

Hebrews 13:8-16

“Let Us Go To Jesus”

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Ordinary Time

This morning, our sermon text comes from Hebrews 13:8-16. Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word - it’s also printed on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to read along.

*8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 9 Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. 10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. 11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. 12 So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.*

*13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. 14 For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. 15 Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

It's important as we come to our text this morning to remember the situation of this early Christian letter.

At the time in which Hebrews was written, the church of Jesus Christ was a fringe religious and social movement at best. Baptized Christians only numbered, at most, in the thousands and they were scattered in various cities around the Mediterranean world. Christianity was a drop in the bucket in the Greco-Roman religious world.

Several weeks ago, I read a book by an early church historian entitled, *"Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?"*

It's a fascinating question. And indeed, the growth of the early church is completely inexplicable apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and the strangely compelling message of the death and resurrection of a crucified Jew who was also the Son of God.

To be clear, there were no social advantages in becoming a Christian in the early days of the church. To be baptized in the first decades of the church's life was much more like the experience of being baptized today in Saudi Arabia than what we experience in this country when we follow Jesus.

At least some of those early Christian converts experienced violent persecution. We know from the letter that the first readers of Hebrews had experienced the loss of property, homelessness and imprisonment, and it's certainly possible that some of them had been killed.

But even if they weren't violently persecuted, every Christian in the early days of the church was ostracized in some way from their community.

Just as Jesus had prophesied, to follow him meant the estrangement of wives from husbands, children from parents, siblings from siblings.

The pressure to turn back from your baptism must have been immense, and a daily struggle. All of the difficulty would stop, all of it would go away if only you turned your back on Jesus and recanted your baptism.

The letter to the Hebrews is likely primarily addressed to Jewish Christians, and for these men and women, the temptation was even stronger to abandon their faith, because during the first forty years of the church, the sacrificial worship of Israel at the temple in Jerusalem continued unabated.

Next to the glory and pomp of the Temple - one of the great wonders of the ancient world - Christian worship must have seemed so outwardly insubstantial.

Worship at the temple meant being surrounded by immense crowds who believed as you did, gazing on the beauty of the gold and carved wood of the temple itself, seeing the blood of the animal spilled to give you an dramatic picture of atonement for your sins.

In contrast, Christian worship took place in homes, small little groups of believers singing and praying together often early in the morning or late at night on the first day of the week so that Christians who were slaves could participate, listening to the Scriptures read and preached, eating and drinking a little bread and wine.

It is in this context that the writer to the Hebrews writes and tells his readers, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Those men and women who heard those phrases for the first time knew the truth of those words. They felt them in their bones.

And in response to this immensely difficult pastoral situation, in the face of all this difficulty and suffering, what does the Apostle do in his letter from beginning to end?

It's actually a very simple thing.

He tells his readers, again and again, about glory and wonder of Jesus.

That's it.

That's his pastoral strategy to convince his readers to persevere in their faith. He just tells them about Jesus.

Hebrews is, without a doubt, the most radically Jesus-focused letter of all the epistles in the New Testament.

In chapter 12, the Apostle famously instructs his readers to fix their eyes on Jesus, but really this is what he has been doing all throughout his letter.

Hebrews begins by apostle describing how Jesus is the true and eternal Son of God, the one by whom God has fully revealed himself.

He tells how Jesus took upon our flesh to deliver us from the slavery of death by his death and resurrection.

He speaks of Jesus' spilling his own blood to perfectly atone for our sin, and how, as our High Priest, he has now actually entered God's own presence as a man to intercede for all who belong to him.

He reminds his readers of how, although they feel alone, they are actually a part of a great cloud of witnesses - a community of men and women who have followed Jesus since the very beginning of creation.

And now, as he draws his letter to a close, he employs the same strategy he has utilized all through his epistle. He tells his readers one more time about Jesus.

Beloved, there is a lesson here for us.

Whatever your temptation in your life today, whatever your difficulty, whatever your doubts, whatever your grief — what you need, above all things, is to see Jesus.

*One thing I have asked of the LORD, David says in Psalm 27: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.*

And of course, what David desires, above all things, is to behold the beauty of Jesus - God's own son.

This, beloved, is the Christian answer in response to suffering, in response to temptation, in response to death - to fix our eyes on Jesus again and again and again, to commune with him in the means of grace he gives us all the days of our life, until we finally in the resurrection we see him face to face.

The apostle begins this passage by emphasizing the eternal changelessness of Jesus: *Jesus Christ, he says, is the same yesterday and today and forever.*

This is the unshakable foundation of our faith in all the changes in our lives - that Jesus is the same as he has always been - steadfast in his love, always faithful in his presence and care - unchanging in his power and strength.

Because of the steadfastness of Jesus, the apostle says: *9 Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them.*

What the Apostle is referring to here is the temptation these early Jewish Christians faced to return to Judaism, to abandon Jesus and return to the sacrificial rites of the temple.

But while we might not be tempted to return to Judaism, we certainly are, at different times tempted to drift away from Jesus, to turn away from the church that he established, to go in a different direction.

So much of Christian discipleship, beloved, is simply this — clinging to Jesus. Not being led away from him. Not giving in to something that promises an easier life, less suffering, less difficulty, less complication.

