

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

November 14, 2021

Psalm 16:1–11 (ESV):

1 Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

2 I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
I have no good apart from you."

3 As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones,
in whom is all my delight.

4 The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out
or take their names on my lips.

5 The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.

6 The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

7 I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.

8 I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.

10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.

11 You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

First Reading: Daniel 12:1–3 (ESV):

The Time of the End

12 “At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. 2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn
Hebrews 10:11–25 (ESV): 11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. 15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,

16 “This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws on their hearts,
and write them on their minds,”

17 then he adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.
19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the

confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

EPISTLE: Hebrews 10:11–25 (ESV):

11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

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The Full Assurance of Faith

19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet

together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Gospel: Mark 13:1–13 (ESV):

Jesus Foretells Destruction of the Temple

13 And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” **2** And Jesus said to him, “**Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.**”

Signs of the End of the Age

3 And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, **4** “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?” **5** And Jesus began to say to them, “**See that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. 7 And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.**

9 “But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. **10** And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. **11** And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. **12** And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. **13** And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Sermon 46 – Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

“How Do You Justify?”

Hebrews 10:11-25

Dear friends,

Justifying yourself is something I talk about a lot because it is so easy to slip into, at least that's been my experience of it. On the face of it, this sounds silly, it sounds

impossible. Not one of us would march up to heaven and tell God to His face that we know better, that we can do it ourselves, that we don't need Him. We can never imagine doing that. But it's rarely that simple and that clear-cut, and it often comes about not in terms of salvation so much but in terms of the issues that life throws our way. In our epistle lesson, the writer to the Hebrews reminds us of why this tendency is nonsense. He reminds us of what really matters. Not our pride, not our plans, not our dreams, but what God has accomplished and continues to accomplish in our lives. We are not the star, Christ is. We know this, but putting it into practice is enormously difficult when the circumstances are right, and sometimes it's hard to know where to even begin. Our life is our life. We live it. We make choices. We try to do the best we can. Yet God is the master of our life, and He determines a lot of what is outside of our control. How do we square those two things up? Let's see if Hebrews helps us understand.

The Book of Hebrews is playing its own game, and it is doing it in its own way, as I have told you before. This book tackles familiar subjects from unexpected angles and uses an approach that you and I would not even bother to think of. What is Hebrews about? It is about Jesus as the Old Testament Messiah, but it is also about how we as Christians are supposed to live that truth in our world today. That sounds nice and helpful, and it is, but you and I would write this book very differently than this fellow chose to. That's what makes Hebrews hard. It's not hard to understand, it's just hard to read, because we would never think of doing it the way Hebrews does it. When Hebrews makes sense, it makes a lot of sense, and it gives us some beautiful insights. This chapter is one of those times. So far, the author has made his case, that Jesus is the one the Jews were hoping for, Jesus is the one that God prophesied in the Old Testament. Now, around this chapter, it begins to shift focus into what we are supposed to learn and take from that rather basic insight.

“11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.” You and I do not live in a world of daily and weekly sacrifices. Jews, back in this day, did. Sacrificing, that is, taking

animals that you owned or paid for and slitting their throats so that their blood would be shed in payment for your sins was as common to the Jews as putting your offering in the offering plate is to you. This was just part of their life, it was done. That's why mileage varies. For us, this isn't a helpful illustration, for them, it made perfect sense. What the writer is saying is clear. Jesus offered His life one time, and that one sacrifice was enough to pay for every single sin that has ever happened. And every single sin that would ever happen. Fair enough, we know this. Jesus died for our sins. But this gives you a good example of how Hebrews seems to say straightforward, clear things in a weird way.

What do we learn? Exactly what I just said. Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice, just like those animals, and despite the fact that it happened 2000 years ago, it was enough to cover your sins, mine, our children, and everyone who will ever come after us and believe. Jesus was God, and when God bleeds, He redeems not just us, but our entire species. So, for you today, you approach God to worship because Jesus sacrificed Himself to take away your sins. Basic stuff.

“14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16 “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,”17 then he adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” This expands on that basic start. One offering, Jesus, perfected you for all time. You, as you sit here today, are perfect because Jesus offered His perfect blood to take away your sins. You are perfect right now, and that is something Jesus accomplished. As a mark of that perfection, a sign that you are perfect, you have your knowledge and your conscience. That's what he means, I think, when he talks about putting laws on your hearts and writing it on your minds. I have seen, personally, that God has done so with each of you. You folks know what you are doing when it comes to your faith, I've watched you exercise it. It doesn't matter if you think that you could never say it right, its there, and this is wonderful testimony to you and to those around you. God has made you what He wants you to be, right now, and even if

that isn't what you want to be, or you aren't where you want to be, you are who God has made you. We can always learn more and do better, sure, but what you are right now is Christian. You have God's law, God's wisdom. You should be proud of that. You should be grateful for that.

