

FULL EXPOSURE

A person is standing on a sandy beach at sunset, holding a long, glowing light stick that has been swung in a large circle, creating a bright, circular light trail. The person is silhouetted against the bright orange and yellow sky. In the background, there is a calm body of water reflecting the sunset, and a distant shoreline with trees and a power line tower. The overall scene is serene and artistic.

OCTOBER 17, 2021 | HEBREWS 4:1-2, 11-16

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When I was a little girl, our living room had these amazing, heavy floor length drapes for the picture window. They were great to hide behind for hide and seek, or just for fun. The corner was the best spot – lots of extra drapery, and enough space to not cause a bulge or a bump. I was as invisible as a kid could be, except that my parents knew it was my favourite hiding spot. Didn't matter, though; I thought I was a master at hiding, and I bet you did, too, when you were little, and the little ones in your care probably think they are awesome at hiding, too. But you always know where they are, don't you?

Even adults are, in some ways, masters of hiding. We generally no longer hide in closets or behind furniture or the drapes as we did when we played "Hide and Seek" as children. Yet we still manage to keep a lot of things hidden from each other – and, sometimes, even ourselves. Today's scripture reading, though, is about the impossibility of hiding anything from God, with bigger stakes than a game of hide and seek.

There are lots of places in the Bible where God's knowledge of us is described in very comforting ways: of being searched and known, and loved, anyway; of being watched over, day and night. But the person who wrote this New Testament letter used very different words to describe God's all-knowingness. There's some almost threatening language and violent imagery used to drive home that point here. Trembling with fear at the thought of failing to enter into God's rest; the prediction that we will fall if we disobey and don't. The two-edged sword of God's Word, cutting us apart at the joints, exposing us completely, right down to our thoughts and intentions.

That kind of total exposure in front of anyone...well, it sounds painfully uncomfortable and definitely undesirable. Nothing attractive about it, nothing that would make us want to get to know God, if we are going to be examined so closely, the hidden parts of ourselves dissected out for inspection by the being we're accountable to. There are so many other ways to talk about an intimate relationship with God, ways that build trust before we take a close look into our dark and dusty corners. There must have been a reason that God's Spirit led the author of this letter to write like this. So what is going on?

The dire-sounding warnings about failing and falling are based on the history of the people who are receiving this letter. A long time ago, their ancestors had been faced with a choice: follow God, or walk away. And they walked away.

God's people had been enslaved by the larger and more powerful nation of Egypt. And by working through faithful men and women, and by exercising some pretty epic divine power, God led them out from under the Egyptian Pharaoh's control, across the desert and to the borders of a new homeland.

No land is ever empty, though, so God's people needed to trust him a little further:

as intimidating as the walls and weapons of their new neighbours looked, God assured them

that he would be with them as they fought and struggled to grab some territory for themselves. But God's people broke faith, and walked away, back into the desert, where they would wander for forty years.

When they got to this turning point in their journey with God, they placed greater weight on the difficulty of following God into what he'd promised them than they did on the care and power of God. And it led to a truly awful period of wandering lost in the desert, uncertain, frightened, angry...but not alone.

God was still with them, even though they tried to bail out on him, and the children of the people who walked away made the journey into their new homeland that their parents had been afraid, or lacking the faith, to make. So don't make the same mistakes that they did, especially now that we know even more about God's goodness and plans and promises, because of Jesus. The author of Hebrews is pulling out the hard sell, because things get bad when we break faith with God, and chose to let our lives be shaped and guided by other, less trustworthy, things.

But that does leave us with this two-edged sword, that cuts sharp and deep to reveal even our most hidden thoughts and intentions.

Step forward in time, to the 21st century, and that kind of total vulnerability and exposure is something we spend a lot of time avoiding. Can you imagine someone knowing everything about you, right down to what you're thinking and feeling? No privacy at all?

I don't think anyone could be comfortable with that; in fact, I would guess that we all spend some time carefully presenting a version of ourselves or our lives to others, whether we know it or not. Perhaps we chose particular clothes or decorate our homes in particular ways, to convey an impression of us, the things we like or value, or our good taste, or how on-trend we are. When we talk to a colleague at work or a new person we've met, we select which details to share and how to share them. There's a whole industry of social media influencers that professionally do that: present an image of themselves to the world that is...appealing, or says something specific about who they are and how they live.

Some things get shown, and some things get hidden; it's us, but not the whole of us, or maybe it's just the version of us that we want others to know.

How many of you have done some video calls, during the pandemic? To family or friends, maybe a Zoom meeting or something like that? It's been a lot, I suspect. At certain points in the last year and three-quarters, I've even recorded our online Sunday worship service in my living room, and I've had countless Zoom meetings and Bible studies there. And I have learned something very important: camera angles are magic.

