

Pastor T.C. Arnold  
Sexagesima  
Hebrews 4:9-13  
February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

I still remember the feeling. The first time I walked into the “Stadtkirche” (town church) of St. Mary in Wittenberg, Germany in 2017. Within these “hallowed halls” Martin Luther preached a majority of his sermons. A man I admire so much... my earthly hero, really... stood where I was standing. I tried to imagine his voice. I wondered what it was like to sit stand (they didn’t have pews back then) and listen to one of the many sermons that I have read for myself time and time again. When I entered that very important church in the annals of human history, I can honestly say, it took my breath away. I was excited, yet at peace. I was anxious, yet calm. It was almost as if I was entering into the closest thing that I have come to heaven on earth.

It wasn’t heaven on earth, as you know. But there are some places that we enter into that are more sacred, more meaningful, and more awe-inspiring than others. Hebrews talks about entering into the “Sabbath rest” of God. It speaks of “Sabbath rest” as coming into God’s presence and how important that is. In fact, Hebrews mentions that we do not enter into a “Sabbath rest” without faith. We “cannot” enter without faith. God’s people enter into God’s presence, we enter His rest, through the faith that God provides for His people. That’s what this text is about.

Interestingly, five different times within fourteen verses prior to our text, Hebrews mentions who will not enter into the “Sabbath rest” of God. And each time the reason for this is “unbelief.” It says two different times the people have “harden their hearts” to the truth of God. They have “rebelled” against God. They have “put God to the test.” They “provoked” God. So, God mentions that for them, there is no rest. There is no rest apart from God. You cannot “enter” rest.

So, with faith, Hebrews mentions what happens. *“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest...”* There are two things I would like to explore with you concerning the Epistle text appointed for this day. 1) What it means to “enter” into God’s presence, and 2) what “Sabbath rest” means.

Each year, on the Day of Atonement, the appointed High Priest ritually cleansed Himself, put on sacred vestments and entered into the Holy of Holies. The cleansing, or ritual bath, washed away his unholiness. The vestments were the so-called garments of the angels, heavenly garments, so he could be worthy to approach God in this sacred place.

The High Priest needed two items for the Day of Atonement ritual. He needed the blood of the sacrifice... a goat... and he needed incense. The High Priest entered the Holy of Holies in a cloud of incense. Then, he sprinkled the Mercy Seat (that is, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant) with the blood of the sacrifice seven times. He also sprinkled the altar of incense, the Most Holy Place itself and the tent of meeting (fifty applications in all). He cleansed these places and “atoned” them from impurity. But the High Priest could only do so if he himself was cleansed. He could only enter the presence of God in purity.

And now, in the book of Hebrews which gives us a clear picture of the Old Testament seen through New Testament eyes delivers the picture of God’s people entering into the presence of God. Remember, time and time again, Hebrews tells us that we enter God’s rest. How do we do that? How can the “un-holy” come near to God? We sinners separate ourselves from God’s holiness when we choose our sins over God’s presence. This is what makes our sins so dangerous. It tears at the very foundation of our relationship with God. We choose ourselves, our desires, our feelings over God’s law.

As people who live for our sins more than God, we cannot enter into God's presence. Our sins make this impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

We cannot enter God's presence by ourselves. Our sins have made us unholy. But we are cleansed to "enter" into His presence through the blood of Jesus. You see, He is the High Priest that made us clean with the sprinkling of blood upon us. Jesus is also the sacrificial goat... the lamb... that from which comes the very blood that cleanses us and purifies us so that we can stand in the presence of God. He is the one who makes us worthy to "enter."

The second part we wanted to touch on is about "Sabbath rest." As mentioned above, five different times Hebrews talks about entering or not entering "rest" before our text for today. Those to whom this book of the Bible was specifically written knew the history of what this means. In fact, they would have recalled when Joshua gave the Israelites "rest" when the people of God, after wandering in the desert for 40 year finally crossed the Jordan River and "entered" the Promised Land. Of course, they had to fight for it, which doesn't seem so "restful" but they again possessed what God had promised.

But Hebrews, and especially our text for today, talks about a far greater rest, a Sabbath rest, through which the people of God enter, not by the Joshua of the Old Testament but rather the Jesus of the New Testament (remember that Jesus is the Greek rendition of the Hebrew Joshua. It's the same name). This "Sabbath" we hear about is the completion of the work. During the six days of creation, the Lord made all that is in heaven and on earth. The seven day, the Sabbath Day, He rested. The Lord enters us into that beautiful day of rest... a completed rest... as He calls us His very own by grace through faith. We benefit from God's completed work which is giving His Son to die for us... the sacrifice for all time... the blood of the lamb that takes away the sins of the world.

The restless times of our lives always has to do with sin. Sometimes it's the sins of others that cause restlessness and discord in our lives. Sometimes it's this fallen world around us that blindsides us from one angle or the other. Sometimes it's our own sins that stir up a lack of peace that causes us to worry, to live in guilt because of what we have done, or live in shame because of what others have done to us. Where our sins are, there is restlessness. Where we become the center of the universe for our lives and for our world, rest will elude us. God promises that.

But Jesus is our Sabbath rest and that is why God's people need to come here and rest together. God's people gather so that we can pray, praise, and give thanks together. There is a bit of work in that rest, as you well know. But the main part of our rest together is the gifts we receive right here. This is the place He brings His blessings, His life, and His forgiveness to poor miserable sinners. We "enter" into His "Sabbath rest" as God opens the door of the sanctuary, not to just a select person once a year on the Day of Atonement, but to all of His beloved children. We have access to our God... all of us... through the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This sanctuary is our Holy of Holies. This is where we step into the presence of God, not by our own worthiness, but because Christ Himself has made us worthy. Thanks be to God.

Beloved, it may not feel for you like it did for me, when I entered the town church in Wittenberg, Germany for the first time. Those who have been to the Holy Land may be well aware of what I'm talking about. It is God who enters us into His very presence by grace through faith. Without faith, there is no entrance into His presence. What a blessed hope this is for us – God's people – who have entered into the Sabbath rest of God. It takes our breath away... It's such a privilege. We live for Him in our daily lives because He lived for us... died for us... so that we have the promise of Heaven, the ultimate Sabbath rest for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.