

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 22

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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

Enter the holy throne room of God

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience. 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. Nothing 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. Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

—Hebrews 4:9-16

[Deep sigh.] You and I are familiar with that, aren't we? You finish a hard day of work. You get home and fall back into your recliner and let out a sigh. It's time to rest. You finish a workout. You pushed yourself to your limit. You sit on the bench, drenched in sweat, and catch your breath. A deep sigh comes from your mouth. It's time to rest. It was a challenging day. You were constantly on the go. But now it's time for bed. It's time to rest.

All of us look forward to and appreciate rest, don't we? We need it. God has created us to need rest. And I'm sure you have noticed that the best kind of rest comes after there is some kind of exertion. Physical rest. For sure. You push yourself to work hard. You expend a lot of energy. Sunday afternoon naps are just what is needed. Mental rest. You have a lot on your mind. Your thoughts are constantly going. Take the time to recharge. Go on a vacation. Do something different from your normal routine. Emotional rest. Interestingly enough, sometimes the best way to get an emotional rest is to workout. Go for a hike. Go for a run. Lift weights. Burn off some energy. Exert yourself and what do you discover? You can think more clearly. You feel better. A fresh outlook on life.

And spiritual rest? Well, that's what I would like to talk with you about today. I suppose it's no surprise that the best spiritual rest would also come after a long grueling workout, spiritually speaking. As we learn in our catechism instruction, we have three great enemies who regularly attack us spiritually: the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. And each of those enemies has a unique attack against us as God's children.

The devil tempts us to doubt God's Word. *"You can't trust God. He's holding out on you. He doesn't have your best interest in mind. Don't listen to what he says."* The world, the people around us, makes us tired. It makes us worn out. And this isn't just with unbelievers. Even in the family of God we have our battles where we make each other tired, don't we? Everybody has their own opinion, their own desires, their own thoughts. At times, there are hostility and anger. And it just makes you tired to live for others. It's tiring to love people. It's exhausting to be there for others, to serve others. And our sinful flesh just wants us to strive for more, more, more for ourselves. We have cravings, desires, wants. We think the world should just revolve around ourselves. And it's spiritually exhausting.

Do you notice that in your life? What's the easy way out? Give in? *"Well, maybe God is holding out on us. Maybe he doesn't know what's best for us. Can I really trust him?"* We sin because we have given in to the idea that our ways are better than God's ways, right? Throw in the towel. It's easier to just give in to the desires of our heart than to say "no" to those impulses. But where does that leave you? With guilt, shame, sorrow, restlessness. Giving in to those temptations can never leave you with rest. You have spiritual uneasiness. Something isn't right. We feel the guilt because we know we should be clobbered for those sins. We feel the sorrow, and we walk away ... restless.

The writer to the Hebrews talks about that in the words before us today. In the context of these words, he talks about the people of Israel. God had promised a rest for his people. As he led them out of slavery in Egypt, he promised that he would lead them to the Promised Land. But here's the problem with that ancient people: they did not believe; they did not trust God's ways for their lives. Unbelief kept that generation that escaped from Egypt from entering Canaan, from entering the rest that God promised.

We do not want to be found falling short of the rest God has promised. And the only way to possibly find that spiritual rest is to trust what God says in his Word. This is how the writer to the Hebrews describes it in our text. ***“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their (the Israelites') example of disobedience.”***

So what kind of rest is this? He talks about a rest from our work. Entering this rest means no longer needing to work. In what sense? The idea is that there is no longer any place for works as a basis for our own righteousness. In other words, to enter Christian salvation means to cease from relying on our own works and to rest securely on what Christ has done.

There's a story of a man who left this world. He was ushered into the throne room of God. As he stood before God, he quickly realized that he did not belong there. The perfect, almighty God was before him. He saw the face of God. Holiness. Purity. Power. Glory. His entire life played before his eyes. A flood of memories rushed in his mind. He looked back at his life and remembered all too well what he had done. He saw the times when he didn't follow God's Word. It was like being in a room surround by TV screens. And on all the TVs he saw scenes from his life's history. He couldn't get away from it. From his youth on. The times when he disobeyed his parents and then deceived them. The times when he lusted in his heart and then acted upon it. The times when he was boastful and rude. The times when he didn't find the time nor make the time to grow closer to God. The times when he selfishly did his own thing rather than serve others. All the memories came flooding back before his eyes.

