

Today

Proper 24

Pastor Josh Frazee

Heb. 4:1-13

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

You know that the fear of the Lord is not being afraid of Him. He is the One who can send us body and soul into hell. Yet we are not afraid of Him. Rather, we fear Him, as in we honor, respect, and stand in awe of Him.

Fearing the Lord in this way is not something we do through our human understanding. We do it by trusting the Lord's Word and His promises.

Through His servant Martin Luther, God made His Word available to us all, to read and believe it. But God never intended His Word to be read and interpreted apart from His Church. The danger in doing this is that one could make a case for just about anything by picking and choosing from texts of the Scriptures.

Today we have the creeds because heretics did just that, taking a verse or two out of the context of the Scriptures and refusing to repent of their ideas even when shown by Scripture that they were wrong.

As we heard in our Epistle text, "the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened." Today, we are called to hear God's Word together as His Church and to hear what He would have us to hear, not whatever our itching ears may desire to hear.

Verse 1

"Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."

Luther explained it this way: "These three—the faith, the Word, and the heart—become one. Faith is the glue or the bond. The Word is on one side; the heart is on the other side. But through faith they become one spirit, just as man and woman become "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Therefore it is true that the heart is combined with the Word through faith and that the Word is combined with the heart through the same faith' (AE 29:160) (ESV Study Bible, p.2109)."

What is more, as we are made one in spirit with the Word, we are made one with it together as we gather to hear God's Word in the congregation of His Church.

Our text reminds us that not all who heard the Word were united by faith even in the Old Testament. Just before our text, in chapter three verses sixteen and following, the author of Hebrews wrote: "(W)ho were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief (Heb. 3:16-18)."

Last week we heard how Jesus gave the rich man another thing to do by giving all he had to the poor; showing the man he could not fulfill the Law. In our text this week the author is not saying that the Israelites died because they did not do what God desired. He writes that they did not enter heaven because they did not believe—they did not fear God. They did not trust His Word, believing on His Word rather than on their own intellects.

Verse 2

“For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, ‘As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’” although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.’ And again in this passage he said, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he appoints a certain day, ‘Today,’ saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God...”

In one way, we have already entered into that rest. We who have been baptized have been baptized into Jesus’ death. Since He has risen from the dead, we also have been raised into new life. It is a case of the “now, not yet.” We are already called God’s saints, and yet we are still in the sinful flesh and need to repent daily. Today, we are God’s chosen people, but we must not harden our hearts against His Word which is clearly taught to us.

But this is not the final rest to which we look. If it were, we would be greatly embarrassed and we would be rightly put to shame by those who currently mock us for being Christians. No, we have not yet entered the fullness of that rest. That fullness is still coming. The author of Hebrews tells us “if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.”

Verse 3

“Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

Keeping in mind that it is not by works that we are saved—neither the rich man nor the Israelites nor us—the author encourages us to “strive to enter that rest.” What other can that mean than to fear the Lord—to keep our faith steadfastly on Him and His Word and Promises?

God knows everything about us. He knows all of our weaknesses and sins. His Word is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit...and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” And all the intentions of our hearts are nothing but sin all the time.

So we repent. We repent and trust on the promises of God, all of which are found completed in our Lord Jesus Christ. “(N)o creature is hidden from his sight, (and) all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” Yet we will be deemed righteous. It will not be by your works or my works—not even our very best ones—that we will be deemed righteous, but because God the Holy Spirit has kept us faithful in the Word amid the congregation of believers, all of us trusting in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, paying the price for all of our sins—for all of my sins and yours. In this trust, God the Holy Spirit will preserve us unto life everlasting. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

