

### Hebrews 3:12-19

Proper 23B + Pentecost 21 + October 17, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
Sharing in Christ

The Word of the Lord from Hebrews 3: "For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

<sup>1</sup>Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!  
<sup>2</sup>Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!  
<sup>3</sup>For the LORD is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.  
<sup>4</sup>In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.  
<sup>5</sup>The sea is his, for he made it,  
and his hands formed the dry land.  
<sup>6</sup>Oh come, let us worship and bow down;  
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!  
<sup>7</sup>For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand. (Psalm 95:1-7)

Psalm 95 a beautiful psalm of joy, and one that you probably know pretty well: if you joined us for Matins this morning, you sang it as part of that liturgy. The good news is outstanding: the Lord God, the Creator of heaven and earth, has made us His people. He welcomes us into His presence!

The psalm doesn't end there, though. It goes on and takes a somber turn:

<sup>7b</sup>Today, if you hear his voice,  
<sup>8</sup>do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,  
<sup>9</sup>when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof,  
though they had seen my work.  
<sup>10</sup>For forty years I loathed that generation and said,  
"They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways."  
<sup>11</sup>Therefore I swore in my wrath,  
"They shall not enter my rest." (Psalm 95:7-11)

The end.

It's a stark warning and reminder. The Lord had made the people of Israel His chosen people. When they were slaves in Egypt, He sent Moses to lead them out. He delivered them from Pharaoh and his armies. He parted the Red Sea and led them on dry land to safety. He rained manna, bread from heaven, upon them. He sent quail and provided water. The people saw the miracles. They knew they'd been delivered from slavery, and they heard the Lord's Word that the Promised Land was theirs.

And they hardened their hearts. They rebelled against the Lord. They were quick to turn to other idols, attracted to the false gods of peoples around them. Largely, they were ruled by fear of death far more than trust in God: death was an idol that they sought to appease, and they didn't believe that the

Lord would deliver them. And because they trusted that death was more powerful than the Lord, the Lord declared that nearly all of them would die in the wilderness; and their false god of fear – death – wouldn't save them from...death.

Our epistle from Hebrews 3 quotes Psalm 95 to give a somber reminder: it is possible to fall away from the living God. God has given you forgiveness for your sins in Holy Baptism: and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also faith and life and salvation. But while God gives these priceless gifts (and all for the sake of Jesus), He doesn't force you to keep them. It's possible to fall away from the living God; and if you fall away from the living God, then you will not enter His rest.

Many Christians have trouble with the teaching that you can fall away. They hold to a doctrine of "eternal security," or "once saved – always saved," teaching that the true Christian cannot fall away from God. So what happens if a Christian commits some terrible sin of disobedience and doesn't repent? Some who hold to the notion of eternal security would say that he still has saving faith despite the impenitence, though there's no such teaching in Scripture. And what happens if a Christian renounces the Christian faith? Eternal security advocates would have to say, "Well, I guess he never really was a Christian in the first place."

The notion of eternal security, though well-intended, is one of false security. Look at the people of Israel who died in the wilderness because of their disobedience and unbelief. Could we ever make the argument that they entered Canaan despite their impenitence? Of course not: they died in the wilderness. Could we ever make the argument that they died in the wilderness because they were never God's chosen people in the first place? Of course not: they were only in the wilderness because God had chosen them and led them out of Egypt.

God has chosen you. You know it to be true because He chose you on a specific day and time with the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." That water was your Red Sea, where the Lord rescued you from slavery to sin and made you His own child. You know that you're His, numbered among the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand. Your birth in Holy Baptism is as sure a gift of God as your birth from your mother, where God gave you life without your work. In fact, consider that for a moment: God gave you physical life without your help, for you could do nothing to make yourself alive. Now that you are alive, He doesn't force you to keep the gift of life; you have the ability to get rid of the life He has given you, though what a terrible choice to make. Likewise, the Lord gave you life in Holy Baptism without your help, for you were dead in sin. Now you are alive in Christ, but the Lord doesn't force you to stay alive: you have the ability to reject that new life, to harden your heart and fall away – an even more terrible choice. In both the case of being born and being born again, the Lord does not force you to keep the gift of life. It is possible to fall away from the living God.

So beware those things that would lead you astray. Our text warns of an unbelieving heart, of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. There are all sorts of little, seemingly harmless sins and victimless vices that creep into your life. They feel comfortable and helpful, because your sinful nature loves them so; and they are working to harden your heart until you return to unbelief. You are tempted to believe that God's Word is wrong, or His doctrine too severe: such temptations are designed to get you to stop listening to His Word so that you listen to other words instead. But other words cannot save you. They will leave you to die in the wilderness. You'll be tempted to go it alone, to try to be a Christian without bothering to attend worship with the family of God; but sheep that go on their own don't thrive. They're easy pickings for lions and wolves, even holes in the ground. That's why the text admonishes, "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

It's a pretty serious warning. But then again, loving parents give serious warnings to their children when it's a matter of life and death. And your Father in heaven loves you very much – so much that He sacrificed His only-begotten Son on the cross to give you life.

Despite the somber warnings and the serious sound of our text, there is abundant good news here. In this matter of life and death, you already have life. *Staying* alive is far easier than *making* yourself alive, which is impossible. This is not a struggle where you have to fight your way past sin, death and devil in order to get the prize: the prize of eternal life is already yours. It's already been given to you for the sake of Jesus, crucified for your sins and raised for your justification. You already have eternal life: sin, death and devil are just doing their best to get you to give it up.

Furthermore, you've got it better than being a follower of Moses in the wilderness. The text says, "We have come to share in Christ." Literally, we are partakers of Christ: He has joined us to Himself. In Holy Baptism, He made His death and resurrection to be your death and resurrection, so that you might have eternal life. In the Holy Communion, He gives you His very, resurrected body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Not only has the Lord given you life freely, but He continues to sustain that life freely for you.

He does so in His Supper, and He does so in His Word – abundant, common gifts that He offers all the time, including today. The text declares, "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." There is a gracious announcement there: you hear His voice. The Lord makes His Word known to you so that you might know of the sin that would steal away the life that He has given; and He makes His Word of Gospel known to you so that He might continue to sustain the life He has given you.

The warning is somber, the threat is real. But the victory is already yours! Christ has died and Christ is risen, and He declares you to be His people, bought by His blood. Eternal life is already yours, and the Lord delights that you be alive forever. For today, you hear His voice that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen