

BID MY ANXIOUS FEARS SUBSIDE

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 3:7-19

Eighth Message

Bernard Bell

July 16, 2023

Five years ago Sue and I spent ten days near Bordeaux with my family. We saw signage for *Les Chemins de Saint Jacques de Compostelle*, the Ways of St James. The routes were marked on the map I was using. And by brass plaques set in the city pavement, along with brass scallop shells, which is the symbol of the Way. These ways are several ancient paths from across France and beyond that funnel pilgrims into the more famous Camino de Santiago, the 800 km route across northern Spain from the Pyrenees to the city of Santiago de Compostela in the region of Galicia in northwest Spain. The Camino ends at the cathedral in that city, which houses the remains of Saint Iago, St Jacob. In English he is known as James the Greater, that is James the son of Zebedee. For a thousand years the Camino has been a pilgrimage route. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims now walk the Camino every year.

Many set out alone, but they don't remain alone for long. They quickly form small groups, usually after the first night together in one of the lodgings. They then walk the Camino together as fellow pilgrims. But a quite different scenario is portrayed in the movie *The Way* (2010). It was released under the tag line "Life is too big to walk it alone." Yet that is exactly what the main character tries to do. Tom, played by Martin Sheen, sets out to walk the Camino on his own. For most of the movie he resists all efforts of three others to pull him into their oddball group. He is stubbornly determined to be an island unto himself. It is not until two-thirds through the movie that his resolved isolation begins to crack and he begrudgingly accepts that pilgrimage is best done with others.

The Christian life is a pilgrimage. The most influential Christian book after the Bible is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, written in prison by John Bunyan. It is presented as the dream of a journey by a pilgrim named Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. He sets out alone but he does not finish alone. Along the way he meets various characters who help or hinder him in his pilgrimage. Book Two tells the pilgrimage of his wife Christiana and their children; she had initially refused to join him on his journey. This second part includes several poems, one of which is very popular in Britain as a hymn. I sang it often when I was growing up. Each verse ends, "To be a pilgrim."

The Book of Hebrews also presents the Christian life as a journey, as a pilgrimage. Jesus has already gone before us as the pioneer and forerunner. He has entered God's presence. We follow him to that same destination. We make this journey together as brothers and sisters.

In last week's sermon we saw that *we* are God's house (3:6), that *we* are holy brothers and sisters (3:1). The Christian life is about *we* not just *I*. We also saw that there is a proviso to this status. We "are God's house, *if* indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory." This *if* troubles people. There is a condition to our status. There are two things we need to hold on to. The first is *confidence*, which we saw last week means our access to God's presence through Jesus our high priest. Boldly we now approach the

throne of grace through faith. The second is our *hope*: at the end of our pilgrimage we will enter God's presence. Boldly we will approach the throne of grace in person. In both cases, Jesus is already there: Christ before us. We already have these two things: access and hope. We hold on to them as we faithfully follow the path set before us, following Jesus.

But there is a danger that we will give up and turn away from our pilgrimage. Hence the several warnings in this sermon. Hence the *if* in v. 6. The purpose of this sermon which the author has written to his friends is to encourage them to persevere together in their pilgrimage. Now in 3:7-4:13 he gives them an extended warning about the danger of turning away, the danger of being unfaithful. He draws from Israel's history to teach them a lesson from the past. Today we consider the first part, 3:7-19. We begin with vv. 7-11:

So, as the Holy Spirit says:

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors tested and tried me,
though for forty years they saw what I did.
That is why I was angry with that generation;
I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray,
and they have not known my ways.'
So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'" (Heb 3:7-11 NIV)

This extended quotation is the second half of Psalm 95. The first half of that psalm was our call to worship. It is indeed a call to worship:

Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care. (Ps 95:6-7)

We are God's sheep. But sheep are prone to wander, far from their master's voice. Sheep are prone to stubbornly go their own way and get lost.

In the second half the psalmist appeals to the Lord's sheep of his generation to not be like the sheep whom Moses led out of Egypt. Moses was twice described as faithful (3:2, 5). But he was leading an unruly rabble of sheep. Repeatedly they rebelled against God and they rebelled against him. They wanted to go their own way.

