

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, September 22, 2013**

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

Hymns: 281, 279:1, 278, 479, 277.

Lessons: Psalm 95, James 4:13-17, Matthew 11:28-30.

Sermon Text: Hebrews 4:5-11.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Perhaps you have seen a sign in a business that says something like “Free food tomorrow”! Well, if you come back the next day, the man will tell you that the sign says “tomorrow”. “Come back tomorrow”, because it is always “today”. Tomorrow never comes. Well, in a sense that is true. But as we shall see from the Word of God today, the day called “today” will end.

We are talking about God’s time of grace that he grants to every living human. That will end for every human being, at a time that is known only to God.

**TODAY IS THE TIME OF GRACE.**

**TODAY IS THE DAY OF GOD’S DELIVERANCE.**

1. *“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”*
2. *“Tomorrow” is too late!*

Isaiah tells us *“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”* (Isaiah 55:6) The Word of God in front of us this day tells us *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”*

It is always “today” – until today ends. Today can end through death, sometimes suddenly, sometimes with warning, with no definite assurance of when it is coming.

Today can end through judgment day, suddenly, without any other warning than you have already heard from God’s Words. We have no clue as to exactly when it will come.

Weather forecasters can give us some clue about what the weather is going to be like, or where it may storm. But as we often experience, they cannot always predict where bad weather will happen, and especially how bad the weather can be. Man likes to think that he has everything under control, but bad weather such as Hurricane Sandy in 2012 reminds humans how powerless and weak man is against what God permits.

Especially since the time of Noah we have had God’s watchmen warning of the end of earthly life. In Noah’s day people had 120 years while Noah was building the ark to repent and believe in the promised Savior. But in the end only 8 were saved from the great flood. God’s Old Testament prophets kept warning about the importance of seeking the Lord now, while you are still alive, while God may be found, before it is too late. Christ himself and his apostles continued warning mankind.

Each generation has its “today”. Each person has his or her “today”. So when may the Lord be found? Only when you still have breath and can hear the Word of the Lord.

We have here a stern reminder of God’s Law. We think of the Third Commandment: **“Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.** *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.”

God has been talking about entering “rest”, meaning his eternal rest, which is the forgiveness of sins right here and now on earth together with the eternal rest of heaven when we leave this earth. He has compared Jesus to Moses, and warned against hardening your hearts, as the descendants of Abraham did in Moses’ time when they were forced by their sin and unfaithfulness to wander around in the desert for 40 years before the

next generation gained access to rest in the land promised to Abraham and his descendants as long as they were faithful to him.

Last week we talked about God's rest. For Old Testament Israel, God provided a day of rest, called the Sabbath. Sabbath means "rest". This was the day, every week, on which the people of Israel were called to cease from their labors and to reflect on and to rest in the work the Lord God was doing for them. The Lord God had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt. They were his people, and he was their God. He would take care of them. He would provide for them. He would protect them. He would lead them on their journey into the Promised Land, where they would find rest. Rest from their enemies. In a land flowing with milk and honey. A land of blessing and abundance. A place where every man could sit under his own fig tree and enjoy life. The 'good life'.

But God's rest is more than just physical rest and that kind of "good life". It is eternal, unending joy starting with the assurance of Jesus: "**Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.**" (Matthew 9:2)

In the previous chapter of Hebrews, God told us: "**So, as the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you hear his voice, 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.'**" (Hebrews 3:7-10) This is a clear example of God's Word of Law. This is God's responding in anger and judgment to the consistent rebellion and grumbling of the Israelites during their journey through the desert. God was angry, and his punishment for their sin was that they wouldn't enter into his rest.

These are strong words of Law. Why? God's chosen people were given a miraculous deliverance from slavery. They were provided with food and water for their journey. They were given the promise of an inheritance in the land of Canaan. These blessings were all pictures or symbols of Gospel: God's love and kindness, his deliverance, his providing for them. But their response to all of this good news was to harden their hearts. Instead of gratefulness, thanksgiving, and praise to God for what he had done, they hardened their hearts in unbelief and ungratefulness. They rebelled and were disobedient.

