

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 18 – September 11th and 14th, 2008

Isaiah 55:6-9

“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Dear children of God,

It was a cold winter day. The carcass of a dead animal floated down the Niagara River on an ice floe. A bald eagle circled around, screamed, landed on the ice floe, grabbed the carcass with its talons and tore away at the semi frozen meat with its sharp beak. The mighty eagle feasted as the sound of the Niagara Falls grew louder. It did not fear. The eagle knew it could fly away at the last minute as the ice flow and carcass went over the falls. The ice flow began picking up speed. The eagle tried to let go of the carcass, but its talons had become frozen into the carcass and the ice. It struggled and struggled but it was too late. It was pulled over the falls and dashed to rocks below. It had waited too long to let go.

All around us we see people holding onto a life style that does not include God and the salvation he has planned for them. We see them sinking their talons deep into the material pleasures of this life, deep into a life of sin that takes not regard for what God has to say, deep into the false hope that some future effort at being a better person will easily make up for the sins of the past life. And then there are those who are totally at peace and content with sinking their talons into their personal choices they have made regarding their views of God. Meanwhile another week of life passes by. One week closer to standing before God in the final judgment.

The words of Scripture before us this morning are well known words and they contain an urgent message. **“Seek the Lord while he may be found.”** A construction worker invited his friend at work to join him in worship on Sunday. The young man said he used to go to worship regularly but his life had changed and he did need God because he was young and strong. God could come later. What if there is no tomorrow, an accident on the freeway, the heavens opening up and Jesus coming in glory. The longer people resist the Lord's call in their lives, the tighter they became attached to wrong views of God that will ultimately drag them down into the pit of hell itself.

Theme: Seek the Lord While He May Be Found

- 1. Call for help now**
- 2. Believe in the rescue**

You cannot wait to call out for help from the Lord because there may not be a tomorrow. “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near,” our text tells us with urgency. If I ask the little kids here this morning, “What do you do in an emergency?” They know the answer. Pick up the phone and dial 911 as quickly as possible. If you wait too long, you could perish before help comes your way. During the tsunami a couple of years ago, a twelve year old girl saw the waters recede suddenly along the beach. She began shouting frantically, “Tsunami.” The people who heard her

warning ran to higher ground and were spared. Very few animals perished because for some reason they had a feeling the tsunami was coming and they ran to higher ground. We are living at a time when people need to seek the Lord and the higher ground that he has to spare them from the judgment to come. God's Word tells us, "Today is the day of salvation." The message we have to offer people is simply this. "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near." During the recent hurricane government leaders in the Gulf States pleaded with people to get to higher ground before the big storm slammed into the coast.

Notice what the Lord wants all people to do. "Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts." The word "wicked" is a strong word and so is the word "evil man." At first we might think this applies only to the real nasty people in the world, the drug dealers, the murderers, the adulterers, those who make life miserable for everyone around them. Upon further examination we realize the word wicked includes ordinary people like us who have wicked and evil thoughts in our hearts that no one even knows are there. One Christian said, "The secret sins we commit would shame hell itself." The book of Romans was not exaggerating when it says, "There is none who does good, no not one." This is a call for all of humanity to pull out the talons that have been sunk deep into certain sinful patterns, whether it be talking bad about other people, or harboring anger in your heart, or thinking lustful thoughts in the heart, or becoming greedy and only thinking of yourself. It is a time to turn away from justifying yourself by seeing others as worse than you are and thinking you are just a little bit better. It is time to pull the talons from this problem of always making excuses and justifying yourself by justifying certain sinful patterns.