This rebellion started straight away before they had even crossed the Red Sea. They encamped by the sea, but Pharaoh and his army pursued them. The people cried out to Moses,

"What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the

Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Exod 14:11b-12)

Moses told them, “Don’t be afraid... The LORD will fight for you” (14:13-14). But they were terrified. They were full of anxious fear. This was just the beginning. God brought them through the Sea in what is the great act of salvation in the OT: God simultaneously saved his people and destroyed the enemy that had held them in bondage. But all the way through the wilderness, despite the leadership of the Lord and of Moses, the people grumbled and complained. They kept saying the same few things.

Firstly, they kept saying, “We’re going to die.” They accused Moses of bringing them out of Egypt to kill them with hunger or to kill them with thirst. They were afraid God was going to kill them, even though he had provided water and had provided manna as food. They were afraid the inhabitants of Canaan were going to kill them. Their anxious fears would not subside. They trusted neither the Lord nor Moses to keep them alive during their journey.

Secondly, they reminisced about how good they had it in Egypt. “There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted” (Exod 16:3). They never sat around the meat pots in Egypt! They were slaves pressed into hard labor on Pharaoh’s great building projects. After a year of manna they complained of this monotonous diet: “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt...also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic” (Num 11:5). Repeatedly they said, “We were better off in Egypt. We had it so good there.” This is revisionist history: they never had it good in Egypt. But they wished that they had never set out on this journey. They were full of regret and wishful thinking.

Thirdly, and as a consequence of that wishful nostalgia, they said, “We want to go back to Egypt!” They rejected all that the Lord and his servant Moses had done for them. They rejected God’s salvation. They rejected his good, gracious plan for them. Better the slavery they knew than the wilderness they didn’t know. Better the taskmaster Pharaoh they knew than the liberating God they didn’t know. They could not walk by faith because they had no confidence in God. They did not know his ways.

When God brought them out of Egypt under Moses’s leadership, they had two destinations. The first destination was Mt Sinai, there to meet with the Lord. He had said through his prophet Moses to Pharaoh, “Let my people go, so they may worship me.” They came to Sinai, where the Lord said, “I...brought you to myself” (Exod 19:5). There at Sinai he formally took them to be his people, his treasured possession. “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” But they were terrified, and said to Moses: “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Exod 20:19). So Moses acted as their mediator, entering God’s presence on their behalf. He brought back God’s word, which he wrote down as the Book of the Covenant. The people promised, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” (Exod 24:7). As many of you know, the word for *obey* also encompasses *hear*. They heard God’s voice and they promised to keep hearing it, that is to obey it. And so a covenant was made between God and his people. But they quickly broke that covenant.

For forty days their resolve was tested as Moses was atop Mt Sinai receiving instructions for the tabernacle in which God would dwell among his people. But they let go of their hope of his return. Moses was nowhere to be seen, and they asked for something they could see. They asked for man-made gods. They had heard God’s voice, “You shall not make for yourself an image” (Exod 20:4). But they stopped listening to that voice, and so Aaron made them a golden

calf that they could see. They reverted to living by sight not by faith, by the eye not the ear.

The Lord wanted to wipe them out and begin again with Moses, but Moses interceded on behalf of this wayward people, and God relented. He spared the people, and graciously put his presence among them in the tabernacle. After nearly a year they moved on from Sinai.

Their second destination was the land of Canaan, which God had promised Abraham long before: a land flowing with milk and honey. They soon came to Kadesh-barnea on the edge of the Promised Land. They sent twelve men to spy out the land. After forty days they reported back, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Num 13:25-14:4). They reported that it was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, but there were giants in the land. Ten of the spies said they should not enter for they would be killed. The other two spies, Joshua and Caleb, agreed that there were giants in the land, but, even so, they should enter for God was with them.

But the people wanted to choose a new leader and go back to Egypt, where life would be better. Again, the Lord wanted to wipe them out and begin again with Moses. Again Moses interceded, and again the Lord relented. He forgave them. But he imposed a consequence: that entire generation would perish in the wilderness. They would not enter into the land. So what did they do? They immediately tried to enter the land on their own but were soundly defeated by the Canaanites. They were stubborn, recalcitrant sheep.

