

Selected Sermons #16

The Festival Half of the Church Year by E. Schaller

Hebrews 4:14-16 Invocavit

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.

Dear friends in Christ, fellow-redeemed –

What, then, will be the practical value to us of the Lenten season as we observe it? The duty of a Christian during Lent has sometimes been described in this fashion: they are to withdraw with the mind from the things of this world and devoutly meditate upon the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, the Savior. This is well and good as far as it goes - but what is to come out of this meditation? Certainly we cannot forget that we are still in the world, no matter how earnestly we make the history of Christ's Passion our chief concern during this time. We must live here surrounded by constant dangers, in times of great

trouble, and we must live with ourselves, in whose flesh dwells no good thing.

Therefore we ought to see how our Lenten observance may be of practical value, helping us to live more safely, more richly. God would not want us to watch his Son suffer and die as though we were spectators at a movie or at a game. Rather, he urges us to make use of what we see and to learn from it. God coaxes us to avail ourselves of the wonderful advantages which are held out to us as a result of the Savior's bloody sacrifice – yes, as the result of his entire life of suffering. To this end our text should serve us. Here the fruits of Christ's redemption are alluringly held before us as the Lord calls us, saying -

“Come to the throne of grace!”

A double reason is held out to us for accepting this invitation:

I. We are weak

II We are promised mercy and grace to help

I. The apostle urges us to accept the divine offer, for he writes, *“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace.”* Why is he so eager, so enthusiastic? Because, no doubt, he felt like the Apostle Paul did when he wrote, *“Who is weak, and I am not weak?”* (2 Corinthians 11:29) Most plainly the invitation of the Lord rests upon this underlying fact that **all of us are weak**. The text comes right out and speaks of our infirmities. It does not seem to

take much stock in its readers and hearers. It sees us being tempted to sin and falling into sin. It mentions *grace and mercy* as gifts which we must have even as we must have food and water.

But what are *grace and mercy*? The first is undeserved kindness such as we might show to an enemy who did his best to harm and destroy us. *Mercy* is pity such as one would feel toward a ragged, diseased beggar on the street.

Now, is it really as bad as all that with us? The apostle – and God speaking through him – takes it for granted, YES! – for look what he offers us. He holds out to us for our use the Christ of sympathy who even before his death came to the rescue of men and women who were particularly pressed down by their weaknesses. The woman of Canaan so suffered that she admitted herself to be little better than a dog in God’s sight. The woman with the issue of blood was not ashamed to bend down and touch the hem of Jesus’ garment in her need. The blind beggar of Jericho heard Jesus going by and instantly cried out, “*Son of David, have mercy on me!*” The woman at Sychar implored, “*Lord, give me of that living water!*”

In all cases Jesus revealed himself as the helper of these lowly people. That was his record throughout. He was useful only to the **needy, the infirm, the suffering** – never to those who, like the Pharisees, were strong and well. “*They have,*” he said, “*no need of a physician.*” So then, in offering us the sympathetic strength of this Jesus, the apostle assumes that **we belong in the company of**

the weak. Yes, we may as well say it frankly – this word of God can only be meant for us if we are helpless in our weakness and sickness. There is an offer here only for those of whom Isaiah says, “From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness – only wounds and welts and open sores, . . .” (Isaiah 1:6)

How do we fit? Dear friends, here we must come to grips with **blindness and a dullness which beset us.** There is a disease known to medical science that robs the body of feeling; one can stick a pin into such people, and they will not feel it; it is called leprosy. We suffer from something similar, and sometimes it is worse than other times. By-and-large, we have been offered a High Priest who has a feeling for our infirmities even though we often have little feeling for them ourselves. We lack, for example, a keen sense of the **weakness of our bodies.** Yes, when something hurts, we moan and groan. When we become ill, we know it, but so dimly we see what is really going on in us – namely, that we have a body of death, and that we house the most hopeless of all plagues. We are wasting away, helpless to prevent our body from turning slowly to decay. It is strange to see how we live as though tomorrow were sure.

