

“Hold On To Jesus”  
Text: Hebrews 4:9-13  
February 7, 2021

I love roller-coasters. But in spite of my love of roller-coasters, I still get nervous when I ride them. In fact, Kelly will sit in her seat screaming at the top of her lungs, with her arms straight up in the air high above her head ... and I'm holding on for dear life. I always wish I could let go and hold my arms up as we drop over the first hill, but I never can. I always end up holding on.

In today's Epistle the writer to the Hebrews tells us that holding on is a good thing, as he exhorts us to hold on to Jesus. At that we look now together ...

As we do, we return to our Epistle reading from Hebrews 4, where we hear again that:

“... there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” (vs. 9-11)

Before we get to the job of unpacking those words, a word of review may be in order here concerning the basics of the book of Hebrews – a word of review concerning who wrote it, who did he write it to, when was it written, and its subject matter: what's it about / why was it written?

As for the first one: we don't know who wrote the book of Hebrews. There are some reasonable guesses, though ...

... Some say it was written by Apollos, a man who is described elsewhere in the N.T. as being articulate and well versed in the O.T. Scriptures.

... Some say Hebrews was written by Barnabas, a fellow-worker of St. Paul's. Perhaps Paul himself was the author, though most scholars I'm familiar with reject that view.

...One of my favorite professors at the seminary: Dr. Arthur Just, used to say that he thought Luke wrote Hebrews. Then again, as we students used to joke, Dr. Just thinks Luke wrote everything.

The simple truth is that, while we have some reasonable guesses as to who the author of Hebrews may have been, we really don't know for sure. We just have to trust that, whoever it was, it was exactly who the Holy Spirit wanted.

As for who the letter was written to, we also don't know that for sure, except to say that it appears to have been written to a group of Jews, possibly in Rome, who had recently converted to the Christian faith. We don't know when Hebrews was written either, but many believe it was written some time during the Neronian persecution, which would date it in the mid-late '60s, not long before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

At this point you may be wondering: "Gee pastor, *what do we know* about Hebrews?" And that would bring us to our last point for consideration: its subject matter. For we *do* know *why* Hebrews was written: Hebrews was written as encouragement to those "new" Jewish Christians, who because of persecution were being tempted to return to their Jewish faith.

Remember that Judaism was tolerated in the Roman world of the first century, while Christianity was not. With that, the first recipients of the book of Hebrews were being faced with the temptation of having life grow more difficult for them due to their belief in Jesus. Returning to their "old" Jewish way of life would've alleviated that difficulty, and so the author of Hebrews, whoever it may have been, wrote to encourage them NOT to do that; he wrote to exhort them to hold on to Jesus.

We heard that exhortation just a moment ago, as today's Epistle states:

"Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." (v. 11)

The statement there "the same sort of disobedience" hearkens back to the previous chapter in Hebrews (ch. 3), where it mentions God's people 'of old': the children of Israel. We heard about Israel in last week's O.T. Lesson, where Exodus 17 described for us their grumbling and complaining against the Lord. Similar to what we heard in last week's Epistle, Hebrews this week mentions the grumbling and complaining of God's people 'of old,' saying that the reason Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before entering the Promised Land was that she had disobeyed the Lord, failing to trust His Word.

Hebrews puts it this way:

"... who provoked (the Lord) ... ? ... did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? And with whom was He angry for 40 years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief." (3:16-19)

Unbelief was the reason the Israelites 'of old' – those brought out of Egypt by Moses – missed-

out on the Promised Land (what Hebrews calls God's "Sabbath rest"). Given that unbelief can cause us to miss-out as well, the writer of Hebrews holds it out before us today, exhorting us to NOT fall into unbelief. Hebrews encourages us to remain faithful, so that we do not miss-out on the Promised Land of God's rest that is eternal life.

Exhortation and encouragement are important for us Christians, because it's not easy living the Christian life; it's not any easier for us than it was for those Jewish converts to the faith centuries ago, the ones to whom Hebrews was first written. So much of our lives are spent resisting temptation. So much of our lives are spent trying to live as God wants us to, but failing to do so. So much of our lives are spent in need of forgiveness, as we try to hold on to the life of faith, trying to not lose what we've been given by the Holy Spirit in our Baptism.

It appears that we're going to be doing even more of that in the future – i.e, trying not to lose what we've been given by God – as our government appears ready to advance an agenda that will make it harder for us to live the Christian life. Like those Jewish converts to the faith in the days of Hebrews, we too might find ourselves tempted to abandon our Christian faith. To list some examples ...

Those in authority over us are moving to repeal the Hyde Amendment (which limits federal funding for abortion); they're advancing the agenda of the more, shall we say, sexually progressive, in a way that could put pressure on us to compromise our faith when it comes to what God's Word says about human sexuality (the gay / lesbian lifestyle, the transgender movement, etc.) – it's not a stretch to see us Christians persecuted by our government for refusing to speak of a woman-as-a-man or a man-as-a-woman (that persecution has already happened, in isolated cases, even here in Indiana); in terms of our cherished 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment right to practice our religion freely, the time when that is compromised or even outright taken away from us could well be not that far away. If so, what will we do?

I'll tell you what we're gonna do: we're gonna hold on. Our Heavenly Father knew that this day was coming, and so His Spirit inspired the writer to the Hebrews to encourage us. In the midst of whatever trials we face for our faith, Hebrews encourages us to hold on to the one true God. Hebrews exhorts us to avoid the mistake of ancient Israel – the mistake of unbelief, by confessing the faith, no matter what. Hebrews encourages us to hold on to Jesus.

How do we do that? By holding on to God's Word. Today's Epistle describes that Word as being "living and active," the very Means by which we rest in God's presence. It says that God's Word pierces "to the division of soul and spirit," that it discerns "the thoughts and intentions of the heart." My dear friends in Christ, God's Word does all of that.

When we hear its Word of Law, it pierces our hearts with an awareness of our sin, leading us to contrition for the pain we all contribute to this world. When we hear its Word of Gospel, it leads us to the thoughts and intentions of *God's* heart – the thoughts and intentions of

His Son's mercy and grace. When we feel threatened, fearful that practicing our faith could lead us to suffer, God's Word emboldens us with the good news that the real and lasting authority is Jesus; He's the One Who's really in charge. Hebrews speaks of that in the verses immediately following those of today's Epistle, where it says that:

“Since we have a great High Priest Who has passed through the heavens: Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest Who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One Who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (vs. 14-16)

By faith in the promises of God's Word we see that, in spite of the difficulty of living the Christian life, God *is* on our side; He's *for us, NOT against us*. Given that He has been tempted in every way as we are (without sin), we can turn to Him in prayer, knowing that He knows how we feel, and is able to help us with whatever difficulty comes our way. By faith in the promises of God's Word, we rest in His love for us as His people by holding on to His Son: Jesus.

Which brings us back to where we began, and my mention of how roller-coasters make me nervous. As much as I want to, I'm *unable* to keep from holding on when riding them. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that, not just roller-coasters, but life itself, can be scary; as the Hebrews themselves would tell us, it's especially scary if you're a Christian. The best way to get through / survive that is by striving to enter God's rest. We do that by holding on to Jesus –

– in His ✘ Name,  
Amen!