I can make my home look bigger or smaller, I can move around to make sure the camera's getting lots of light, I can raise my laptop so that you can't tell I'm preaching in yoga pants with a nice sweater on. I can even position the camera just so, so I don't need to completely tidy up my living room before doing a recording or taking a meeting. And I bet that you didn't know that for all of those online in-my-living-room Sunday services, the whole technology set-up for preaching was built on a stack of books on my ironing board.

Now that's a pretty harmless example of hiding things that no one needs to see other than me. But all of us, I suspect, keep things to ourselves for a whole variety of reasons.

Maybe there is some part of us, some part of our personality or something we've done, that we'd like to angle the camera away from, that we don't think our friends or family would like. Maybe we've got thoughts or prejudices that would hurt people if we shared them. Maybe there is something going on in our life – an illness, an unhealthy habit, a relationship that hurts us – and we definitely don't want that to be well-lit; we don't want anyone else to know.

Sometimes it's good to not share everything about ourselves all the time; but sometimes, it harms us, body and spirit, to keep it hidden. Either way, we like our privacy; but here is God, unpacking and exposing us with surgical precision, no option of concealment for us where he is concerned.

Why does God do that, and why, within the world of this letter to the Hebrews, are we being told this right now?

The people who received this letter when it was written understood it to be a sermon, a message, from an author inspired to write and whose words were shaped by God. Those people were part of an early church congregation that was struggling. They weren't being persecuted by the people around them, they weren't struggling financially or experiencing internal conflict and division. Other early churches – and many churches, over the centuries – have definitely had those problems. This church's problem was much more insidious, and it was a church-killer: people were walking away.

After an exciting, high-energy beginning, the Christians in this church had begun to drift away, losing their oomph and their energy for the gospel; they had heard the good news of Jesus and how he was the culmination of all God's promises for thousands of years.....and then got bored with it. And they were in genuine danger of repeating the same mistake that their ancestors had: seeing what God had in store for them, seeing the people that God was calling them to be, and breaking faith and turning back into the desert to wander, lost.

According to Hebrews, it turns out that the greatest threat we face, as a church and as individual human beings, doesn't come from the outside.

The greatest threat to our thriving and to our well-being is not the challenge of those who believe differently, or the hostility of our non-Christian neighbours, it's not the loss of importance and status in the greater world, or a shaky economic footing or even physical safety. It's the possibility of ceasing to respond to God's call, of not bothering with faith and deciding not to order our steps to walk with God. And because that threat begins within us, in our hearts and minds, well, suddenly God's promise to take a good look at our inner workings makes a lot more sense.

God is doing a surgeon's work with his two-edged sword, not inflicting the discomfort of full exposure without purpose. Because what God exposes are the places within us – in our hearts and minds and lives – where we need his healing grace the most. All our sore spots and hidden hurts, all the things within us or in our lives that cause harm to ourselves and others – that's what God is looking for. And when he finds it, he offers us the help we need to heal and move forward.

The letter shifts gears at this point, reminding us of the wonderful promises that God makes to us in Jesus. We are promised all the help we need. Jesus knows our every weakness, just like our hymn this morning said. And it's not a "knows about it" kind of knowing. One of the reasons we are so insistent on Jesus' humanity is because of this: Jesus understands firsthand how hard it is to persevere on the path God calls us to walk. He understands human weaknesses, what it's like to be surrounded by things and ideas and people that might make it appealing to walk away from God.

But we are also insistent on Jesus being God, too, because that means that Jesus leads the way for us, showing us how to live in response to God's call, guided by God's word, walking us all the way through everything, right to God. Through Jesus, God's response to our vulnerability before him, to our full exposure, is compassion and empathy, grace to heal and real, powerful help to change and grow.

One of the many ways by which we know God's word to be powerful and active is how the Bible still manages to be very relevant, two thousand-plus years after it was first written down. The first and greatest threat to our well-being and wholeness and abundant life is still an internal one: not hearing God's call, for whatever reason, and letting our lives and our life together be shaped by anything else. Without that path to follow, without that centering power working in us, we get as lost as God's people in the desert, when they walked away from what he'd promised to give them.

It is so easy for us to do the same, to walk away from the good things God has for us, when we lose track of God's call. Maybe we never heard him calling, or we struggled to recognise it when he did; maybe God's call to us has gotten drowned out by the clamouring noise in our heads of worry and anxiety, of busyness and exciting, distracting, ultimately unsatisfying other things.

Or maybe we hear God calling us now, and we're stood at a turning point, not unlike God's people in the desert or God's people in the church that had this letter written to them.

God calls every single person, each one of us, from our old way of thinking and living and being, and he calls us to follow him, to let him lead us to all the good things he's promised us in Jesus, whether that's new purpose, rest and peace, strength for the tough stretches, grace to heal or help to keep going, every step of the way. God calls us first and always to walk with him, and to keep walking, side-by-side with one another and with Jesus. Thanks be to God! Amen.