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Proper 23 • Hebrews 3:12–19 • October 11, 2015

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Notes on the pericope

Okamoto: Proper.23 • Hebrews 3:12–19

The pericope urges Christians to believe God's promise of eternal rest and to hold on to it by faithfulness.

The pericope is part of a passage that exhorts Christians to persevere in faith and faithfulness. The first part of the exhortation begins by quoting part of Psalm 95 (Heb 3:7–11). These verses (Ps 95:7–11b) call on God's people *today* (σήμερον; 3:7) to hear and believe God's voice, not to respond like the Israelites in the desert. The hardness of their hearts provoked God to swear: "They will certainly not enter *my rest* (τὴν κατάπαυσίν μου)" (3:11). They did not enter God's rest *because of their unbelief* (δι' ἀπιστίαν) (3:18).

At 4:1, Christians are warned: "Therefore let us fear, lest some of you, because you left behind the promise to enter his rest, appear to come up short." They had been evangelized just as the Israelites had been. The word did not help the Israelites, because they did not combine faith with hearing (4:2; see also 4:6). Christians are urged not to fall into that error and therefore fail to enter God's rest.

But what was the rest that remained a promise even for Christians living long after the wanderings in the desert? It was not the entrance into the promised land, "for if Joshua had given [the Israelites] rest, then God would not have spoken about another [rest] after these days" (4:8). Rather, it was God's own rest on the seventh day, "for somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on **268** the seventh day from all his works'" (4:4, quoting Gn 2:2). So the author concludes: "Therefore there remains a *Sabbath rest* (σαββατισμὸς) for the people of God, because whoever enters God's rest also rests from his labors, just as God rested from his. Therefore, let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one should fall by the same example of disobedience" (4:9–11). From this, we see that the promised rest is ultimate and eternal, not temporary.

The promise is eschatological, a promise of life with God and all his people in the new creation, enjoying the life of the age to come.

The topic changes in the final two verses of the pericope (vv. 12–13). We can understand the change as a shift from a focus on the promise of *rest* and exhortation to *remain faithful* to a focus on promise and exhortation themselves, that is, to the word itself and to God himself, who speaks the word and makes the promises. This word should not be taken lightly, because it is "living" and "active" and "sharper than any double-edged sword," just as everything is open to the eyes of God. These verses reinforce the urgency of the message.

Notes for preaching

A sermon based on this text should urge hearers to strive to enter God's Sabbath rest. They will do this by living by faith in the promise and in faithfulness to the God who made it. This sermon should explain the concept of "rest" and the promise of rest. This text not only explains what rest is but also defends its interpretation. This sermon also should be clear and concrete about the faithful obedience that is called for. This passage helps by making a comparison with Israel, who neither believed the promise given to them nor obeyed the God who made it. And it will be important to keep in mind that just as faith and obedience go together, so also do unbelief and disobedience. This passage is strong on this connection, and so any sermon based on it should be just as strong.

How might you organize this sermon? You might organize it around the theme of "rest." This may not be as obvious as it sounds, because "work" dominates our lives. It dominates them not only in that it fills our lives, but also in how we understand

ourselves and give value to our lives. We are known by what we do for a living. Formal education is training for lives of work. Many so-called leisure activities are filled with activity and accomplishment. Concordia Journal, Vol. 41 [2015], No. 3, Art. 17 Even when they are not, they are supposed to make us ready to “get back to work.”

Then point out that the promise of rest—of enjoying *God’s Sabbath rest*—implies a radical revaluation. We are to look forward to *end* all of our labors. To lead your hearers to look forward for rest, explain the promise of rest in this text and assure your hearers that God made it to each of them in the means of grace.

Conclude by urging your hearers always to look forward to this rest, and not to let go of it through disobedience. If you begin with the “economic” theme that I suggest, then it makes sense to return to this theme. Jesus’s warning against worry (Mt 6:25–34) and Paul’s exhortation about contentment (1 Tm 6:6–10) are relevant.

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