That wilderness generation refused to enter the land because of their unbelief. They were unfaithful throughout their entire pilgrimage from Egypt to the edge of the land. They trusted neither the Lord nor Moses. Again and again they viewed Moses and the Lord as being *against* them, not *for* them. They had nostalgia for the good old days before they started their pilgrimage. They had a selective memory of how good it was before they started following the Lord. They succumbed to a revisionist history. They never had it good in Egypt! But they were determined: they wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt. A low point was reached when two of the rebel leaders accused Moses, “you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness... you haven’t brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey” (Num 16:13-14). They redefined Egypt as the land flowing with milk and honey. They rejected all that God had spoken. They would not hear, but instead hardened their hearts. As a result, what they feared did happen: they did all die in the wilderness. But it need not have been this way. If they had just listened to God, hearing his word, they would have finished their pilgrimage to the Land of Promise. If they had just known his ways:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exod 34:6-7)

They had ears but they would not hear. They hardened their hearts and refused God. It was they who subsided under their anxious fears. They did not know God or his ways.

The preacher now applies the lesson of the wilderness generation to his beloved brothers and sisters:

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We

have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. (3:12-14)

He urges them to watch out, to be alert. He warns of the danger of a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. The danger is a lack of faith and a lack of faithfulness. Why would they turn away from the living God? Why would they abandon their heavenly calling? For similar reasons as the wilderness generation. If they came to doubt the goodness of God, no longer seeing him as for them but against them. If they were overcome with anxious fears that would not subside. If they were nostalgic for their former life, for how good they had it before they started following Jesus. For any of these reasons, and more, they might turn away. It might be a slow drift, slowly letting go of what formerly they held onto firmly; a slow drift away from Jesus and back to their former life. Or it might be a sudden apostasy, an abrupt turning away from following Jesus. Sadly, some of us, I'm sure, know people who have done this. As I wrote these words I had people in mind.

The preacher proposes a "precious remedy against Satan's devices" to use a lovely Puritan phrase: "encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (3:13). When we come to Christ it is not the end of our journey of faith, but just the beginning. It is the beginning of learning to live a life of faith. We have a lifetime ahead of us in which to follow Jesus, until at death we enter into God's Rest. This is our pilgrimage. We don't walk this path alone; we do it together as fellow pilgrims. We encourage one another to persevere, to remain faithful. Together we keep our eyes on Jesus who has gone before us. When one of us lags or grows discouraged or feels like giving up, we come alongside to encourage perseverance. The best way to persevere is to look to Jesus. This is what the preacher does again and again in this sermon: he urges us to see Christ before us.

A second remedy is to remember our status as participants in Christ: "We have come to share in Christ" (3:14). Paul's favorite way to describe us is that we are in Christ. We have participated in his death and resurrection, as symbolized in baptism. He is not ashamed to call us brothers and sister. We participate in him if...

Another *if*; and again it's *if* we hold on to something—the same verb as v. 6 where we hold on to our confident access to God's presence and our hope of arrival there at the end of our journey. This time he calls us to hold on to "our original conviction firmly to the end." The word rendered here as *conviction* in NIV is difficult to translate. It can be translated as *substance* or *reality*, so we can think of it as our conviction of what is ultimately real. When we turn to Christ we accept a new reality, a reality that is shaped around Christ himself. As we pursue our pilgrimage we hold on to this reality from beginning to end, from the moment we confess Christ and start our pilgrimage to the end when we enter into the fulness of that reality, when we enter into God's presence. Such perseverance is faithfulness. And we do this together, encouraging one another not to be seduced or led astray by sin's deceitfulness. We hear and heed our Master's voice, and we stay the course.

Sin's deceitfulness might try to persuade us of another reality. For the wilderness generation their reality was what they could see, not God's voice which they had heard. Their reality was their stomach: food and water. It was their anxious fears. It was their comfort, or lack thereof. We can easily pursue realities under the name of God. We can easily substitute idols of our own making for the living God. We can easily attach the name of God to these idols: the God of our comfort, the God of our cause, the God of our nation, and many

others. These can turn us away from the bedrock reality of our participation in Christ.

The preacher repeats his warning from Psalm 95:

**"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion." (3:12-15)**

If you hear his voice. We have heard his voice, what God has spoken in these last days to us through his Son. We now heed the heavenly calling to faithfully follow Jesus.

The preacher now adds his own analysis of the wilderness generation, using a series of rhetorical questions, based on Psalm 95:

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. (3:16-19)

The preacher describes the four problems of the wilderness generation: they rebelled (16), they sinned (17), and they were disobedient (18), all summed up as unbelief or unfaithfulness (19).