And he stood there, in the throne room of God. He compared his life to what he now saw standing before his holy God. And he was terrified. There were two doors: one on the right and one on the left. Above the door on the right was the word "heaven." Above the door on the left was the word "hell." As he entered the holy throne room of God, he didn't need to hear the verdict. He knew he didn't belong there. And without hesitation he headed toward the door on the left.

The Word of God does that to us. **"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. Nothing 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."** We must give account as we **enter the holy throne room of God.** And it is God's Word that will diagnose how we stand before him. The Word of God diagnoses the condition of every human being with a surgeon's precision. It lays open the heart and accurately discerns spiritual health. It exposes our weakness and our moments of unbelief. The Word of God penetrates our hearts with power, sharpness, and accuracy.

We may put on a nice outward image. We may know how to make ourselves look good on the outside. We know how to do that in front of each other. I can make myself look pretty good in front of you. And you can do that to me. I can't read your hearts, your thoughts, or your attitudes. But God's Word discerns that.

Nothing is hidden from God's sight. **Enter the holy throne room of God.** He sees everything. Everything is uncovered and laid bare. Everything is literally naked before God. God's Word is the surgeon's knife that cuts into places no scalpel can go. It discerns our thoughts and our attitudes. We cannot hide behind anything. We can't hide behind our good works. We can't hide behind our outward façade. Everything is displayed before God's sight. It's like being in a room with TV screens telling your life's history. The time when you went too far on a date. The time when you drank too much that you lost control of your senses. The time when you lost your temper. The time when you were too lazy to serve. The time when you harbored anger and greed. It's all before you. God sees it all. He knows it all. And you must give an account.

God's Word is active. It is at work. We can deceive a lot of people. We can put a good front before people. But **enter the holy throne room of God.** His Word cuts deeply. As you stand in the presence of God with everything exposed, it becomes very clear. I don't belong there, and neither do you. Without hesitation we would run for the door on the left.

But praise be to God because we do not reach that door that leads to hell. Someone steps in between us and that door. He stops us. This is none other than Jesus, our great High Priest. We know the high priests of the Old Testament. They could go into the presence of God in the Most Holy Place, but only on one day of the year: the Day of Atonement. But Jesus is our great high priest. He gave his life as a sacrifice for our lives. And Jesus has passed through the heavens. He is alive and has ascended. Jesus has entered the Most Holy Place, the throne room of God. He is there right now. Jesus is God himself. And he is the one who stops you and me from entering through the door labeled "hell" and leads us to the door labeled "heaven." He knows and feels what we go through. He knows the battles that you face because he faced them too. He knows how to suffer along with you because he suffered too. He's been there. He knows the temptations and the doubts that Satan places before you because he faced them too. He knows the weariness from facing the world because Jesus was worn out too.

Oh, but what about the battles that we face against our sinful nature? Does Jesus know what we go through when we have the sinful desires plaguing us and pushing us toward more and more for ourselves? Well, not like us. In fact, he faced those battles even *more* than we did. The sinless One knows temptation in ways we don't. Jesus faced temptation much more severely than we ever have or ever will. Why? Because only the one who never gives into temptation knows the full strength of temptation. It is true that Jesus never faced temptation in an *inner* sense the way we do, because there was never a sinful nature pulling him to sin from the inside. But he knew the strength and fury of *external* temptation in a way and to a degree that we can never know. What was it like for the perfect Son of God to have temptations placed before him? How could someone so perfect, so mighty actually allow himself to face the same ugly, condemning temptations we do?

Oh, we may not know the full extent to what Jesus faced temptations as our great high priest. But we do know why he faced them. He endured the battles and the temptations of this world so that you and I could have rest. Jesus endured triumphantly every form of testing that we could endure, without any weakening of his faith in God or any relaxation of his obedience to him. Such endurance involved more, not less, than ordinary human suffering. And every time he succeeded for you.

The writer says, **“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.”** **Enter the holy throne room of God** and who do you see? You see a person. You see Jesus. Immerse yourself with your Savior who lived his life for you. Fall into his arms with all your wounds and scars from the battles you lost. Find rest in the fact that you are forgiven, fully forgiven. Rest in the fact that you have been covered with a robe of Jesus' righteousness. That is who you are right now. And be strengthened. Be strengthened to go out into this world and to live your life for him. When Satan comes luring you to doubt God's Word, when the world makes you feel so tired and worn out that you just want to throw in the towel, when your sinful flesh beckons you to attain more and more pleasures and impulses for yourself, remember what you have for the battle. **“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”** **Enter the holy throne room of God.** You have direct access. Jesus' mercy and grace is there to help you in your time of need. [Deep sigh.] Amen.