

Sermon for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
“A Loving Warning from the God of Our Salvation”
Hebrews 3:12-19
10/14/18b

I. Introduction: Another year drawing to a close

“So long as life is mine” (from hymn just sung, “Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower,” *LSB* #694...

Today’s children’s message (on Ps. 90:12—“so teach us to number our days...”

ANOTHER YEAR IS DRAWING TO A CLOSE:

Another *calendar* year

Kids are well into the school year; many high schools have already had their homecoming; we’re deep into the playoff season in baseball
Third quarter investment statements came in the mail.
The days are fast getting shorter
It won’t be long now before Christmas lights are out—or, maybe some of you have seen some already?

Another *church* year

When you arrive at “The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost” you know we must be pretty close to the end.
While the liturgical color remains the same—green—these Sundays toward the end of the church year are often rather different in their focus or their tone. There’s a growing emphasis upon where we’re going as Christians, where we’re headed as God’s people. “Jesus, Lead Thou On, Till Our Rest Is Won”... God’s Word on these latter Sundays in the church year calls Christians to a hope-filled waiting, a patient perseverance in trial and suffering, and a bold and dauntless, Christ-centered faith and confession. “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand; All Other Ground Is Sinking Sand.” (*LSB* hymns #575 and #576)
There is an earnestness, a seriousness, to these closing days of the church year because they remind us that while all things are coming to an end, the beginning of our eternal life with God lies just around the corner.

➔ *Therefore, if there is any laxity, if there is any complacency, if there is any casualness and worldliness within any of us or among us here at Beautiful Savior in these days, God through His Law today wants to expose that and call those at ease in their sin—the “comfortable”—to repentance. Likewise, if there is any anxiety, if there is any uncomfortableness, any contrite fear, if there are any timid hearts among us, any persons who penitently tremble before the living God, God through His holy Gospel today wants to bring to them the assurance of a full and free salvation that has been secured by the blood of God’s Son Himself, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for sinners.*

II. The Text for Today

¹² Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; ¹³ but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, ¹⁵ while it is said:

“Today, if you will hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

¹⁶ For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses?
¹⁷ Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? ¹⁹ So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

III. “Beware, brethren!” What we have here, dear friends, is a divine warning. Those who hear God’s voice are warned to take care how they hear!

The EXAMPLE which is held up is the example of Israel led by Moses. The children of Israel, after they were freed from slavery in Egypt, did not leave us a good example of how to give ear to God’s voice.

It is true, after the Red Sea crossing, “Israel saw...feared the Lord...and believed” (Ex. 14:31).

And in the next chapter when they became very thirsty, God answered their plea and made bitter water sweet. The Lord then tested the people and said, “If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes...I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, you healer.” (15:26)

But soon the people grew impatient and complained. They did not listen to God’s voice and keep His Word but they began to harden their hearts against it:

- They cried for meat and said, “We are going to die of hunger!” (16:3)
- They cried for water and said, “We are going to die of thirst!” (17:3)
- They dared to test the Lord and said, “Is the Lord among us or not?” (17:7)

Worse still was the faithlessness, disobedience, and outright rebellion that occurred after the twelve spies returned from spying out the land of Canaan. Though the Lord had sworn to give them the land (Numbers 13:2), most of the spies did not believe, and they soured the people’s minds by giving them a bad report about the land. When Caleb spoke up for the Lord and said that God would surely give them the land, the people did not believe the Lord, and they cried out and said, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt” (14:4). It was that rebellion against God’s voice and

promise that resulted in the Lord vowing that none of those who rebelled would live to see the promised land; over forty years every last unbeliever would die in the wilderness (14:28-30).

→ Later, in Psalm 95, a psalm we know from the Venite in the order of Matins, the psalmist *held up this EXAMPLE!* He reminded God's people of their rebellious forefathers so that they would not repeat their grave mistake. "Today," the psalmist wrote to the people of his day, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as...your fathers [did]" (v.7ff.)