What does this have to do with self-justification? Take this same principle out of salvation and into your life and it becomes problematic, and sometimes even self-contradictory. Think of what Hebrews has said. Right now, you are perfect. We nod our Christian heads because we know what that means. Try this on for size: Right now, dear Christian, your life is perfect. Who you are? Perfect. Where you work? Perfect. Your children and grandchildren? Perfect. Your health? Perfect. Doesn't sound so right now, does it? But think of the truth of it. We know that God puts us where we are. We know that God puts people in our life, the Scriptures tell us both. It is God that gives us our skills, our setting, and the people we share it with. So your life is, right now, just what God wants it to be.

If you're like me, that is extremely hard to stomach. I need God to change things, you might also. Many of you have health problems. Many of you have family problems. All of you have things you need from God. This is where our tendency to self-justify most often comes in. Not in where we're going when we die, but in what we have to swallow right now. If you want things to change, if you want God to change things, that is where we get tempted. That is most often where we end up saying to God, no, you're not doing it right. No, this isn't good. No, this isn't what I need.

Self-justification is believing a lie, and the lie is that we are God. We're not God, we largely don't want to be God, except when things get important enough, or scary enough. To put it another way, the lie is that we need to be God, or it'll all go wrong. We'll get hurt, people will die, something awful will happen. There's a lot of jokes about control freaks, but when you touch the right problem at the wrong time, everyone becomes a control freak. It's pretty easy, in my experience, to avoid telling God to take me to heaven because I'm so perfect. I've managed to do that for a long time. It's not so easy telling God that it's okay if things go wrong.

Christ tells you that you are forgiven, that you belong to Him. He tells you that you are perfect. He tells you that the circumstances of your life, the problems that plague you, are just what they need to be, until He decides to change them. It is that truth that is so very hard to live with when your family members are dying, when your family is falling apart, or when you just need things to be a certain way and God just will not budge. That's when we start trying to push God out, do it our way, and that is self-justification. You would be shocked just how easily you can slide down the slippery slope. You start as a child asking Father for what He needs, and in no time at all you're trying to knock God off His throne and take charge of the whole thing by yourself.

Hebrews addresses this in a kind of sideways fashion next. **“19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”** Being Christian doesn't just give us forgiveness, it gives us confidence because we know God is on our side, even when it seems like He is not. The devil wants us to believe we have to do it or it'll all go wrong. Hebrews tells us to approach God with it. We have a high priest, greater than any, who understands our weaknesses, and we can approach Him with those failings. The Bible doesn't tell us to just sit there and take it when our sinful lives and sinful flesh starts tearing us apart. No. It tells us to draw near to Him. We do this prayer, asking Him for the things we need. We do this in church, approaching Him to hear His words from the Bible. We do this in song, praising Him when all we want to do is curse at the things He brings about in our lives. Jesus promised us that we belong to Him, no matter what life looks like, He promises us that we are not ignored, we are not chesspieces, and all of this is not a complete waste of time.

I have to do it myself. Jesus says, no you don't. When you do it, you screw it up. Even when you're absolutely certain what the right thing is, it's right there, you can see

it, you can talk about it for days, you know in your bones what's going to be good. Jesus says He did that first. You don't have to do it. Jesus says He knows better than you, and that can be a real hard message to bear at times. Lord, what's better for me is not to have this sickness. Lord, what's better for me is to have a job. Jesus says, I know what you need, and you'll get what you need when you need.

We want to be better Christians. We want to be better people. Jesus reassures us that we are just the people He wants us to be, and if there's anyone that can make you better, He will. And He will do it on His own time, thank you very much, not on yours or mine. That's maddening, but Hebrews urges us to take comfort in it rather than view it as a curse. We have full assurance of faith. What does that mean? We have assurance that God knows best, that God knows us best. We have hope to which we were called. What does that mean? That we hope that Christ is always better than anything we could ever dream up. Being Christian is a better deal, even when that deal takes and takes and takes from us. That's the devil talking. Jesus only takes so He can give, and what He gives is best.

Amen.