

Michael McGowan

Hebrews 4:1-13 – *Sabbath: a Foretaste*

Preached at Trinity CRC

June 20, 2021

Hebrews 4:1-13

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ²For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. ³Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

“So I declared on oath in my anger,
‘They shall never enter my rest.’”

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” ⁵And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”

⁶Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

¹²For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

In her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn re-tells a Jewish folktale:

There is a devout Jewish man who loses his way in a forest.

It's late on Friday which means the Sabbath approaches soon.

The sun sets and the man begins to weep with sadness...

Because this pious man won't be able to observe this most important day.

Suddenly, he sees a palace standing amidst the trees...

And an old man approaches him from the palace.

The old man motions this lost Jewish traveler to follow him...

Without words...just summoning him to follow.

The old man leads him to a fragrant pool.

The Jewish man bathes.

And after, he puts on the elegant clothes given to him by the old man.

This lost Jewish traveler is then led into a chamber that glitters with silver and gold...

Pearls and precious stones adorning the walls.

He's then led into a second chamber...

Where candelabra and chandeliers gleam with radiance.

The guest wanders from room to room...

With each room more beautiful and splendid than the one before it.

In the seventh room he is approached by seven men...

Ancient men who with their white beards resemble a forest of snow-covered oak trees.

They welcome this stranger...

And they tell him that they now have enough to hold a Jewish service...

The required 10.

But, doing the math—

7 elders, the 1 man who was leading him, and now he himself—

He only counts 9...

How are they counting 10?

The man is seized by overwhelming feelings of fear—

Not the kind of fear that makes your limbs tremble—
 But fear of awe and reverence.
 He realizes that he has sensed it all along—
 The presence of the 10th—
 The Divine Presence.
 One of the ancient men—
 An elder wearing a royal crown on his head—
 Takes his place at the cantor's pulpit.
 He chants with beauty the words of Scripture welcoming the Sabbath—
 With chants so sweet you'd think maybe he is the Psalmist himself.
 After prayers the man is led to wash his hands...
 And then is served meat and wine...
 Meat he is sure the righteous will eat in Paradise...
 And wine so good it could only be reserved for the coming of the Messiah.
 This lost man spends the entire Sabbath in the elders' company...
 In prayer, in singing Sabbath hymns, in the study of the Torah.
 And at the conclusion of the Sabbath...
 He is given spices to smell which have the fragrance of the Tree of Life.
 Finally, it is time for the Jewish traveler to leave...
 Sabbath has ended.
 The old man—
 His guide—
 Leads him from the palace, back into the forest and whispers in his ear:
 “You've just been in Paradise.”
 “The elders you spent Sabbath with were:
 Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob;
 Moses and Aaron;
 David and Solomon.”

“I am Eliezer, caretaker of the palace and servant to the Patriarch Abraham.”

“And the tenth for our service was the Holy One Himself.”

“You’ve just been in Paradise.”

A traveler—

Lost in the wilderness of life...

Unable to find his way...

And longing for the repose of Sabbath—

Is led into the presence of God:

“You’ve just been in Paradise.”

How many of us are in a similar place?

Lost in life...

Weary, tired, worn out, lost...

Longing for rest?

Not rest where you kick your feet up and binge on Netflix...

But rest that is deep and sustaining.

Rest that actually refreshes and gives life. [PAUSE]

Here’s the good news:

“There remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.” (Heb 4:9)

A rest that is called, “His rest.” (4:1)

“God’s rest.”

“God’s rest,” not just in the sense that it’s something he gives.

But, “God’s rest” in the sense that it’s something God himself enjoys.

Because on the 7th day God rested.

God finished his work of creation...

He called it very good...

And then he rested...

God sat back to marvel at his creation.

Is there a rest more pure, more peaceful, more lifegiving...

Than the rest that God himself experiences and shares?

This is the rest that is available to us!

“There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.” (4:9)

“The promise of entering *his rest* still stands.” (4:1)

The rest that we’re pointed to in this passage...