→ In Hebrews 3 the author *quoted Psalm 95, reminding his readers of this same EXAMPLE!* "Today, if *YOU* hear his voice, do not harden your hearts," he wrote (Heb. 3:15). It was especially important now that they hear God's Word because "in these last days he has spoken to us by His Son" (Heb. 1:2)!

→ Today, through the proclamation of God's Word among us, you and I, God's people today, are being warned—warned to receive God's Word and not to harden our hearts in stubborn rebellion against the good news it brings. "Today"—that's now!—"if you hear his voice..."

IV. When our text says, "Beware, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief," the warning is needed because evil is real. Unbelief is not far from each one of us for it dwells in our old nature. Sin has a very deceitful quality about it. It sneaks up and takes hold of us so very gradually, hardening the heart by steps and by turns if we do not keep watch upon ourselves and one another.

It's so easy to compromise with sin—to say, "I know what the Bible teaches, but..." Or, "I know what God says, but..." It's so easy to relax our commitment to God here and there by being just a little more like the world, blending in, when we are called to shine as lights, to season like salt, to be holy. It's so easy to succumb to greed, making material things our trust, as the young man in today's Gospel did, rather than God. Sin is deceitful, evil is real, and unbelief lies close at hand. That is why God's Word today says: "But exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13). We are to love one another such that we exhort one another... This is why we practice loving church discipline... The warning is needed because hardening one's heart against God, departing in unbelief from the living God, has consequences—dire consequences. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

There is an image, a picture in our text that shows this. The picture painted in our text is so stark and vivid—it is of a vast graveyard. It is a picture of the bodies of the rebellious Israelites scattered about the desert floor, dead and cut off from God forever in their unbelief. Can you picture it? Picture it for a moment. It is not a pleasant image. That

bleak picture powerfully speaks the Law. It portrays sin and its devastating result; it depicts unbelief and its ultimate end. That picture scares us to death.

But this morning God would draw our eyes to another picture which speaks the Gospel—another picture which does not scare to death but comforts with life and hope. That picture is of another grave. It is a grave empty but for some neatly folded grave cloths. It is a grave before which stands a woman weeping tears of wonder and amazement and joy. It is the grave of God’s only-begotten Son, once indeed dead, but now and forevermore alive—alive as our merciful High Priest (2:17), “the mediator of a new covenant” (9:15), our great [good] shepherd (13:20), our Savior from sin and Satan, our Lord of righteousness and life. This picture is the picture of

the light of salvation that broke upon our world on Easter Day. It is the picture of what God, by grace, has finished, completed, and accomplished for you and for me.

V. Today’s text says: “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (Hebrews 3:14).

Where, dear friends, is our confidence? Where, in the midst of evil and unbelief, with the deceitful sound of sin swirling about us, is our confidence?

Our confidence is and remains only in Jesus Christ, who at the cross “offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, [and] sat down at the right hand of God” (10:12). Our confidence is in Him who took on flesh like ours so that He might face all temptation for us and truly fulfill the whole Law of God in our stead, living blamelessly for us and also dying in our place. Our confidence is in Jesus, who was “made like his brothers in every respect” (2:17), “who was faithful to him who appointed him” (3:2), and who is truly “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). Our confidence is in Jesus, whose blood “purifi[es] our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (9:14). Our confidence now and always is in God’s only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, “the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8).

VII. Conclusion. PRAYER: *O most mighty and most gracious God, since You have so wondrously forgiven our sins and made us Your own people, bless and defend, protect and guide, lead and support us all our days so that by Your grace we may remain steadfast in our devotion to Jesus, our only Savior, hearing Your voice and trusting unwaveringly in the promises of Your holy Word, by Your Holy Spirit fighting against the deceitful power of sin, resisting every temptation to evil and unbelief, and in love exhorting our brothers and sisters in the faith to remain steadfast in your grace; and grant that we, holding fast our original confidence firm all the way to the end, may finally inherit the salvation purchased for us by the blood of our true Redeemer, Your Son, Jesus Christ. In confident faith in Him alone do we pray. AMEN*