

"Today, If You Hear His Voice"

In the name of our truly Good Teacher, dear friends in Christ: Yesterday we called it tomorrow, and tomorrow we will call it yesterday; but right now, in the present, we call it *today*. It's the time we live in *now*. It is the *only* time in which we can live. Unlike the Lord God who made us, who transcends time in such a way that he exists in the past, present, and future simultaneously, we are creatures bound to time. We can only live every moment in the present, in the time we call today.

This is why the writer of Hebrews admonishes us: "*Today*, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." You see, it does no good to summon people to hear and to receive God's Word yesterday. It's gone. Whatever happened then for better or worse is over. We can't bring it back and relive it again. Nor can you summon people to hear and receive God's Word tomorrow. We aren't there yet. And the truth is we don't know for sure that tomorrow will come. Today may be the last day for any one of us; or it may be the last day for us all. No, we can only hear God's voice now. The question is: what will you do with what you hear? Will you receive his Word in faith? Will you trust it? Will you apply to your life? Or will you harden your heart against it? And will that hardening cause you to resist and reject it?

We heard about the hardening of hearts last week. You may remember that in Gospel reading the Pharisees asked Jesus whether it was lawful for someone to divorce his or her spouse. In answer, Jesus said that it was indeed *allowed* by Moses, but only because of the hardness of people's hearts. It is never the Lord's purpose or will. Quite the contrary, The Lord's will for every marriage is that the couple keep their sacred promises to love, honor, and cherish each other as long as they both live. That's his design for marriage: that the two become one and stay that way. But the Lord also knows that in this fallen world people do not always adhere to his good and gracious will. He knew that people would impose their own evil, selfish, and stubborn wills above his own in such a way that they would block out what God says and do what they pleased – what they thought at the moment was better than God's will. (Think about that for a second: "My plan is better than God's!" I don't think so.) So yes, there were arrangements in the Law for divorce; but if one happens it always because there is at least one person (and in most cases two) who is actively, persistently, and stubbornly hardening his or her heart against voice of the Lord.

That, my friends, is never a good thing to do. It's deadly dangerous. That's what the writer of Hebrews is telling us – and not just about the question of divorce; he's talking about any sin that through its deceitfulness might cause you to turn from the Lord's will and harden your heart against his Word. It's what we call apostasy, which literally means "to stand away from". It's like the church of Christ is over here. This is where the assembly of the faithful is. These are people who are hearing God's voice and receiving what he says in faith. Those who commit apostasy are setting themselves at odds against the Lord's Word. They are standing over here, rejecting and refusing to believe what the Lord says. By so doing, they are excluding themselves from the life and salvation the Lord gives to his people through Christ in the church. I hasten to add that this is a spiritual separation, not always a visible one. The person in apostasy may be still standing among the members of the church, still attending worship, still pretending to be faithful; but their heart is hardened. So they are not receiving the gifts and benefits God gives through his church.

The thing to see is that apostasy always happens in the present. It involves the ongoing, active, willful rejection of God's Word right now. I mean, if you sinned in the past, all right, we all have. But you know what to do about that: you repent. You receive God's forgiveness – the forgiveness he purchased for you by the blood of his Son who gave himself as the atoning sacrifice for your sin. Then, having been forgiven and reconciled, you rise up and move forward – using the Lord's grace and the strength of his Spirit to avoid falling into that sin again. And yes, it's a life-long struggle. The temptations keep coming back. Maybe you fall again – and again; but you keep on fighting. And you keep on repenting and living in the forgiveness and grace you have in Christ. But this is entirely different than staying in the sin and refusing to repent of it. Then it's, "I know what you say about this, Lord. I hear your voice; but I don't care. Today I'm going to keep on doing it anyway." Or, "I'm going to keep on refusing to trust you." It's the same thing. It puts you outside of God's salvation in Christ today; and it doesn't matter how long you've walked with the Lord or how far you've come.

To prove this point the author of Hebrews gives us the example the Children of Israel whom Moses led out of bondage in Egypt. They were all rescued from slavery by the Lord's mighty hand. They all saw the miracles the Lord worked through Moses. They all participated in the Passover and were protected by the blood of the lambs while the firstborn of Egypt died. They all went through the Red Sea on dry ground and saw the army of the Pharaoh destroyed. They all ate the bread from heaven and drank from the rock that Moses struck. They all saw the Lord descend at Sinai, and trembled as they heard his voice as he spoke his holy Law – the first command of which was to have no other gods and to make no idols representing any god. These things happened to them all. They all saw. They all heard. They all believed. And you know what? There came shortly thereafter a different today, a today when Moses was on the mountain receiving more instructions from the Lord, when they all turned away from the one true living God and worshipped a golden calf they had made instead.

You remember what happened: when Moses came down the mountain and saw what was going on he was furious. He said to the people, "You've got a choice now. You can either repent of what you're doing and stand with the Lord or you can continue to worship that idol." Amazingly, several thousand of them chose the latter. And they were cut down. They were killed without mercy. So even though they had begun the journey well enough, they never made it to the Promised Land.

