

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 15, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 151:1-3, 216:1-2, 410, 27, 362:4.

Lessons: Exodus 31:12-18, Colossians 2:13-17, Matthew 11:28-12:14.

Sermon Text: Hebrews 4:1-5.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

God rested on the seventh day of creation. Later, when Moses was leading the descendants of Abraham out of Egypt to the promised land, God commanded that *"the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD."* (Leviticus 23:3)

That special will of God is no longer in effect for us today, as you heard in both our epistle lesson and our gospel lesson. Jesus himself perfectly fulfilled this commandment in our place and he gives us the true rest, the forgiveness of sins.

But it is true, as Luther taught in the catechism, that the Third Commandment "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" is still in effect for all people in that God wants all people to receive his Word eagerly because it tells about Jesus, who gives us God's true ultimate rest.

Our text today speaks of the true rest that believers have in Jesus Christ. Today let's hear about

THE SABBATH REST GOD OFFERS

- 1. What is this "rest"?**
- 2. For unbelievers there is no heavenly rest,**
- 3. But for believers it is sure and certain.**

There are those who feel that the day we New Testament Christians have chosen as our day for worship should be only a day of physical "rest" from their normal week's work, and it then becomes a day of what is called "leisure" or "recreation", involving just about anything except worship of God. It then becomes anything but a day of sacred assembly.

This isn't just physical rest, but rest from trying to earn our own salvation and the rest we have in the forgiveness of our sins. Some people work at DOING everything they can, at WORKING "good works" to assure their salvation – almost everything except believing God when he says: *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."* (Ephesians 2:8-9) Others, of course, do only what they feel like doing, or think might lead to God recognizing them when he shows his "love", love which they think will ignore sin.

The real rest we have because of what Jesus did is the forgiveness of sins. God by inspiration here writes of our eternal rest through Jesus Christ as a parallel to entering the promised land.

In the previous chapter of Hebrews you were told to fix your eyes on Jesus, as you heard last week. God also warned us not to harden our hearts as the descendants of Abraham did in the desert: *"do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*" (Hebrews 3:8-12)

We, today, have that same warning, concluding with the words *"So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief."* (Hebrews 3:19)

Then we read the words of our text: *"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did."* I know from what you have told me that many of the members of our congregations have had the gospel preached to you all your lives. I also know personally that many of the members of our congregations under the age of 30 have had the gospel preached to you all of your lives.

So the warning is to you – and to all those who have declared their confession with us but are not with us this morning – to be careful lest you lose that rest promised in the Gospel. God's promise still stands: *"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."* (Mark 16:16) But God's stern warning and threat also stands: *"but whoever does not believe will be condemned."* (Mark 16:16)

But hearing the message of the gospel is useless unless it is joined with faith as we read: *"but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith."* Faith is necessary. One can hear the gospel weekly, even daily, and not believe. That is a real problem. But an even greater problem is just not hearing that gospel. We know that *"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."* (Romans 10:17)

"Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, 'So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"

Many rejected God's rest and many still continue to do so today. They perhaps thought – and think – they had something better.

The key word in this section is rest. The rest of which we read must be important, that the inspired author speaks of it in this way. The eternal rest awaiting all who believe in Christ in heaven is all-important, so that the author's pastoral heart reaches out in urgent warning to his readers. *"Let us be careful"* he urges *"that none of you be found to have fallen short of it."* He did not want not a single one of them to miss out on the heavenly rest into which God himself entered when he had finished his work of creation and to which the entry of Israel into the promised land pointed.

But that rest is not reached automatically. Unbelieving Israel in the wilderness was a warning example of how that rest could be lost. Let those who still have the *"promise"* be on their guard. If Israel with all their advantages lost the promised rest, so might we today. *"Let us be careful"* the author therefore urges *"that none of you be found to have fallen short of it."*

How did Israel lose this heavenly rest? How might the readers lose this heavenly rest? It was not because they had not heard about it or did not know how to enter it. We also have had the gospel preached to us just as they did. Entrance into God's eternal rest through the promised Savior was no mystery concealed from them. Jesus himself told them: *"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."* (John 8:56)

The Hebrew Christians to whom the author was writing had this gospel promise and could look at Jesus and see its fulfillment. There is no other Savior for mankind. But the message they heard was of no value to them – did not benefit them – because if those who heard it did not combine it with faith and did not share in the faith it would be useless to them.

Did those Hebrew Christians tempted to forsake Christ get the warning? Do we? Faith is not a matter of ears only, but of the heart. Faith is required. Israel lost the promised rest because of a lack of faith.

For unbelievers there is no heavenly rest, but for believers it is sure and certain.

We who have believed enter that rest. The author writes using the present tense. Entering that rest is going on right now. Jesus said in John 5:24: *"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."*

The writer quotes Psalm 95:11: *"So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"* God was not tearing up his promise or putting up a barricade to the door to heaven. A joyous rest is still there, just as it always has been and ever will be – for all who believe.

In talking about that rest, God takes us back to the creation of the world. God told us in Genesis 2:2: *"By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all*

his work." and in Exodus 20:11: *"For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."*

What was that rest of God on the seventh day? It certainly was not tiredness as we read in Isaiah 40:28. *"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom."* Nor was it inactivity as if he stopped watching over the sparrows or counting the hairs on our heads. *"Jesus said to them, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.'"* (John 5:17)

God's rest on the seventh day was the rest that follows finished and holy work, a rest characterized by perfect contentment and infinite satisfaction. It is this rest, this eternal blessedness and total fulfillment that he wants to share with his children.

They shall never enter my rest, God said of Israel, but others will. To a world wearing itself out under sin's load and wearied by sin's consequences, the eternal God stretches out hands in open invitation in our gospel lesson: *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)

The beauty of it is that he not only invites mankind, but his grace through Word and Sacrament produces in us the faith necessary for entrance into that eternal rest.

Believers of all times should keep this warning example in mind, so that they may become and remain partakers of the blessing. For we do enter into the rest, we who have believed, as he says. The solemn oath of God by which he denied certain people entrance into his rest was directed against all unbelievers. So far as the believers are concerned, if they but remain true to their faith and confident in the promises of the Gospel, they do enter, they are continually entering into the eternal rest above. One by one, as the Lord calls them home, they leave their earthly pilgrimage and are received into the rest, into the peace of heaven.

May we, too, rejoice in the words of the hymn writer:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Come unto Me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down,
Thy head upon My breast."
I came to Jesus as I was,
Weary and worn and sad;
I found in Him a resting-place,
And He has made me glad." Amen.
(The Lutheran Hymnal, 276:1)