

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

November 14, 2021

Hebrews 9:24-26, 10:1, 12-14, 19-25

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

In 2013, Englishman Peter Dean designed the invitation to a 2009 party, a four-years-earlier fête that Stephen Hawking hosted for time travelers he hoped would return to visit with him about their adventures.ⁱ The fourth-dimension Hawking affair sparked a conversation between Dean and his friend, Michael Ogden, and together they began planning their own event ... scheduled for 250 years *in the future*. As recounted in *The Globe* this week, “If all goes according to plan, the [party] will be worldwide – even wider, if extraplanetary ambitions are realized – and will celebrate life and living, creativity and community, innovation and exploration.

“Ambitious and hopeful,” journalist Linda Rodriguez McRobbie observes, “the idea of this 2269 event posits a future in which parties are possible and [when] there will be a lot to celebrate.”ⁱⁱ

The party planners explain that “their discussions became more serious after [the divisive experiences of 2016], and[, before the pandemic,] they launched a modest Kickstarter campaign to fund print[ed] invitations.” In less than a month, they earned pledges *six-times* their goal, all for the event set for June 6, 2269.ⁱⁱⁱ Dean and Ogden explain, “[250 years is not] *so far* in the future[, and, yet,] it’s also far [enough] ahead that it’s impossible for someone alive today to attend – therefore, *it will only work if it’s passed on.*”^{iv}

In this morning’s appointment from the letter to the Hebrews, we receive our own “ambitious and hopeful” invitation from the distant past, an encouragement of faith during an earlier time of trial: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,” today’s reading crescendos, “for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another ...”^v

Written between 60 and 90 CE,^{vi} the epistle’s distinctive language and style argue against Pauline authorship, and Episcopalian, scholar, and poet, Ruth Hoppin, endorses a woman – early Church leader Priscilla – as Hebrews’ author. Writing with CBE (“Christians for Biblical Equality”^{vii}), Hoppin points to Acts 18 as credibly connecting Priscilla to Timothy, an association the letter’s author claims in their concluding salutations. Hopping also notes that Priscilla fits in the apostolic tradition, one raised in the first generation after those who walked with Jesus, as indicated in Hebrews’ second chapter: “It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested *to us by those who heard him.*”^{viii}

Further, “We have several manuscripts naming Rome or Italy as [Hebrews’] place of origin[, and] Priscilla was a leader of a house church in Rome. Archaeological discoveries, reinforcing ancient church tradition, identify [Priscilla] with a noble Roman family[, and a]s a[n aristocratic] daughter, she [would have been] trained in rhetoric, philosophy[, and] oratory,” all in align with the scholarship that Hebrews’ prose witnesses.^{ix}

As for the consequences of Priscilla’s authorship, Hoppin explains: “Implications for the theology of Hebrews for gender equality are just that: implications. [Breaking with precedent by naming specific women as exemplars of faith in a roll call of heroes, and by alluding to many others clearly or obliquely,] Hebrews is not an intentional feminist [essay], but a pastoral explication and exhortation. If its theology tends to support gender equality, I believe its very unintentionality makes the case for gender equality [in the ancient and contemporary Church] even stronger.”^x

That is, we do not inherit Hebrews as an argument for gender-equality. Rather, Priscilla-as-author *participates* in a Church of greater gender equality. Indeed, in the very spirit of the epistle’s encouragement – *let us [provoke] one another to love and good deeds* – the letter realizes a more righteous, a more loving way of Church, and today we join in that inauguration, leaning into both Priscilla’s authorship and the loving encouragement she commends.

2269 founders Dean and Ogden have not planned the party they have conceived, and neither are they “interested in creating [even a] blueprint for the [event], since circumstances may be very different in 250 years.”^{xi} Indeed, arranging the details will be the responsibility of their successors in celebration. Therefore, they “have designed invitations to spark intrigue – and to last. They’re foil-blocked on rich archival paper, and ... they [are] meant to live on an invitee’s wall until passed on to the next generation. Each person who possesses one is supposed to sign and date the companion Record of Ownership. Hundreds of these invitations, priced at \$110 [each], have already been sold[, and] Dean and Ogden are [now] working [to release] a digital version that will be available for free, as well as versions in languages other than English.”^{xii}

Rodriguez McRobbie comments, the “invitation is simply the tangible artifact of a larger idea. Since 2016, the feeling of chaos that motivated Dean and Ogden has only deepened. Thinking about the future is causing real anxiety for many of us. A recent survey of young people about climate change discovered that three-quarters of them found the future frightening. More than half believed that humanity is *doomed* ... But the 2269 project [declares] there’s going to be a party [– the biggest of all time, 250 years in the making! –] and it’s up to us and subsequent generations to make sure it happens.”^{xiii}

“It’s a stake in the ground,” says Ogden. “You can paint a picture of a bleak future, [but that’s only] a vision of [what might be coming. We can share a] different narrative around building a culture of community[, and] if you have that to work towards ... then you are more likely to get there. The 2269 event is ‘an invitation to think bigger, to think differently, [to think more hopefully,] about the future.’”^{xiv}

