

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 20 – October 22, 2023
Matthew 22:1-14 – The Israel of God
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

Seek the Lord while he may be found, for he is right here. He's in the church in his word and sacrament. Here to abundantly pardon, to forgive and cleanse all sins. No sin is too great! This is the gospel, rich and free. God calls you to come and receive his means of grace every Sunday, the gospel applied to you. Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters of baptism; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and bread, the body and blood of your God, without money and without price.

The gospel is yours for the taking! The gifts are free! So do not hesitate. Though you have no money, though you can offer nothing to God, it does not matter! He offers forgiveness and life for free. Because he already paid the price. Not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. You were ransomed with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

So seek the Lord while he may be found! Come to the banquet, come eat and drink the feast he has prepared! Do not make excuses, do not neglect the gifts. Just receive the word and sacraments with joy, you are invited and God offers them to you.

Seek the Lord while he may be found, for the time is short. No one knows the number of the days of his life. No one knows the hour of the Lord's return. So call upon him now, before too late. The gospel may pass on from this place. Many times in history it has passed on from various places, like a rain shower moving across the land. Many nations who once were faithful have sadly fallen away, so that God chooses new nations to shower with the gospel, people who will believe and receive it.

The prime the example is ancient Israel. At one time, Israel called on the Lord and sought him. They obeyed his voice when God led them under Joshua into the promised land. They trusted his salvation when God rescued them from Egypt and led them through the Red Sea. And throughout the Old Testament, God always preserved a faithful remnant. A remnant that always believed the promises of God and looked for their fulfillment in the coming Messiah. These Jews were the true ancient Christians.

And when the Messiah came, the faithful remnant received him with joy. John the Baptist leaped in the womb. Simeon took the Christ child in his arms with tears, for his eyes had seen God's salvation and the light of the nations. Many other Jews also believed and came to him in faith, seeking his healing touch and forgiveness. The disciples too, though they were slow to understand, confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. And they became great witnesses and martyrs for the gospel. Upon their testimony the church is built.

These are the true heirs of Abraham, the true Israel of God. Like Abraham, they received God's promises by faith. For as Genesis 15 declares, Abraham believed God, and it was counted it to him as righteousness. So God also credits righteousness to all who believe his promises by faith.

But many in ancient Israel did not believe. They rebelled in the wilderness, they did not trust God to save them. So God swore in his wrath, “They shall never enter my rest.” Because of their unbelief, he condemned them to die in the wilderness, wandering for forty years. They may have been circumcised descendants of Abraham according to the flesh, but they were not Abraham's heirs by faith. They were not of the true Israel of God.

And these wicked unbelievers also rejected Jesus. When the only Son came into the world to save it, they denied him, and they were condemned. The chief priests and scribes and Pharisees were worse than the Israelites of the Old Testament, worse even than those who stoned the prophets. They conspired to kill the Son of God himself.

So in Matthew 21, Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants against them. He told of a landowner who built a vineyard and hired tenants care for it. But when the time came for gathering fruit, the tenants rejected the messengers. They stoned one, beat another, and killed another. Finally the owner decided to send his son. Surely they would respect him! But instead, they seized his son and dragged him outside the vineyard and killed him. “Therefore,” Jesus asked, “When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” And the

leaders of the Jews pronounced their own judgment, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” “Therefore I tell you,” answered Jesus, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”

Jesus meant that for their unbelief, the Jews who rejected Jesus would be cut off from the kingdom of heaven. He knew that in the year 70 AD, God would send the Romans to destroy Jerusalem and burn the temple. He would cut them off from their land. And God would give the kingdom to the true Israel, to the church, the true heirs of the promises to Abraham. The church is the beloved bride of Christ. Here there is neither Jew nor Greek, here Christ loves all who receive him by faith.

And to make his point absolutely clear, Jesus added another parable after the one about the tenants. He told the parable of the wedding guests. A king invited many guests to the wedding banquet of his son. But the guests who were invited ignored his invitation. Some made excuses, others turned on the messengers in violence. They treated some shamefully and killed others. So the king was angry, and he sent his troops to destroy those murderers and burn their city. Just as he burned the city of Jerusalem to the ground in 70 AD. And then the king sent his servants back out into the roads to call other guests to the wedding feast, to gather all who would come and fill the wedding hall. Just as the Jews rejected the Messiah, so God called the whole world. All who received him and believed in his name, invited to the wedding feast.

By these parables, Jesus has shown us where the true Israel of God is to be found. The true Israel is the church, not the modern nation of Israel. For the Jews today still do not believe in Christ, they still do not have faith. We pray they would repent and believe, that God would bring a faithful remnant into the church. But the great promises of Scripture about the God’s love for Israel do not apply to a modern country. They apply to the church.

So when we hear of the horrific terrorist attack on Israel, and when we see Israel declaring war on Hamas, we should not think that these current events precipitate the end times or Armageddon. This is not what Daniel and Ezekiel and Revelation mean when they describe the nations attacking the glorious land. No, the end times began when Jesus was crucified. The glorious land is the church. And we already live in the last days. In these last days God has spoken to us in the church by his Son. And we know neither the day nor the hour when our Lord will return.

On the other hand, even though modern Israel does not believe in Christ, there is no excuse for antisemitism, or for terrorism and murder against Jews. The government of Israel has every right to declare war and protect its citizens, just as any government has a responsibility to protect its citizens from attack. But we should not think that the church must support Israel in order to please God, or that God’s holy city is Jerusalem. We long for the heavenly Jerusalem. The church is the true apple of God’s eye, the true bride of Christ.

But in all this, there is also a warning for us. We belong to the true church, but do not become arrogant. Do not presume on God’s grace. Do not ignore his invitation or reject his call to repent. Because as Paul teaches in Romans 11, if the Jews, who were the natural descendants of Abraham, were once cut off for their unbelief, then we who were grafted in as wild olive branches can also be cut off. For if God broke off natural branches from the olive tree, he can also break off wild branches that were grafted in. And he can graft the natural branches back to their original place. So be warned! The kingdom was taken away from the Jews and given to the Gentiles. But if we prove unfaithful, we can also be broken off, and the natural branches restored.

Therefore, God calls us to continue in repentance, humility, and faith. Pray that God would bring all nations into the church. And pray especially for the Jews, that he would open their eyes to confess Jesus Christ as their Messiah and their God. But do not be anxious about news of current events. It is not for us to know the day of the hour of our Lord’s return. Our calling is simply to be ready. Stay awake and watch, do not fall away. Put on the wedding garments of baptism, washed from sin. The white robes of Christ and his righteousness. Throw away the filthy garments of unrepentance and unbelief, lest you be cast into the outer darkness.

And lift up your heads, for your redemption is drawing near. We already partake of the great wedding feast. Here in the church, we have a foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb. We eat and drink with angels and archangels and all the saints. In communion, we drink the precious wine of his blood, shed for our salvation. Though we have no money, God invites us each week to his altar to eat and drink. The feast without money or price, the banquet of the bread of life. For Jesus has paid the full price of our salvation with his body, he has purchased us as his beloved bride. He has poured out his blood to clothe us with white wedding garments, cleansed and pure.

So come to this wedding feast without hesitation. And give thanks with the words of Isaiah 61. “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.