But above all, we are so insensitive to our **spiritual weakness.** To say that we are sinners is a simple thing, and we say it – but do we always feel like it? Do we faint with despair because we really understand so little of the Truth (that we know as it was revealed to us in the Bible) and yet

are so clumsy at doing what should be done with any ease and perfectly? Watch a six-month-old child trying to tie a shoelace, and you will have a good picture of our spiritual health and powers. Yet how self-assured we are, like Peter taking things into his own hands and telling Jesus (out of his great store of wisdom!) to be sure not to go up to Jerusalem!

Not appreciating that we can do and think nothing good of ourselves, we lay ourselves wide open to the devil's temptations, and the result is as it was with Peter – that we become devils ourselves, furiously working for Satan and not realizing it. How important Peter felt himself to be, but what a wretch he was! So long as we are blind to the real nature of our infirmities, how will we ever feel ourselves invited to a throne of grace? And let us realize that this very blindness is the one weakness against which sympathy will not help. What did the proud Pharisees ever gain from Jesus?

To continue in not being sensitive to our true condition is inexcusable, for it is plainly to be seen in our lives how weak we are, as clearly revealed in the Scripture. To persist in being insensible to it is to draw upon ourselves what Jesus pronounced upon the Pharisees: *“Now you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore your sin remains.”*

So then, our Lenten observance should awaken in us this knowledge. Christ's suffering on the Cross cures our blindness, for when we see him, we see all that was in us, which he took upon himself. We do not see in him our

sins, for he had none and showed none, but we see what our sins and weakness did to the Son of God who bore them. He is the image of us, a man of sorrows, despised, with no form or comeliness. Let us turn from him to search ourselves, and we will find that we are like that in God's sight, fully ready to be cast off, rejected. God, be merciful to me!

II. He answers, "Come to the throne of grace." Never does the finest food taste so good to the starving as do grace and mercy to the weak, penitent sinner. Where does such *grace and mercy* come from? Where do they originate?

We are pointed to a throne. That is a place where sits the king, and from a throne where people have learned to expect justice. Is that what the weak and infirm want? Justice is on the side of the strong and the good, but it holds out little hope for the guilty. I would ordinarily have to advise you to stay away from this throne especially, for on it sits God, and in his hand is the book of the Law, wherein is written, "...I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ..." (Exodus 20:5) If you, friend, really know what you are, you will tear loose and use what strength you have left to hide yourself and beg the mountains to fall on you and cover you!

But I now beg you, LISTEN! This word of God says that this is a *throne of grace* – and it does not mention the God

who sent the Flood and who rained fire upon Sodom. He is there, of course, but beside him stands a man clothed in our very own flesh and blood, who has the eyes and ears of God fixed on him. Look at this Man carefully; you will see priestly garments on him; in his hands is a bloody sacrifice; in his hands are nail holes. Yea, verily, it is the Christ of sinners, the weak and lowly One, who was crucified, who lives, and who never forgets his experiences.

We are told that *he was in all point tempted as we are, yet without sin*. We are mindful of what he went through! Coming from heaven and its infinite splendor. He was plunged into the unspeakable horror of a sinful world and found the devil himself on his heels, tearing at his soul. No one of us can measure what it means when we read, "He was tempted by the devil." For *being without sin and being tempted* without sinning did not make it easier for him but far harder. Jesus could not fall, yet he could feel the full power of temptation as any man would. He was torn between devilish might and divine purity. The irresistible force met the immovable object. What shuddering pain our Lord endured! But in his obedience he atoned for our sins and rendered satisfaction for us; his sympathy is the ruling power of the throne; his blood is the law which judges us.

Therefore now there are but **two things awaiting us** at this throne which looks down upon us in **our weakness and need**. They are, first – **MERCY**. That is mentioned first, and assuredly it must come first, before *finding help*.

We have no right to reckon on God's help and protection and guidance until we have first sought and received the mercy which answers the cry, "*God be merciful to me, a sinner!*" With him is forgiveness, full and free, of our past failures, and to the evil we have caused in our weakness.

We all have **GRACE** to *help in time of need*. It remains only for us to know our need. As we know temptation, we come to him who still feels what it is like to be in our position. To receive help, we come to *the throne of grace*. He never did turn away the needy, and he never will. If we are weak, he is strong – and this is all the answer. When we are tempted, if only we will flee to him, he will hide us in his pavilion; he will furnish us with weapons and courage. To receive help, let us come to the throne of grace. Oh, then, come and receive life both now and in eternity! Amen!

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