In the third chapter of Hebrews, Priscilla exhorts the Christian cohort to whom she writes: “[Christ] was faithful over God’s house ... and *we are his house* if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope.”^{xv} However, she acknowledges that the Hebrews’ house is a congregation plagued with worry, suffering with frustration, grappling uncertainty. Perhaps because of the unexpected delay in Christ’s return, “Some members have [even] grown lax in attendance [*if you can imagine that*], and [their] commitment[s are] waning.”^{xvi}

Given my familial matriarchs’ preferred challenge of my teenaged angst – “What’s got your nose out of joint?” they would press me – I find Priscilla’s encouragement in Chapter 12 especially moving: “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,” she calls, “and make straight [the] paths to your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather [may] be healed.”^{xvii}

Friends, we, too, are God’s house. Let us, then, stand up straight, “holding firm the confidence and pride that belong to hope”! See, more than only “positing” a hope-filled future when “there will be a lot to celebrate,” our experience in the Beloved Community of Trinity Church actively brings that hopeful future into being, now *and* in “The Life of the World to Come.” See, we gather not merely in anticipation, but in *inauguration* of a new, more righteous, more equitable, more loving realm. Our devotions *participate* in their heavenly Forms and bind us to Christ’s continuing worship.^{xviii}

All that we have endeavored this fall in expression of our Program Year theme – our return to indoors, in-person worship and this morning’s Annual Parish Photograph; our Prayer Wall and this evening’s Forum sharing the “tangible artifacts” of the time capsule we are assembling; gathering in fun and spending glad time together – all these devotions “provoke one another to love and good deeds ... encourag[e] one another” to enliven a future worth celebrating, rather than fearing or despairing.

And [... here comes the Stewardship pitch...] be sure that just as our worship participates in the ministry of heaven, so, too, our Stewardship participates in God’s generosity.

Friends, consider your pledge an open invitation to whole world – the world as it is now, the world as it will be 250 years from now ... *two-thousand* years from now – an invitation to the biggest dadgum party since God breathed over the deep. For by our pledge, we invest in the present and future celebration of “life and living, of creativity and community, of innovation and exploration.” As with the 2269 project, faithful Stewardship is *our* “stake in the ground,”^{xix} *our* claim to the consequence of Beloved Community, yet one that will only work if it’s passed on.

Therefore, Trinity Church, “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees!” ... and if you want to grow the world’s faith in a hopeful future, then show the world *your* faith, show the world *your* hope – and make your pledge!

Trinity Church, “make straight the paths to your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather may be healed!” ... and if you want to share in a joyful church, then *enjoy the church* – and make your pledge!

If you want to be part of a generous future, then *be generous*, and pledge like the whole cosmos depends on it ... for surely it does.

For this life,
and for The Life of the World to Come,
Amen.

ⁱ Rodriguez McRobbie, Linda. “Party Like It’s 2269.” *The Boston Globe*, November 13, 2021.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ “... a date chosen because it reads [“6-6”] regardless of whether listing the day or the month first.”

^{iv} Rodriguez McRobbie.

^v Hebrews 10:23-25. Because prayed the All Saints propers and did not read the epistle appointed for November 7, this longer citation combines the lessons from November 7 and 14.

^{vi} Craddock, Fred. “The Letter To The Hebrews: Introduction, Commentary, And Reflections.” *New Interpreters Bible, Volume XII*. Abingdon Press, 1998. As Craddock notes, “The primary external evidence [of Hebrews dating] is the letter of Clement of Rome to the church in Corinth. In chapter 36 of that letter, Clement quotes and paraphrases key passages from Hebrews 1-3. Clement’s letter is generally, though not unanimously, dated 95-96 EC. Thus, Hebrews must be dated earlier ... The high Christology[, however,]... demands a date as late as possible.”

^{vii} [More about CBE and Ms. Hoppin may be found here.](#)

^{viii} Hebrews 2:3.

^{ix} Hoppin, Ruth. “Priscilla, The Author Of Hebrews.” *The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary*. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, editors. InterVarsity Press, 2002, pp. 762-763.

^x Hoppin, Ruth. “[The Book Of Hebrews Revisited: Is Priscilla The Author? And How Does This Epistle’s Theology Relate To Gender Equality?](#)” [cbeinternational.org](#). January 30, 2003.

^{xi} Rodriguez McRobbie.

^{xii} *Ibid.*

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} Hebrews 3:4.

^{xvi} Craddock, p. 9. Craddock notes that, given this unexpected delay in Christ’s return, some scholars propose the Hebrews author wrote to address the community’s need for a more substantial Christology, one which inspired and shaped Christianity’s emerging liturgical devotions.

^{xvii} Hebrews 12:12-13.

^{xviii} Hebrews 9:24. Even in Trinity’s spectacular space, still we worship “in a sanctuary that is [*a shadow*] of [the] heavenly one.” In the language of Plato, our devotions *participate* in their heavenly Forms, and when we gather before Trinity’s altar, we bind ourselves to heaven and *participate* in Christ’s continuing worship.

^{xix} It got too clunky to include in the sermon, but I enjoyed thinking about what we would bring to this biggest-party-of-all-time, the image that our pledge is a teeming casserole dish, a bottle of wine good enough to bring to the house of a best friend, a four-pack of those fancy IPA tall-boys, a mix tape of our favorite songs ... what would you bring to the party? Does your Stewardship reflection the aspiration?