

Sermon 10-21-18  
Pastor Ray Lorthioir  
Trinity Lutheran Church  
W. Hempstead, NY

Based on the second lesson for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Hebrews 4:1-16

**Today!**

In 1979 a person specially appointed to pray at the altar rail for those receiving Holy Communion prayed over me saying, "The Lord has a Word for you. It's Hebrews 4:9." When I returned to my seat I was eager to see what God had for me in that verse. So I turned open the pew bible and read, Hebrews 4:9, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God;" (RSV) I thought to myself, "What does that mean?" So, I read the context of the entire third and fourth chapters of Hebrews and began to understand but only a little.

The New Testament book of Hebrews is one of the more difficult books of the New Testament. As its name says, you have to be very familiar with the Old Testament in order to understand its teachings.

For instance, last week we traced part of what the term "God's rest" means from the Old Testament. It comes from Yahweh's ancient promise to the people of Israel concerning the Promised Land, which includes not only present day Israel, but the West Bank, Gaza, parts of Jordan and a small part of Syria.

Here's what Moses said to Israel as they were preparing to invade the Promised Land after forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 12:9-10, "9... 'you have not yet reached the resting place and the inheritance the LORD your God is giving you. 10 But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety.'" This means that the Promised Land was the place where wandering Israel would finally come to rest and settle. The Promised Land would be Israel's homeland for as long as the earth endures. It would be a place of safety from their enemies. The Promised Land was and is God's rest for wandering Israel.

But forty years earlier, Israel had balked when Yahweh had commanded them to conquer the Promised Land. Instead, fear of the giant people living in the land had conquered Israel. Israel had refused to believe Yahweh and they had refused to believe Moses, Joshua and Caleb. Therefore, Yahweh punished them declaring that no one twenty years of age or older would ever see the Promised Land. They would all die in the desert. But those younger than twenty and those yet to be born would get to call the Promised Land home.

Last week we saw how centuries later King David recounted all this when he was inspired to write in Psalm 95:6-11, "6 Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; 7 for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, 9 where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. 10 For forty years

I was angry with that generation; I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.' 11 So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" By "my rest" Yahweh meant that they would never enter the Promised Land.

Therefore, we saw how the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews interpreted psalm 95. Yahweh had judged the older generations of Israelites because of their unbelief. Remember that word: UNBELIEF. When we doubt the Word of God or Yahweh Himself, that's unbelief. When we refuse to act upon God's Word, that's unbelief. It was unbelief that caused Adam and Eve to commit the original sin. Unbelief in God's Word is the cause of our personal sin and the sin of all the world. Indeed, the world would be a very different place if we all completely believed Yahweh in all matters without any unbelief. More on this later.

But so that we can understand the term "God's rest" we have to look at two more of its uses in the Old Testament. The first is found in Genesis where we read in Genesis 2:2-3, "2 By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. 3 And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." So God "rested" from creating, meaning that His work of creation was complete at that point.

The other use is found in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:8-11, "8 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.'" So, Israel was to rest from their labors one day in every seven in honor of God's rest on the seventh day of this world's existence.

So, here we see that in the Old Testament "God's rest" is not only associated with the Promised Land, it's also associated with creation and the Sabbath Day. Understanding this, we can see the connection that the New Testament writer of Hebrews makes with the term "God's rest." That's why in that special verse for me it says in, Hebrews 4:9. "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God."

Now, as we saw last week, Lord Holy Spirit greatly expanded the Old Testament meaning of "God's rest" and "Sabbath rest" when He gave the New Testament teaching in the book of Hebrews to its writer. Jesus is God's rest. He is the Sabbath rest of God because Jesus gives us rest from our sins. In addition God's rest is the Promised Land of the coming Kingdom of God. It's eternal life with God. As it says in Hebrews 12:22-24, "22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, 23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant...." The coming city of the living God is God's rest for His people – those to whom Jesus has given rest from their sins.

In the Old Testament, then, God's rest is the Promised Land. His Sabbath rest is the day He rested from creating and the seventh day of the week – Saturday. But, in the New Testament, God's rest is a new Promised Land – the coming Kingdom of God, the new heavens and earth that will be revealed at the coming of Jesus Christ. It's eternal life with God. In the New Testament God's Sabbath rest is Jesus – forgiveness of sins, salvation and relationship with Yahweh through Messiah Jesus.

