

I have to say, these other things are. These other ideas are. There is nobody to authenticate it. The word of God came to us in public, not in private. It came over a long period of time in many contexts. Look at the way it's put here, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways." All of that period of perhaps over 1,600 years or more, nearly 2,000 years of revelation in the Old Testament, covered by the Old Testament, in all that period, God is coming to different people at different times and he is reaching out to them, and every time he reaches out to them what does he do? He uses some kind of created means to communicate with them, whether it's the name that he gives to them; whether it's the word that he sends to them; whether it's the glory that goes before them; whether it's the angel who appears to them. These are all created means by which he is communicating with his creatures. He stoops to our weakness, mighty as he is, to communicate to his creatures. But his supreme communication, his supreme act of self-expression, of self-communication, did not ultimately come through an angel or a great blazing fire or an entity like a word or a name, it came in flesh and bone, it came in the Son born of Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead and buried and then raised from the dead, and then enthroned in heaven. It came in Christ because he loved us so much.

But through all of the history, you see, he was demonstrating to real people that he loved them. He was setting up the case, "This is how I'm going to communicate with you. I'm beyond creation but I'm going to enter into creation and I'm going to come as close to you as I can possibly come by becoming a human being." Praise his name.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the wonder of the Gospel, that although it gives us this blinding picture of your difference from us, that not only did you make us but you made means by which you could communicate in many ways and at many times to who we are, but supremely in your Son. We understand a human life, we live a human life. We know babies and boys, teenagers and men. You've communicated in our skin. Thank you that you have not only that, but you've done what needs to be done to remove iniquity in one day, the day Christ died for us on the cross. We thank you that you can pardon our iniquities and our sins and it is in the hands of Jesus to do that, just as it is in the hands of Jesus who loved the world. We pray that today we would all know that we are not judged but justified, not condemned but forgiven. We may be accused, but we've been pardoned. That that reality would dawn on us today in Jesus' name. Amen.