Nor was this the last rebellion that happened on the way – not by a long shot. There were many others, like when a man named Korah led an uprising against Moses. He didn't like the fact that the Lord spoke primarily through Moses, his chosen servant. Korah thought that he and his friends ought to be recognized as prophets and priests of God too, even though the Lord hadn't called them to that. Through Moses the Lord called him and those with him to repent. But they hardened their hearts. They refused to listen to the voice of the Lord. And the ground opened up and swallowed them. They too began the journey, but didn't finish it.

But by far their biggest rebellion was the one the writer of Hebrews refers to in today's text. It was when the Israelites first came to the edge of the Promised Land not long after leaving Mount Sinai. They sent twelve spies to reconnoiter the land and report back on its quality, its relative abundance, and on the military strength of its inhabitants. Two faithful spies reported that the land was indeed flowing with milk and honey, even as the Lord had promised. They said that while the people living there were strong, they weren't strong enough to stand against the Lord. They urged the Israelites to go forward and conquer the land. "With God on our side, we cannot fail."

The other ten spies were afraid. They didn't trust the Lord to give them the land as he'd said. So they made up a bad report. They said the land was a miserable place that consumed its inhabitants with hunger. Oh, and somehow, even though the land was so poor and pathetic, the inhabitants were all massive giants who would squash them like bugs. Their report was self-contradicting; but it's the one the vast majority of the people chose to believe. So the next day, when Moses ordered the nation of Israel to move forward, they said "No. We're not going to do it. We don't trust the Lord to defend and care for us. We don't trust him to give us the land."

And the Lord said, "Fine. Since that's what you believe, that's what you'll get. Not one of you who rebelled today is going to enter that land. You'll spend the next forty years in the desert. After that time I'm going to give the land to your sons and daughters. But I swear to you that you will die in the desert because *today* you hardened your hearts and refused to listen to my voice."

These things are recorded as warnings for us that we not fall away through sin and unbelief. It's possible to come the whole distance, to live in the faith all one's life, and then lose the goal at the very end. It's also possible to fall anywhere along the way. All it takes is a certain today when you harden your heart against the voice of the Lord. He's not interested in how faithful you were in the past. Nor does he care about how faithful you're planning to be at some time in the future, after you've had your fling with sin or when you decide you'll have more time to think about spiritual matters. No, what the Lord cares about is *today*.

I've seen this in my ministry. I've come across people who want to rest on their accumulated laurels. "After all", they tell me, "I was baptized. I was confirmed. I got badges in Sunday school for memorizing Bible verses. I served the church in these various capacities." And what they're telling me is that they've paid their dues. So what they're really trusting in is not the Lord and his mercy in Christ, but in their own accomplishments. That's apostasy. I've even had some of these people tell me that now they are entitled to commit certain sins. It's like they think they've earned some extra credits through their past faithfulness that authorizes them get away with whatever it is they want to do. "I've done such a good job up until now. The Lord will surely look the other way." I've asked them, "Do you hear what you're saying? You're saying exactly the opposite of what the Lord says." But you know, at that point it doesn't make a difference because they've already hardened their heart against the voice of the Lord.

I'm sure you've seen this too. I mean, how many of our young people stand here before the altar of God on the day of their Confirmations and promise to adhere faithfully to what they've been taught, to continue steadfast in receiving God's Word and Sacrament, and to suffer all, even death rather than depart from the faith; and then go forth and rarely if ever again darken the door of the church? Or perhaps they do attend for a while; but before long they drift into some sinful lifestyle or spiritual laziness – which itself is a sin – and then they too fall away. And here's the thing: for most of them, they really meant it when they made their promises. They sincerely wanted to follow through. But there came a day when they said, "No, not today. Today I don't want to hear the voice of the Lord." And afterward there came a lot of other todays just like that one, when they could hear what the Lord was saying; but they deliberately blocked it out. They hardened their hearts. And over time the voice of the Lord became fainter and fainter, until at last they couldn't hear it at all.

You know what I'm talking about. You've seen this happen to others. But it isn't to the others that I'm speaking today. Today this message is addressed to you. And in view of our fallen nature's sinful propensity to stray, the question you need to be concerned with is always

"Am I being faithful now?" Today, if *you* hear his voice, do not harden your heart. It's a call to self-examination. It's a call to scrutinize your thoughts, words, and actions in light of what the Lord says – in light of his commands – and to ask yourself, "Today am I hardening my heart against the voice of the Lord?"

Well, are you? If so, then hear the voice of the Lord calling you to repent – and don't harden your heart against it. Repent today, don't wait. Trust in Christ today. Receive his blood bought forgiveness today. Renounce your sin and rise and live in his grace today. And living by his grace, exhort your brothers and sisters in Christ – especially those who may be in danger of stumbling or straying – to likewise not harden their hearts against the voice of the Lord. This is our primary calling while we live in the time called today. And by keeping us faithfully in this calling, the Lord is equipping and strengthening us to accomplish his will, and enabling to stand with him on the Last Day when he will cause us to inherit his eternal Promised Land.

So I think it's fair to say that *today* we have our work cut out for us. We know what to do. Let's do it today – and each today that follows, for this is how Christ keeps us faithfully in the fellowship of his church as long as it is called today. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!