Is ultimately eternal rest with God—

Eternal fellowship with God—

When after this life when we’re received into heaven and see Jesus face to face.

But even now we’re given a foretaste.

We’re given a glimpse of what that will look like... Today!

“*Today*, if you hear his voice...”

Just like the lost Jewish traveler welcomed into the palace of Sabbath—

Invited to come in from the wilderness...

To be in the presence of the Holy One—

We too are invited to live that rest today...

To come away from the rush and hurry of life...

To come and find repose in none other than the Lord himself.

Whether it’s taking the whole day to enjoy close company with God—

Or maybe it’s moments of quiet throughout the day—

We’re invited to leave the wilderness of life...

To come into the Paradise of God’s rest *today*.

This passage begins with a warning though:

“Be careful that you don’t miss it!”

“Be careful you don’t come up short of God’s rest!”

How would that happen?

James Smith from Calvin University points us to 2 sides of the same coin:

Disbelief and disobedience.

The first, disbelief, means that you hear the Good News proclaimed to you...

But you don't receive it in faith.

The Bad News is that God sees you exactly as you are...

He knows all of the secrets;

He knows all of the sins you've committed against him and against people he created;

He knows the ways that you *will* sin against him and other people;

He knows how in your work you're trying to make yourself look and feel good...

That you're depending on things other than him.

The Bad News is that God sees it and is just...

He doesn't gloss over sin.

We couldn't call God holy and just if he turned a blind eye to sin.

The Bad News is that we're separated from God because of our sin...

Our relationship with him, each other, ourselves, and the creation is broken.

We work and work and strive and strive...

Trying to fix things but only making them worse.

The Bad News is that we cannot do anything to fix the mess we're in...

So we wander in the wilderness of life...

Looking for something to save us...

To satisfy us and give us that rest we long for.

The Good News...

Is that God knows.

God knows and shows us grace and mercy.

The Good News is that God himself comes down to us.

God comes down in Jesus Christ to rescue us from this mess we've landed ourselves in.

God reaches down his hand to pull us out of the grave.

Jesus Christ gives up his life on the cross—

Dying for our sins—

Is raised to new life and gives that to us.

The Good News is that God is the great fixer.

In Jesus Christ our relationship with God is repaired/restored.

This is the only way we will have rest in this life or the next...

By being in this restored relationship with God.

The writer of Hebrews warns us not to come up short of God's rest through disbelief.

Don't just hear the Good News...

Hear it and grab onto it in faith.

"Yes Lord, I believe!"

On the other side of that same coin is disobedience.

We very practically miss God's rest *today* through disobedience.

When our faith in Christ does not lead to a change of affections or desires.

We say we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior...that we trust God...

But what do our actions, attitudes, and pursuits tell us?

In our busyness are we trying to cover over a spiritual restlessness?

Afraid to come before the Triune God to let him change us?

Afraid of where he'll lead us in life?

In our endless work...

Are we pursuing the comfort and security only God can provide?

As we examine our life...

Do we trust more in our frenzied efforts than God's grace?

Where is your heart?

Where do your desires lead you?

Is it into God's rest?

This is why the writer of Hebrews puts verses 12-13 there.

The word of God is like a sharp scalpel...

With precision it cuts through the attitudes and intentions of our heart.
God's word shapes and disciplines our desires.

You cannot spend time in God's Word—

Whether that's on your own;

In a worship service;

In a small group;

With a friend;

Or around the family dinner table—

You cannot spend time in God's Word without it dissecting your heart...

Cutting through to your true intentions and desires.

We come before it longing to be changed...

Trusting that God will perform the necessary operation in our lives.

God's rest is available to us today.

Paradise is available to us today.

A taste of what we'll experience after this life is available to us today.

If only we would come to him:

Come to Christ, weary traveler;

Allow him to embrace you;

Trust him to shape your desires;

Avail yourself to his Word and his care;

Trust Christ to lead you into God's rest, today.

Amen.