Therefore, when that woman gave me that word back in 1979, God was inviting me to come out of my unbelief. He was inviting me to trust in Jesus. He was inviting me to enter the Sabbath rest of God in Jesus Christ. And so stage by stage this has taken place in my life.

Unbelief is a hard thing to shake when it takes hold. As we saw last week, it led the ancient Israelites to think of themselves as helpless victims even when Almighty God was absolutely on their side. And ironically the more helpless we feel in any given situation the more *powerfully* we will insist on our helplessness. This is what makes unbelief so deadly.

In a similar vein I recently had a conversation with a young man who insisted that it's impossible to know God. The more I challenged that understanding, the more he absolutely insisted it was impossible to know God. How can you absolutely *know* that God is impossible to know? For by saying that it's impossible to know God you're saying that you *do* know something about Him. But that's the kind of logical nonsense rabid unbelief can bring people to.

I don't know how Lord Holy Spirit does it, but He is able to take minds totally befuddled by unbelief and bring people to the truth. Actually I do know. It's through the Word of God. But sometimes people are so screwed up that something has to happen in their hearts and heads before they can receive God's Word. I'm intrigued when Lord Holy Spirit causes such a thing to happen. For this pagan culture creates a nightmarish fog of nonsense about God that many are lost in.

I can sympathize. The fog of unbelief I was lost in in 1979 wasn't as dense as the fog we have now. But still fog is fog and lost is lost. When I look back on those months in 1979 I see the work Lord Holy Spirit did for me. The fog of unbelief cleared so that I could begin to see the way. But that was only the beginning. The Spirit's work continues still in me. Therefore, Hebrews 4:9 is still as fresh for me today as it was then. Jesus, the perfecter of our faith pulls me closer to Him. He pulls me closer to the Kingdom of God as the days go on.

It all comes back to Psalm 95:7 quoted both in Hebrews 3:15 and 4:7. Hebrews 4:7, "... 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'" Many times over the years I refused to let my heart be unhardened over some things. Yet, the Lord was merciful. He never shut up. He spoke and He still speaks.

So, how, then, do we hear the voice of God? It's through His Word. In this service alone we'll hear the voice of God numerous times. In our confession of sins we have already directly heard 1John 1:8-9, John 1:12 and Philippians 1:6. In Holy Communion we'll hear Isaiah 6:3, Matthew 21:9, 1Corinthians 11:23-25, John 20:19 and John 1:29. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts! And in this sermon we're hearing God's voice. Again, today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts! The electric of God's very voice is in all the Word we're hearing. It's

only the accursed fog of unbelief that makes it as if His voice were nothing. But Lord Holy Spirit can graciously cure us of such unbelief.

Hear then, o victims of unbelief. Jesus became victim for us all upon the cross. And upon the cross He became victor for all of us. Nothing in this life – even death itself – is greater than our Lord Jesus Christ. For in His bodily resurrection Jesus' victory was made complete. We can live because He lives. As it says in 1 Corinthians 8:6, "... there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." And we can be His victors even in this life because Our Lord Jesus was and remains victorious.

Because of Jesus many suffer, and many will suffer. Some will die of persecution. Yet, even these are victors in life because Jesus is victorious. They will inherit "God's rest" of eternal life with Him.

All those who hear Jesus' voice with open hearts enter His Sabbath rest. That Sabbath rest is forgiveness of sins and peace with God that grants eternal life. That's where the victory of Jesus Christ begins in our lives. It's also where the victory of Jesus Christ continues in our lives daily, and today, as we hear His electric voice anew. As it says in Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living 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."

Therefore, if we give up the resistance of unbelief, the electric Word of God releases us from defeated victimhood into the victory of Jesus Christ. So stage by stage we enter God's rest where one by one various things no longer torment us. Believing, living and doing through God's Word sets us free to serve God and become a blessing to our neighbors around us, especially those closest to us. Therefore, today if you hear God's voice, welcome Him with an open heart. As it says in Hebrews 4:11, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that [God's] rest...." Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV except where otherwise noted.