

## SERMON FOR SUN. OCT. 10, 2021

Pent 20B 2021 Hebrews 3:12-19 “You Can’t Go Back.”

Dear fellow redeemed of, by, and for the Lord Jesus Christ, the book Hebrews was written to Christians experiencing both a frightening persecution and a severe temptation.

The persecution came because it was illegal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire at that time. The Christians’ claim that their God was the one and only true God didn’t sit well with the polytheistic, pagan Romans.

Weird rumors surrounded Christianity and its practices -like killing babies in their rites of initiation (the death and resurrection of Holy Baptism) and cannibalism (eating a body and drinking blood in their meetings) – so they saw Christians as a threat to Roman society.

Christians were being imprisoned and killed to try to stop this menace. Many saints were fed to the beasts or burned alive. So being a Christian in the early church was not for the faint of heart.

And so there was a great temptation. Since many of the Christians in Rome had formerly been Jews, and Rome tolerated the Jewish faith the temptation to go back to Judaism was a strong one.

If only they’d renounce Jesus as their Savior, they wouldn’t be harassed. Less fear, fewer sleepless nights: tempting.

The epistle to the Hebrews was written to encourage persecuted Christians and to help them understand one crucial fact: ***you can’t go back.***

Oh, you could - but Christ had fulfilled the Old Testament Law and promises. He was the great High Priest that all the other high priests pointed to. He was the once and for all sacrifice that all the other O.T. sacrifices foreshadowed.

And so, to go back would be like the people of Israel going back to Egypt.

That was another time of frightening persecution and severe temptation, remember?

God had brought Israel out of their slavery in Egypt, where life had been very, very difficult. But this new life was frightening. There were enemies all around - powerful nations who didn’t like Israel passing through their lands and saw them as a threat.

There were the hardships of travel through the wilderness - the difficulty of finding food and water, the heat and cold, and dragging all your possessions and family along with you.

The wonders of the ten plagues and the dividing of the Red Sea seemed like a distant memory. Faced with all this trouble, there was the temptation to go back.

Life in Egypt was hard, but at least it was safe. Like the Hebrew Christians in Rome, they were tempted to go back.

But as they found out, turning their hearts away from God was not the answer. Turning away from God may grant you the illusion of comfort for a while, but in the end, you'd just be selling yourself back into the slavery of sin.

All this background helps us to understand our Gospel lesson wherein a rich young man came up to Jesus one day and asked, "**Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?**"

In reply, Jesus lists the commandments God had given to His people after bringing them out of Egypt. To paraphrase them, they are teaching: **do not go back** to doing sinful things.

And the young man replies, in effect: **I'm not. I don't want to go back** to this old way of life. And that's good.

But there's one more thing, Jesus says that's holding your heart, one more thing that you're afraid to go without; *your wealth*. "**Go, sell all that you have . . . and come, follow me.**"

***His wealth was this young man's Egypt.*** To sell what he had, to do without and be poor, was too much to ask.

He could turn away from the other temptations to sin; he could not turn away from his wealth. And so he went back, leaving Jesus. Back to his wealth. *Back to his Egypt.*

Now, there's nothing wrong with being wealthy. Jesus is not condemning all wealth but undue reliance upon it.

Jesus *knew* that wealth had become this young man's false idol, his Egypt.

It had become his security. It had become what he could not do without. It had become what he would turn to for assurance, comfort, and rest. Or, in other words, it had become his god.

And that's the challenge for us to think about today: **what's *our* Egypt?**

What are those people or things or thoughts or behaviors or comforts that you can't seem to let go of to follow Jesus?

For some people, it is wealth or possessions that has captured their hearts. For others, maybe it is sinful behavior that such as drugs, alcohol, or sexual pleasure has such a strong pull on them that they find themselves being drawn back to it.

Maybe you have a grudge you're unwilling to let go of, a person you're unwilling to forgive. Whatever the case may be, we are all tempted to go back.

**PAUSE**

In our world today, holding to Christian truth is seen by many as bigoted, intolerant, and perhaps even a bit subversive.