The Lord also wants people to forsake their evil ways when it comes to trying to rescue themselves. If your rickety old car breaks down on a lonely road in the middle of the desert, and a State Trooper comes along and offers you a ride to the next town, you would be a fool to say, "I can make it on my own" especially if I have no water. We are born into this world with an evil heart that likes to believe that we can rescue ourselves. Remember the picture of the elderly people pulled from New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina? After days without the right food, water and medicine they were so delirious they thought they could still survive on their own feeble strength. Romans 3 says, **"Therefore we conclude that no will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."**

Merely becoming conscious of how helpless we are does not save us. The Lord wants the wicked to forsake their ways. He wants us to forsake the ways we were born with when we came into this world. He wants us to turn to him for help. **"Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."** The Hebrew word for "turn" carries with it the thought of repentance or change. What if you had a cup with holes in it? You would realize very soon that it cannot hold water. I can turn away from this cup and turn to one that is good and has no holes in it. Becoming a Christian means turning away from trusting in a cup with holes in it such as the life that you live, and trusting in the perfect life Jesus lived for you, and the perfect death he died for you. That is repentance.

What happens when you turn your back on the hopeless plans that you were born with and turn to the Lord and his plans? It says, "For he will freely pardon." The chapters in Isaiah previous to this chapter describe a Suffering Servant who came into our world to remove sin from us free of charge. Isaiah 53 says, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him." The chapter 55 begins with these words, **"Come all you are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost."**

Remember what I told the kids. You can get a cheeseburger for free. I had the coupon right here in front of me, and it says, "FREE." Only the fine print says, "with the purchase of a value basket." "There is no free...lunch." Things are given out free, but there are usually some strings attached. How differently our Lord is, when we come to him with nothing to offer him except our broken hearts burdened by sin and despairing of hope in ourselves, it says, "He will freely pardon." Romans 3 says, **"We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."**

Why are you a Christian? It is because you have come to believe that there is only one teaching in the whole world that speaks about turning to God and finding free pardon for all sin. A non practicing Muslim once told me that he would never accept the Christian faith because it was wrong for Jesus to turn to a dying thief and give him Paradise free of charge without first demanding that he do something to make up for his sin. We love the words from the hymn, "Rock of Ages" –Nothing in my hand I bring simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked come to Thee for dress. Helpless look to Thee for grace." The talons that once held so tight to salvation through works, now cling tightly to free pardon and forgiveness found only in Jesus. The powerful words the Lord speaks to you this morning call out to you and change your heart and mine. Words such as "Seek the Lord while he may be found" open your heart and mine to believe in a righteousness not found in yourself but the righteousness that has been given to you and declared to be yours in Christ.

2) Believe in the rescue

I am sure you have heard people say, "If it sounds too good to be true, it is probably not true." That is not the case with the salvation the Lord has for us. The Lord says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways." The idea of full and free pardon for sin is not in our thinking. Our thoughts tell us that there must be something I must contribute to the process of salvation, even it is just a little. Perhaps you have heard it said, "God does his part but I must do my part." One woman once told me her favorite verse in the Bible was "God helps those who help themselves." God's way is to do it all for us, and then give us salvation as a free gift.

What did you think about the story Jesus told in our Gospel for today about a landowner who hired people to work in his vineyard? At the end of the day those who worked only one hour were paid the same wage as those who worked twelve hours. Jesus wants us to know that things are different in the kingdom of God. We are not rewarded on the basis of our performance, but only by God's mercy and grace that depend on him doing the work for us. Go back to the car breaking down in the middle of the desert on a lonely road. Instead of a police officer who stops by to help you, it is a car dealer driving by with almost new Honda Accord on his truck that he has just bought at an auction. He stops and says, "Oh, I see your car is broke down. Let me help you. Here, you can have this car, it is almost new, free of charge, I will even fill out the forms and pay the registration for you." What are the chances something like that would ever happen to you?

God's ways are not our ways. God's plan was to take everything you ever did wrong in your life, place it all on his Son. Our Father had his Son nailed on a cross to die for us. The Apostle Paul said that this preaching of the cross, this free pardon of all sin, is so far above our way of thinking that it is foolishness to the human mind. That was God's plan to save people. This morning we hear the Lord's voice calling out to us and to all people, "Seek the Lord while he may be found." That's where you want to sink your faith and trust, because the end is always near. Amen.