

“Sympathizing with our Weakness”

Preaching Text: Hebrews 4:12-16

14 October 2018: 21th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC— Salado, Texas 76571

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“Men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses, women for their strengths” (Lois Wyse).

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We could label Hebrews “a lengthy 13-chapter sermon.” Chapter 4 begins:

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

Hebrews reminds believers that entering God’s rest is not just a past prospect. It is still an open invitation. Like many invitations, however, this opportunity may pass. Now is a time of decision. But what is it, we wonder, that could keep someone from entering into God’s rest—another way of describing salvation—or what we might call “going to heaven?” The writer answers that disobedience caused some of the faithful to miss entering God’s rest. Yet, entering God’s rest remains open. Hebrews tells us, “it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day—‘today’ ” (Hebrews 4:6-7). This is the good news—today is the day! Hear our Hebrews lesson:

[12] Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. [13] And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:12-16).

Not all people dream, but many people do. A recurrent human dream is a dream in which we sense falling. It is such a realistic sensation that many people wake up in a panic. I have had this dream many times. Another frequent dream that people describe is the dream of standing before a group of people and discovering we are half dressed or in our underclothes. Some psychologists suggest dreams like this address people’s fear of judgment. Often people fear public speaking. Rightly or wrongly, to stand before a group of people and speak/perform opens us to other people’s judgment. The Nazis intimidated and de-humanized Jews in concentration camps by removing their clothing. Each Jew in Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau, or Buchenwald experienced this appalling exposure. Eventually, the Nazis provided camp uniforms for prisoners, but not before uncovering every Jewish man, woman, and child as naked and disgraced.

The writer of Hebrews reminds readers that God is the final judge. God is arbiter of ultimate justice. There is nothing we can do to cover such searing exposure to the creator of heaven and earth. God knows everything. We are accountable to this God.

None of us wants to stand before God's judgment. We may want to see other people get justice, but we desire mercy. This mercy is possible, according to Hebrews, because we have a high priest who intercedes for us. This high priest is Jesus who has made God's mercy possible. Through mercy we are able to enter God's rest or salvation. For the reason of God's mercy alone, can we boldly approach God's throne. No one wants God's judgment, but we can stand before God's judgment because Jesus stands with us. Jesus is advocate/friend. This is the gospel's good news. Let me share a sense of such a feeling of fearing judgment and then at the last moment receiving mercy. We will all, no doubt, come to that day.

My long-time friend, Bob Long, pastor of St. Luke's UMC in OKC told me a story that bears sharing. One day he was driving in the East Texas woodlands when a DPS Officer pulled him over. Bob's inspection sticker had expired three days before—and after the grace period. But Bob wasn't worried. He thought he would simply get a warning. Instead, Bob received a ticket for \$68—a \$68 ticket for a \$5 inspection sticker that expired three days earlier!

He took the ticket home, tossed it on his desk and forgot about it. A month later, Bob opened a certified letter from the state of Texas: "You failed to pay your fine and did not appear for your court date. Your fine is now \$350.00. If you do not appear in the next seven days, a bench warrant will be issued." Now Bob Long's \$68 ticket had grown into a \$350.00 fine for failure to appear to a simple \$5 inspection sticker. Bob immediately called the county in question and got his court date.

He arrived at court and found the courthouse was a building in the middle of a cornfield—not a courthouse, but rather a dance hall. There were folding chairs on a concrete floor. Behind a high bench sat a judge in utter control. Bob watched people confess their sins, and the judge would slam the gavel and pronounce sentence. Bob admitted there was no question he had made a mistake! He was seriously worrying about what the judge might say about his failure to pay his initial ticket. Abruptly, the clerk called Rev. Robert "Bob" Long. He drew near and the clerk said, "Sir. We've lost your paperwork."

Bob said, "I brought you the letter you mailed me."

"I know," she said, "You did everything right but we've lost your paperwork."

"Well, what does that mean?" Bob asked.

She said, "It's like nothing ever happened. We will simply forget your crime. You're free to go. Good night and good-bye."

Bob told me that he ran for the door, jumped in his car, and took off before the court changed its mind. Free to go. All is forgiven.

The writer of Hebrews suggests that no matter how we happen to feel about God, Jesus, the church, or anything else, it is God who not only is the truth, but it is God who sees the truth. And it is to this God that eventually all of us will have to "render an account." Left to our own devices we should be tired, disillusioned, lacking energy, and near despair. Yet, we can enter God's blessed Sabbath rest not in our own strength, but in the strength that Jesus offers us as "a great high priest." It is not on our own that we accomplish what God requires of us as believers. Rather it is simply because Jesus not only sympathizes with our weakness, but has been tested in every respect as we have been tested. Yet, Jesus was and is without sin.

The priest's task is to be a go-between linking God and God's people. Jesus is like us in that Jesus knows temptation. Jesus is like God in that Jesus is sinless. Thus, Jesus as high priest becomes a perfect bridge between heaven and earth. For this reason, we can "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy" (Hebrews 4:16).

Our chief feeling as we ponder God's judgment is fear. Yet, with Jesus as our high priest, we have an advocate who has a lot of pull with the judge. In my opinion, this is a good kind of friend to have. If you want to enjoy God's rest, then get in touch with God's son—that is, Jesus, our high priest. Amen.

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