When I was a student at Nashotah House through a series of odd circumstances, I became the president of the Mission Board my senior year. The Mission Board was what its name suggested, it existed to create mission opportunities for students at the seminary. In my previous two years serving on the board as a regular member the board had done absolutely nothing; this was not for lack of talking about doing something. The meetings were often two or three hours in length and the ideas flew fast and furious, but when all was said and done nothing ever happened. We never flew in the Archbishop of Nigeria for a conference or housed Belarusian orphans in the seminary gym. And so, the good news for me in taking over leadership was that the definition of success was very low, I just had to do something. So, I decided to set three very modest goals to accomplish in the year. At our first meeting I explained my thoughts and how I wanted to accomplish these three things and once we had accomplished those we could talk about other stuff. Everyone agreed but upon adjourning the meeting one of the members of the board approached me to tell me that he had a great idea about the seminary importing coffee from somewhere in Africa and then, well I can’t remember what happened next, but he assured me that it was going to be awesome. I asked him if this was one of the three things we had agreed on and he finally admitted that it was not. He had sat in the meeting for an hour, voted in agreement with the agenda, but apparently did not understand what it was that I was getting at. Sometimes when people don’t really hear or understand us it is willful and other times it is because of a lack of context or ability. For example, I don’t think I can really understand what it would be like to have grown up in a tribe in the Amazon, or a Bedouin in Saudi Arabia or be a George Clooney film aficionado. I simply do not have the experience to relate. But of course, there are a lot of things that I can understand because I have the background.

And having the background to understand the human condition is partly what the author of Hebrews is talking about today. It takes a minute to see, but stick with me for a moment. In Hebrews we hear, “It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.” The idea of understanding humanity all hinges on the idea Jesus of being made perfect through suffering. It may sound strange but the idea is that suffering is partly what allows Christ to understand the human condition. In The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, we hear this, “Perfection is not a term for moral flawlessness; that quality of blamelessness …. Rather, it refers to the completeness of Jesus' preparation for his priestly ministry. Any life short of suffering and death would have been less than an identification with humankind and, therefore, less than a full understanding of the human condition.” In other words, Jesus understands the human condition from top to bottom. And that is one of the rather incredible claims that Christianity makes – God understands what it is to be human.

I think sometimes we forget what an odd religion Christianity is. The basic narrative is that God became man and dwelt among us but then we decided it would be good to kill God in one of the nastiest and most brutal ways possible. But for all its strangeness this narrative also sets up what the author of Hebrews tells us today and that is that God knows what it is to suffer probably more than most of us. When we speak to God of the pain we suffer, he understands. But it is not all doom and gloom. We don’t worship a divine Charlie Brown whose life was one bad experience after another. We worship a God who has been through the whole range of human emotions. A God who has experienced the joy of a wedding feast, the companionship of good friends and the agony of the cross.

If you ever look much at Church heresies (and who doesn’t) you might notice a trend in many of them and that trend is that many try very hard to say that God did not become man and dwell among us. For example, in the heresy of adoptionism they say there was a guy named Jesus who was here on earth but then they say that this Jesus was not God. It claims that Jesus was a really good human, the best as a matter of fact, and because of his being such a good human he was subsequently adopted by God as a son and then received some transfer of benefits as a result. In another heresy, known as Docetism, its believers say that Jesus was God but that he was never fully human; he just appeared to be that way in the same way a magician appears to saw someone in half. It was all a big ruse. But why do people fear a God who became man so much that they come up with odd theories to make it seem like it did not happen? I think in a lot of ways they do it because it is easier. In some ways it is easier to put God out in the distance.

As you probably know I tend to stay out of politics in my sermons and so what I am about to say is not a political observation in terms of who is right and who is wrong but rather is an observation about human nature. If you have been paying much attention to congress there has been an ongoing debate about two pieces of legislation. One is the so-called infrastructure bill which has already passed the senate and has a price tag of $1.2 trillion and the other piece of legislation doesn’t really have an official name but it has a price tag of $3.5 trillion. There have been debates mainly in the Democratic party about which order to pass them in, what should be in them and if $3.5 trillion is an acceptable amount. The other day I heard a commentator make an interesting observation about this inter-party debate he believed on some level leaders in the Democratic party, in light of the ongoing difficulties in getting either passed, wished that Republicans had won at least one of the Georgia senate seats. His point was that if that had happened the Democratic Party would be able to say that they really want to pass this wonderful legislation but the Republicans wouldn’t let them. And I think what this observation points out is that often times we prefer to have a scapegoat for why we can’t do something rather than having to take the time and effort to actually fix the problem.

This is the same reason that I think we may want a God who is out there pulling the strings rather than an Immanuel or God with us. A God that is out there can be blamed for things or ignored, but a God who has been here, who has seen just how bad things can go cannot be ignored or blamed. He has been through it all. I had lunch with an old friend the other day who has gone through a number of unfortunate events including a divorce and the loss of a job. I guess because I am clergy, he asked what God’s plan was in all of this. I cautioned him to not try and understand too much because in doing so he could get a really warped perception of God. A God who moves pieces around on his divine chess board and brings suffering upon people rather than the God who became perfect in suffering. The God who says I understand and I am with you. That is the God we worship, the God who is with us both this day and forevermore.