

St. Andrew Presbyterian  
Albuquerque, NM

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BLESSED ASSURANCE  
Hebrews 10: 11-25

In 1990 Sharon, Tucker, and I moved to Amarillo to serve St. Luke Presbyterian Church. Walker would come along toward the end of our almost six year ministry there. Before we moved there from Austin, a friend gave me a book he thought would introduce me to this town of 200, 000 or more souls in the Texas Panhandle. The book is called “Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo.”

The author is A. G. Mojtabai, a very liberal Jewish journalist from New York City. She chronicled the nuclear build up at Pantex under the Reagan administration. Pantex, the largest employer in the Panhandle, found itself assembling nuclear warheads 24/7 during the 80’s. Ms. Mojtabai came to Amarillo to find out how the nuclear industry was impacting the people and institutions of this “dusty town in West Texas”, as she called it.

The title of her book is an ironic comment on the “blessed assurance” these nuclear weapons seemed to give the people of Amarillo. The blessed assurance that they were preventing a nuclear attack by relying upon the doctrine of mutually assured destruction. The blessed assurance that the increased expenditures at Pantex were strengthening the Amarillo economy. The blessed assurance that their city was engaged in a patriotic cause. Ms. Mojtabai found the entire Panhandle area strangely reassured by the increased numbers of nuclear warheads assembled there.

It was a fascinating read for me personally, especially since one whole chapter was devoted to Paul Wagner, the head of Pantex. Paul also just happened to be the Clerk of Session at my church, St. Luke. Fascinating, indeed!

After we lived in Amarillo for a few years, we got the opportunity to meet Ms. Mojtabai, in fact, had dinner with her and some friends. What amazed us was this woman with distinctively liberal leanings came to like Amarillo and her people very much. She found them “amazingly friendly”, as did we. In fact, in a final irony, Ms. Mojtabai moved to Amarillo! I asked her if she found “blessed assurance” living in Amarillo, if she had come to be “at home with the bomb” in our hometown. She laughed at the irony of it all.

Funny how people find blessed assurance. What gives people peace and comfort? What makes them feel at home? What gives you blessed assurance? What gives you peace and comfort?

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews found blessed assurance in this simple thought: Jesus provides a more blessed way to God. This letter does an amazing reinterpretation of the entire temple cult in Jerusalem. At every point the writer believes that Jesus offers a better means of access to God. Jesus is better than the angels, because he is the Son of God. He is better than Moses, better than the priesthood of Aaron. Though not from the tribe of Levi, but from the tribe of Judah, Jesus offers a brand new kind of priesthood, after the order of Melchizedek, a mysterious priest that Abraham once encountered in the desert.

Then the writer of the letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus as a better high priest, a better sacrificial offering to God. Jesus offers a new and better covenant with God. And thus better access to God. This letter is an astonishing tour de force in theological reflections upon the meaning of Jesus. Jesus is exalted because he is better than the angels, better than Moses or the priesthood of Aaron, a better high priest, a better sacrificial offering to God, the means for a better covenant and better access to God. It may sound strange and foreign to our 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears. But for Jewish Christians of the First Century, this letter addressed powerfully many of their concerns and questions.

Our text from Hebrews 10 lifts up the many ways Jesus brings blessed assurance to the author. Because Jesus has “set down at the right hand of God”, we now have greater access to God. So that means we can “have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus”. We can “draw near in full assurance of faith”. Why? Because our “hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water.” So we can “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.”

That is blessed assurance, a deep conviction that we can live without fear, without dread of God. Rather in Christ, we live confidently, grateful for all that Christ has done for us and in us. There is no fear here, no anxiety at all. The curtain separating us from God has been parted by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We come now into the Holy of Holies, the very presence of the living God. That is blessed assurance, indeed.

As I studied our passage, I asked myself, “What gives me blessed assurance? What gives me hope when there are so many reasons to be discouraged?” This is my answer: whenever people I know and love are changed because of our faith in Christ, then I am deeply encouraged. Once

again a blessed assurance arises in my heart because of what I experience in the lives of others.

I just spent a few days with my dear friends Bob and Isla Morley in Los Angeles. They invited me there to see their new home and to celebrate Isla's birthday. Some of you know Isla and I have become pen pals, exchanging emails often. We particularly like to exchange what she calls "redemption tales", stories of people coming through tough times who've been changed for the better.

You remember Bob, my Methodist minister friend who has preached and played his guitar here at St. Andrew. Bob has gone through some tough times in recent years. He fell off a ladder working on his home in Honolulu and banged his head, resulting in brain surgery followed by a lengthy withdrawal from methadone. Then last year he was hospitalized in Los Angeles with pancreatitis, a truly painful condition. I have seen Bob at some very low points in his life. These have been very painful, very difficult, very challenging times for Bob and Isla and their lovely daughter Emily.

But now I am happy to report that Bob and Isla and Emily are healthy and happy and deeply engaged in their lives and their faith in Los Angeles. The congregation Bob serves, Covina United Methodist Church, is flourishing. They love his preaching and his music and his leadership. Bob's health is much better now.

And Isla has just published a wonderful novel entitled **Come Sunday**, a story about redemption. It is the story of a tragedy in a family that almost destroys them. And yet the husband and wife struggle through the tragedy and in their own ways find new hope. **Come Sunday** is a powerful and poignant tale, in some ways similar to the struggles Isla and Bob have endured these last few years.

During our visit we talked about how God has been with them through all their adversity. They talked about their growing ever more grateful as they have come to love the Covina congregation. They talked about growing ever more grateful as Bob's health has improved and as their daughter has grown to be so bright and talented and as Isla's writing has come to fruition in her novel. All in all, these have been blessed times for them this past year.

Bob and I have known each other now for over three decades. He said that this is about the best time of his entire life. Without false piety he confessed, "I do know that God has been good to us." We both have come to believe that the main narrative of the Christian faith is this, "Redemption is always possible. Out of the darkness, light."

Nothing gives me more blessed assurance than to see how the people I know and love are changed because of our faith in Christ. I saw that in the faces of Bob and Isla in California. I do believe it is true-redemption is always possible. Blessed assurance, blessed assurance. Amen.