In v. 12 the preacher had urged, "See that none of you has an evil heart of *unbelief* that turns away." He closes with v. 19, "We see that they were not able to enter God's Rest because of *unbelief*." The root problem is unbelief. Unbelief is not primarily a failure to believe the right things, to have the right creed, or the right theology. Unbelief is primarily a lack of faithfulness. It is a failure to continue following Jesus, to whom we have given our allegiance, whom we have pledged to follow. Such unfaithfulness is contrasted with the faithfulness of both Moses and Jesus (3:2, 5-6). Faithfully following Jesus, our faithful one, is our earthly pilgrimage, at the end of which lies entry into God's Rest.

Today, if you hear his voice. Today, as long as it is called Today. Today is lasting a long time. After forty years wandering in the wilderness, the second generation came to the plains of Moab on the east side of the river Jordan. The entire first generation had died, except Moses, Joshua and Caleb, and the children; they had all fallen in the wilderness. Moses reminded the second generation of their parents' rebellion, sin, disobedience, and unfaithfulness. He urged them, "Don't be like your parents. Be different. Hear the word of the Lord." His charge to them, to hear the word of the Lord, forms the book of Deuteronomy: Hear, O Israel.

Centuries later the Psalmist urged his generation, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden you hearts." God had spoken to them through the prophets. More centuries later, the writer to the Hebrews urged his generation, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden you hearts." They have heard his voice, for now in the last days, God has spoken to them by his Son. Now we, 2,000 years later, hear the same exhortation: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Again and again, the preacher urges his brothers and sisters to look to Jesus in faith, to follow him in faithfulness, and to not turn back in unbelief. Today, for it is still Today, we hear this same warning.

The Christian life is a pilgrimage. Along the way there are difficulties and challenges, just as the Israelites faced in the wilderness. Like them we face tests and temptations as we walk by faith not by sight. Test and temptation are opposite sides of the same coin. We see this dynamic already in the garden of Eden. God gave the first

human a commandment: do not eat of this one tree. God stacked the decks in favor of keeping that commandment. There was no need for the human to eat of that one tree, for God had provided an abundance for him, the fruit of all the other trees. But the crafty serpent focused the woman's gaze on that one fruit denied. She saw with her eye that it was good, and failed to hear with her ear what God had said. God was testing them: would they be faithful to his word? But Satan was tempting them. The object was the same: the fruit of that one tree. God wanted them to succeed, to pass the test by being faithful. Satan wanted them to fail, to succumb to the temptation to be unfaithful. He deceived her to give in to what she saw, then take and eat.

This was true for the wilderness generation. God had given them his word. But they did not listen with their ears. Instead they saw with their eyes and they acted out of their anxious fears. Instead of God testing them, they tested him saying "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exod 17:7). They had no confidence in him.

Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness where he was tested and tempted. Three times Satan misquoted God's word, tempting him to autonomy from God, to act on his own and for himself. Each time Jesus accurately quoted God's word from Deuteronomy. He heard God's voice and did not harden his heart. He rejected the temptation and passed the test. He was proven faithful. He had conquered the tempter and was thus able to enter into his public ministry, doing God's mighty deeds. Satan was defeated.

As we make our pilgrimage through life we will be tested and tempted. We need to remember that God wants us to pass the test by hearing his voice, and Satan wants to trip us up with what we see.

God has provided help for us. He has put his Spirit in us. He has given us one another to encourage us to be faithful. And he has appointed a faithful high priest, Jesus. "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (2:18). Some English versions translate *tempted* as *tested*, again because they are the opposite sides of the same coin. God purposes to use the trials of life to strengthen our faith; Satan purposes them to destroy our faith. God bids our anxious fears subside; Satan cultivates our anxious fears.

On this pilgrimage of faith, let us encourage one another to listen to the right voice as we journey together. To hear the Lord's voice Today. So that we can faithfully complete our journey and enter into God's Rest, as did Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*:

Now I saw in my dream, that these pilgrims went in at the gate; and as they entered they were transfigured, and they had Raiment put on that shone like gold. Then I heard in my dream that all the bells in the City rang again for joy, and it was said within, "Enter ye into the joy of our Lord."

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

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