**November 18, 2018**

**Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8**

The eleventh verse of this Hebrews passage describes the futility that pastors fear in ministry: day after day performing the same tasks that produce no real results. A seemingly Sisyphean task at times, priests of old offered sacrifices again and again and again and again without ever making a difference. Presbytery meetings today may bring similar patterns to air: churches stuck in the same old rut and committees unable to see the big picture.

Keep pedaling. The first word of verse 12 makes all the difference: “but.” Something big always comes after little conjunctions. But Christ has already done the heavy lifting. But Christ offered a once-and-for-all sacrifice.

Tired? Run down? Listless? Feeling poopy at parties? The answer to all your problems is in these words: Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins. Which is to say that we can stop making sacrifices. We are wasting our time trying to fix a problem that God already solved. We have been so busy trying to clean up our wrongdoings and get rid of our sin that we didn’t pay attention when Christ took care of it. Jesus Christ made the sacrifice. His blood was shed. His task was eternally successful. In one fell swoop he defeated his enemies and perfected the ones whom God called (the sanctified). They are all made holy. The rest of us can sit down.

Even more, because Jesus saved us in his sacrifice, God no longer keeps a tab on our sins. God doesn’t keep a tally sheet of the wrong we did this week, or how the number of ways our very beings are broken and separate from God. The bill for our sinfulness and lawlessness was torn up. We were eternally forgiven. So this is why sacrifices are unnecessary. Since God doesn’t keep a count of our sin, we don’t need to pay attention to sin. Now we are free to spend time on what is really important: worship.

The 19th-25th verses of this Hebrews passage then walks us through an overarching outline of why and how we worship:

Because of the sacrifice Jesus made – and specifically because of Jesus’ blood – we are clean and clear to enter God’s Sanctuary. God wants us here so much that God made a way for us to be here. This place, this drama was created *for* us to spend time with God Almighty. And though we know that we were sinful, and we though that we are indebted to the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf, the writer implores us to enter worship with confidence.

Our entrance to worship, to the Table, to God each week should be a triumphant procession. Our approach should be in full confidence, with assurance of faith. There is no need to bring any abject piety. No reason to eat humble pie. Don’t drag your feet getting here because of what you did or didn’t do this week, what you doubted or questioned this week. Come because God made a place for you. Come because Christ redeemed you. Come because you are enough. No more, no less is needed. Just you. Come. And march through those doors like you deserve to be here. Don’t skirt around the side or slink up to the Table. Walk like this is your family property and God is the proud papa.

In this regard, Maya Angelou could have broadly been speaking of sin when she wrote the poem “Still I Rise.”

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?

’Cause I walk like I've got oil wells

Pumping in my living room.

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Don't you take it awful hard

’Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines

Diggin’ in my own backyard.

Despite sin’s best attempt to keep us down and out, we still rise because of Jesus Christ. We were given the keys to the kingdom in Christ’s death and resurrection. We inherited the riches of salvation with Christ’s sacrifice. We were invited into the heavenly feast through God’s abundant mercy. Even with the threat of sin knocking at our back door, still we rise.

Secondly, we enter God’s sanctuary with our hearts already sprinkled clean from our former sin and evil. The sin within us was defeated. The cancer that threatened us was removed. We have a clean bill of health. So in a sense, we are undergoing a spiritual awakening – a desire for God that we did not know and could not feel when sin entrapped us. Like an adrenaline rush that comes after battle or some physical struggle, we emerge with a newfound understanding of what our life is really about. We know the value of life, and a strong desire to connect.

Then after we enter the Sanctuary, after our hearts are purified, now our bodies are washed pure in water. Of course this is baptismal imagery. Baptism is the entry rite into Christian community. Baptism is a seal of God’s gift of life within us, and a reminder that we are first and foremost God’s children – not our parents’ or our churches’, not Flannagan or Fischer or Presbyterian or Methodist; our baptized name is “child of God”. God gives us our life and breath. God names us and claims us. Then God calls us to service. The baptismal fount is where God’s grace literally washes over us. The waters rush over our heads and mark us, immersing us in God’s family. So that when we walk away, we are dripping with God’s love.

Because we are forgiven, because we are clean and called, we stay in God’s sanctuary with hope unwavering. Perhaps like students undergoing Confirmation who return to the fount to make their own promises to God. Hoping without wavering that God has been with them since they were baptized as infants. Hoping without wavering that their parents didn’t make a mistake. Hoping without wavering that God will go with them from this point. Hoping without wavering that their lives will find whatever meaning God intends.

Then as we leave these doors and complete our confirmation, full of hope, we enter the real world. We provoke one another to love and good deeds. We care for all that God has given us – people and planet, resources of time and talents and income. This is stewardship. We continue to meet together regularly; not neglecting to do so as some. We worship and practice stewardship and watch and wait for Christ’s Victory Day when he will return to claim what is rightfully his.

The lectionary calendar of scripture readings is gently turning us toward Advent, which starts in two weeks. This Hebrews’ passage begins to peak around the corner at Christ’s coming. We are reminded that our worship hasn’t reached the high point. Our stewardship is not yet done. The whole point of worshipping and living this way is so we can keep watch. The good news of Christ’s sacrifice, the welcome news of God’s hospitality just gets better when we remember that Jesus is coming back. God is taking us home.

Katherine Patterson, a prolific children’s author, once said that all great stories have 3 parts to their plot: home, adventure, and home. We begin in one place with family, thinking and feeling particular ways. We adventure to some place (whether physical or emotional or spiritual) where we experience new and different things, then at some point, we return home. Home may have changed. We may have changed, but we must return home to reconcile who we are with who we have become. The hero (or heroine’s journey). Huckleberry Finn, Lord of the Rings, The Little Engine That Could – all great stories whose arc is centered on leaving and returning home.

So it is with God’s creation. We were born close to God’s heart. Sin and Darkness ensnared us, forcing us on a journey away from God. Then Christ called us home. Through his own sacrifice he paved the road home to God’s heart. The way is clear, though our final escort has not yet arrived. So we stand in the road, ready and waiting, hoping for Christ’s imminent return. This is our everyday Christian living.

The Hebrews writer created a glorious, triumphant picture of worship. And this is our home. This is a sun-streaming-through-the-windows, trumpets-blasting, full choir. Here is grace upon grace upon grace. Here is desire and belonging and welcome. Here is assurance and pardon and presence. God’s glory is streaming round us. In Christ’s light, we bring our offerings of praise and prayer, time and talents with pride. Not reluctance that they might not be enough. Not arrogance that we have the best. Simple pride and trust that God wants us, and we then can want God. We come to worship with a desire to be and become. We leave worship with a desire to be and become. And we wait every morning that this will be the day when our being will finally meet our becoming. Amen.