The apostle goes on verses 10-12 to expand on his argument.

*10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. 11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. 12 So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.*

Those who serve the tent are the priests of Israel who, even as the apostle writes, are sacrificing animals in the temple.

But the apostle tells his readers that in their apparently insignificant acts of Christian worship, they are actually given access to an altar that the priests in all their religious activity cannot touch — the altar of heaven, the true temple, where Jesus now lives and ministers on their behalf.

The reason for this dramatic reversal of reality, the apostle explains, is because Jesus is the true sacrifice - the fulfillment of the promise of atonement that was communicated through the death of animals in the Old Covenant.

As we heard in our Old Testament reading from Leviticus, on the day of atonement, a bull and a goat were sacrificially killed as a sin offering to atone for the sins of the High Priest and all the people of Israel, and after their blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat in the Holy Place, the bodies of the animals were taken outside the camp to be completely destroyed.

As Leviticus says, the skin and the flesh and even the dung of the slain bull and goat were burned up with fire.

And it is for this reason, the apostle teaches his readers, that Jesus suffered and died not in the temple, but outside the holy city, outside the gates of Jerusalem, so that he might complete the atoning sacrifice in his own body all the way to the end and sanctify - that is, make holy, all of those who belong to him.

In this way, the words of Psalm 118 take on an even deeper meaning — *the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone* — for Jesus being destroyed outside of the gates of the city is a sign — not of God's rejection of him, but the sufficiency and power of his atoning death.

And here, the apostle makes the great turn in his argument in this passage.

*Therefore, he says in verses 13-14 — therefore, since Jesus suffered outside the gates, away from the apparent glory of the temple, away from the apparent blessedness of the holy city — therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach that he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city to come.*

This, for the apostle, is the heart of the matter.

Although, it might be tempting to these early Jewish Christians to believe that the place of power is the glory and pomp of the temple, although it may seem tempting to believe that the way of safety is returning to Judaism — in actuality the reverse is true — it is in the place of apparent rejection — outside the camp, suffering with Jesus, that is actually the place of permanence and safety.

And so he concludes his argument in verses 15-16: *Through him [that is, through Jesus] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

It's fascinating to me that the apostle here tells us that the sacrifice of praise to God that we are to offer is the fruit of lips that acknowledge the name of Jesus — deliberately echoing the words of Jesus himself, who taught his disciples in Luke 9 that the way in which we acknowledge Jesus' name is by taking up our crosses, denying ourselves, and following him.

And it also stands out to me that according to the apostle, the Christian way of life is embodied not only in going to Jesus outside the gates of the city, but also, in that place, bearing the reproach — that is, the shame — that he endured.

In this way, those who follow Jesus, those who belong to Jesus, are given the dignity and honor of suffering with Jesus — sharing actually, in some way in his affliction and trauma.

And I mean that.

The deepest dignity and honor that you or I can receive is suffering with Jesus, going outside the gates and bearing the shame he endured.

For remember, beloved, the words of the Apostle in Hebrews 2 — Jesus is crowned with glory and honor not in spite of, but *because* of the suffering of death.

The cross is where Jesus is lifted up. His crucifixion is actually his glory. And we are those who are called into that same cruciform-shaped life.

We are those, beloved, who are given the gift of sharing in the strange glory of the cross.

So what does this mean? At the very least, it means what verse 16 says — doing good and sharing what we have — which hearkens back to the beginning of chapter 13, where we are called to sacrificially welcome strangers and seek out those in the body who are in need.

That, certainly, is part of what it means to bear the reproach Jesus endured.

But the particulars of this calling is different for all of us. The cross that is laid upon our shoulders is new in every age.

For the original readers of this letter, going out to Jesus and bearing the reproach he endured meant remaining steadfast in their baptisms and not returning to the apparent safety of Judaism — despite the loss of property and social status and even perhaps their lives as well.

So what is the cross that Jesus is asking you to bear? That is a question you must wrestle with if you are going to follow Jesus, for you can be sure there is a cross that is prepared for you, if you are to be his disciple.

Perhaps it is forgiving the sins of someone who has wronged you, a spouse or a sibling or a friend or even an enemy.

Perhaps it is serving someone who is impossible to serve, someone who doesn't even understand everything you are giving up to help them in their need.

Perhaps it is simply continuing on in your faith in the face of persistent physical afflictions, chronic bodily pain and suffering that sometimes feels completely isolating.

Perhaps it is resisting the temptation of sin, even though that sin seems to promise life and happiness and the way of holiness feels excruciating.

Perhaps it is walking through the valley of the shadow of death, and clinging to Jesus in the midst of your depression and despair and grief.

Perhaps it is simply laboring quietly in a place where your faithful work is often unnoticed and unappreciated by those around you.

All of these, beloved, are good ways to die.

All of these, beloved, are beautiful ways to take up your cross and follow Jesus.

All of these are magnificent ways, beloved, to be crowned with the glory and honor of going outside the camp and bearing with Jesus the reproach that he endured.

But in whatever way Jesus is calling you to follow him, know this.

Going after Jesus into death has always been, and will always be, the heart of the Christian life.

And because Jesus has gone before us and adorned this path with his own presence that the way of the cross is truly the way of life and peace.

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

*Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen!*