That very idea is found in our Old Testament lesson. "**For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.' So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'**" (Psalm 95:10-11)

These words show that God had a rest. He intended this rest for all men. The first rest, an earthly rest, is the rest in the land of Canaan, which had been promised to the descendants of Abraham. It was also a picture of the eternal salvation promised through the seed of the woman after the first sins. But the disobedience and unbelief of certain men made it necessary for the Lord to exclude them from the salvation which his gracious will wanted to give them. The Lord did not withdraw his promise of rest from all mankind because of sin. The promise of this rest was based upon Christ Jesus the Redeemer, but God is obligated to deny its blessings to unbelievers, since unbelief rejects the grace which God offers. Unbelievers prefer to live without God's blessings of forgiveness of sins and eternal life in heaven, or think that they can somehow earn or merit eternal life because of something they do.

But some men will enter into God's rest. We read: "**It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.**"

Since it remains a fact that some should enter into it, and those to whom the good news was first proclaimed did not enter on account of their unbelief, God again fixes a certain day, "Today" he calls it. "**Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.**"

From the Words of God you have heard this day it is clear that the Sabbath rest of God's salvation is still there. The promises of God stand secure and God has not changed his will or his mind about wanting to give eternal rest to mankind.

Those who previously had the opportunity to hear the good news, the Gospel-message as given to the patriarchs, did not enter into the rest of the Lord, entirely due to their unbelief. But God repeats the promise, proving the certainty that some will enter into his eternal rest.

Scripture uses the word “today”. With the eternal God “today” is not confined to the time of Moses, nor to that of David, but extends to New Testament times, including us today, and all humans till the end of the world. Israel came short of the rest through unbelief. Each human has his or her “today”. All who believe do enter God’s eternal rest. **“God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’”**

How many of us can say with certainty that we will be living tomorrow? Not a single one of us. We hope, we assume, we plan for tomorrow and for many future days. But the only thing that is really certain is death. Today is the only day you can be absolutely certain about. Gods tells us in Proverbs 27:1: **“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”**

And so the warning from God stands: **“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”** In Pharaoh when Moses was pleading with him to let God’s people go, we find one who kept turning his back on God, who kept hardening his heart against the Word of God, who refused to listen to it and finally God hardened his heart. He had forfeited all hope of eternal life despite seeing the power of God in ten plagues which afflicted not only all his people, but him personally.

And how does hardening one’s heart start? With not hearing God’s Word? Yes. With not appreciating and sharing in the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the altar? Yes. With not finding time to pray to the true God in the name of Jesus Christ, with not praying **“Thy will be done”**? Yes. And most horrible of all is preventing others from hearing God’s Word, as when we refuse to bring our children to Jesus and let them hear and learn his Gospel promises. Twice as recorded in the Gospels God the father spoke from heaven, once at Jesus’ baptism and again at his transfiguration telling men that Jesus is his beloved Son with whom he is well pleased. **“Listen to him!”** (Matt. 17:5)

The present, right now, is God’s “today” for us. Only he knows how long it will last. Through the Word his voice speaks to us proclaiming the Gospel and offering his rest, far more glorious than Israel had ever heard it. God’s Sabbath rest remains for his people.

The people of God, the spiritual Israel of all true believers have the eternal Sabbath rest of peace with God with its fullness to be reached in heaven. God’s resting on that first Sabbath after creation typified this wondrous rest as did all the Sabbaths observed in the Old Testament.

For us in the New Testament the picture is even clearer. Those Sabbath days were **“a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”** (Colossians 2:17)

In Christ shadow has become reality. Through his death and resurrection the way to God’s eternal rest is fully built and opened wide. What we now need are not Old Testament Sabbath days, but a faith in Christ that will not shrink though pressed by many a foe.

Such glorious rest the believer tastes now in part and wants to taste in heaven fully and forever. We need more than just a good beginning, more than nominal allegiance to the Christian flag, more than mere lip service to his Word. Constant diligence must be given so that we do not end up like disobeying and unbelieving Israel in the desert.

Listen to him, and listen to him today! You may not have another chance. God’s warning in Isaiah concludes with the Gospel promise: **“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”** (Isaiah 55:6-7)

Those who believe will be recipients of God’s promised rest. We begin to know that rest in this life, by the peace of sins forgiven that comes from Jesus’ death on the cross for us. But the full and complete rest, the true rest for our souls, is in heaven. When we by faith enter into that rest that Jesus has won for us, there will be no more pain or suffering or worry. We will be at home with God. We rest from our labors and trust in his. Jesus invites us to do just that when he says, **“Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give your rest.”** (Matthew 11:28) Yes, even now, we find rest for our souls, knowing that our salvation is secure in Christ. He is our great high priest in heaven, through whom we can come to God with all our cares and troubles. **“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”** (Hebrews 4:16) Amen.