If you openly confess Christ, you risk your reputation, the loss of your job, or the loss of a friend.

And so it's easier and safer to turn back in silence instead of confessing your faith, to go along with the crowd instead of causing waves and risking the world's wrath.

**What is it for you? What is your Egypt?** We all have them. What would be that **one more thing** Jesus would point out to you that's holding you back from fully and joyfully following Him?

Now, on the one hand, the young man's question, **what must I do to inherit eternal life is fundamentally flawed**. And the answer to his flawed question is: **nothing you can do will qualify you for eternal life**.

After all, an inheritance is a gift. It is something left behind for you by someone after they die. Jesus's gift of eternal life is the inheritance He has left behind *for you*.

The book of Hebrews will talk about this in later chapters, that a testament goes into effect when the one who made the will dies. After Jesus' death on the cross, His testament went into effect.

Through His death, He's left behind for you the forgiveness of all your sins. Through His resurrection, He has left behind for you a resurrection to life after death in His eternal kingdom.

Forgiveness and eternal life are the inheritance Jesus has provided for you *by grace* – as a free gift, received by you *in faith*, which if you think about it, is also a free gift.

That leads some folks to think Jesus generous bequest of eternal life is good to be true. But what Jesus offers in the Word of His Gospel, His forgiveness, life, and salvation, is very real.

As real as His cross, as real as His empty grave.

And now, through preaching and His written Word and Sacraments He offers this inheritance to you. And the Holy Spirit uses preaching, Word, and Sacrament to create in you the faith to believe, and thus receive it.

And so, from start to finish, the inheritance **is all His work. All gift**.

Satan offers temptations to get you to **renounce your inheritance** - like the Hebrew Christians in Rome who would turn back to Judaism, like Israel in the wilderness who would turn back to Egypt; and like the rich young man who turned back to his wealth.

He wants you to renounce *your* inheritance by turning back to worldly pleasures, or, to turn away from faith.

And so the devil is constantly tempting you to believe that God's Word and promises are a *scam*, that God will not provide what you need. He'll try to convince you that if you want something in this world, you have to get it for yourself. Satan promises: if you trust him your life will get *better*.

And again, maybe, *maybe* for a while, if you do, things will be easier. But true life is from God, so as we heard twice from the prophet Amos today: **seek the Lord and live.**

Indulging in the things of this world *might* be able to improve life, change life, sustain life, but they cannot *give* life.

There is only one Lord and *giver* of life. He gave you mortal life in your mother's womb and he gave you eternal life in Holy Baptism. He sustains that life through His Word and forgiveness. He feeds that life with His very Body and Blood.

So when life is difficult and relief seems far away, do not turn back but seek *Him* [and His life] *where He has promised to be for you.* In the Word and Sacraments.

Seek Him there by remembering that you are baptized - you are a dear and precious child of God.

Seek Him by repenting and receiving His merciful and loving forgiveness, won for you **by Him.**

And seek Him by coming and being strengthened in faith, receiving His Body and Blood, His forgiveness and life - *the New Testament in His Blood* that He left behind for you by His death, and that He now gives to you here in His resurrection.

**Seek the Lord and live,** Amos says. And **the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you.**

Amos goes on to say, **it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious.**

But for you it is not a "**He may be**" but "**He will.**"

Amos didn't know whether or not God would spare the nation, but we know what God has done. He did not, in fact, spare Israel; but *He did come and save the world, you included.*

Now that doesn't mean the struggles and temptations will go away; in fact, God may not seem very loving in the midst of them but more reliable than your feelings is the truth of your Savior.

If you doubt His love for you, look at the cross.

If you doubt His commitment to you, look at the cross.

If you doubt whether He is with you, look at the cross.

He has *bound* Himself to you in love. Of that you can be sure. **And so turning back to Egypt is not the answer; turning to the cross, turning to your Savior, is.**

And that's the treasure you have, dear sons and daughters of God. Jesus is your priceless treasure, a treasure in heaven that cares for you, who died for you, and who will not turn away from you but is here for you. Why? Because he considers you to be His priceless treasure. **AMEN**