

And he will give you rest

Hebrews 3:1-4:16

A Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

In 1937 in Germany, the Nazis threw a Lutheran pastor named Ernst Käsemann in prison. He was one of the most important New Testament scholars of the Twentieth Century. Why did they do it?

At the time, Käsemann was serving a congregation in Gelsenkirchen, a coal mining town. He told about how during the Sunday morning worship services the Nazi soldiers sat up in the balcony with guns, but his miners, as he called them, sat downstairs with clubs in their hands. They had no fear of the Nazis because they faced death every day in the mines.

How did Käsemann handle the whole situation? He said: "So I preached the Gospel." And then the Nazis threw him in prison.

The jailor was a bit flummoxed. He'd never had a pastor as a prisoner before. Of course, the rules were that prisoners are not to have any writing materials or any artificial lighting. But the jailor broke the rules by allowing him to have a pencil and paper and a couple of books. Käsemann told how during daylight he wrote his famous commentary, at least the first draft of it, on the Letter to the Hebrews.

In Hebrews chapters three and four, it again and again repeats the message: "God will give you his rest." And then in Hebrews 4:9, it says "a sabbath rest."

That of course echoes in our minds because in the story of creation, Genesis 2:2, it says (paraphrase): "On the seventh day God rested."

Käsemann titled his commentary on Hebrews, *The Wandering People of God*. We have then the contrast between wandering – they wandered in the wilderness – and rest. God's rest, the promised land.

Older people welcome this message. We're tired. We're ready to rest. But what about the others? Younger people would like something to do, useful work, adventures, something happening. They say: "Let's do something exciting." They may even ask: "What's wrong, after all, with wandering?"

You may know that line from the poem, "Daffodils," by Wordsworth: "I wandered lonely as a cloud." We think how nice it is to sort of drift along like a cloud. Or if you go to the Dead Sea, it's so salty that you can drift along on top of the water. Or maybe you'd like to take off on a motorcycle or in a RV and just go traveling wherever, according to your whim, free as can be. We think how nice it would be to ride the rails or sail around the world.

However, there is a big “however.” Remember the supersonic sky diver (Felix Baumgartner) twelve years ago who went up in the atmosphere twenty-four miles up and then did a free fall down to earth? When he landed, he said: “All I wanted to do is get out of there alive.” It was a little different than just fun.

In the past two hundred years or so our culture has become so stable that we forget how truly precarious life can be. Edgar Allen Poe wrote a short story: “A Descent into the Maelström” (1841). It was really a parody. He was mocking the idea that this is such great sport, great fun, as the literature in the Nineteenth Century tended to do.

When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, it wasn’t fun. It was not just an adventure, a thrill. It was bleak, nothing but rock and stones. The people were in constant danger from the animals, storms, and disease. When you have to be there and are trying to stay alive, it’s awful to wander and not be safe.

In the Middle Ages they talked about “the wandering Jew,” who could find no safe place, no place of rest, but was expelled from one town, then the next.

In Greek mythology there is Sisyphus, forced to push an immense boulder up the hill, only for it to roll back down every time it neared the top, and to do this for eternity. That’s really more what wandering in the wilderness means.

Or as it says in Isaiah 57:20: “The wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.” There is no abiding rest, only toil and turmoil.

That’s why in this text from Hebrews that talks about rest, there in Hebrews 4:9-10, it says: “So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God.” There is that which is before us as God’s rest.

In the fourteenth chapter of John, verses 2 and 3, it says (paraphrase): “I go to prepare a place for you, a place for you to rest, a place for you to be, to live in peace and rest and safety.”

We are familiar with the verses in Matt 11:28-29: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and you will learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

And in Romans 8 it says it is not just us who labor and are heavy laden, but creation itself has been subject to futility” (Romans 8:20) and “the whole creation has been groaning in travail” (Romans 8:22) and isn’t at rest. Nature itself is convulsed, disordered, as are we.

Then it says we await “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). There is this sabbath rest, the seventh day, that day which the Lord has prepared.

On the seventh day he rested, and on the eighth day he began his new creation. Amen