



God's People Gather Weekend

September 17-18-19, 2022

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: God's People Gather:

1. To Worship; 2. To gain hope; 3. To encourage one another

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10: 19-25).

In the name of the Triune God, dear members of God's family,

With some things, it's open to debate whether in-person or on-line is better. Take spending time with family. I think you know we have one granddaughter named Marie who is 21-months old and lives in Nevada. Back in June, we got to spend time with her, hold her in our laps, read books to her, and give her hugs. Since then, we've been thankful to Facetime her with our Smartphones, see her smile, and talk together. We still get to see her online, but, it's different.

Permit me another example: meetings. When we're in the same room, presentations and reports seem to go a whole lot better. But, Zoom, a new word and technology we learned during the pandemic, that's a whole different ball game. Zoom lets people from all over the country meet without ever getting on a plane. Plus with Zoom, there's a bonus. I can do a suit and tie from the waist-up and shorts from the waist down, and no one ever needs to know.

When COVID hit, nationwide, we had unprecedented lockdowns. For a time, online worship became a temporary necessity. And thank God. I mean that, thank God we had access to online worship here at St. Paul's to feed our fragile Christian faith. But, even now as the lock downs are lifted, online worship remains the norm for some people. Some people have a lingering medical condition, and rightfully so, watch online. Others have grown to appreciate the convenience. It's obviously easier to watch a service online than worship in-person. With online worship, you can sit in front of a screen in your jammies, hair all messy, and a cup of Joe in your hand. So it raises the question: when it comes to worshiping God and feeding our faith, is it open to debate whether in-person or online is better?

Even though our sermon reading was written some twenty centuries before the internet was a thing, God's Word actually addresses the debate. A key passage is Hebrews 10, verse 25 translated in the NIV: ***Let us not give up meeting together.*** The Greek word translated: "meeting together" is EPI-SYNA-GA-GEN. Even if you're not a Greek student, I think you hear a Jewish word you recognize: EPISYNA-GA-GEN or Synagogue. A dynamic translation could be: "Let us not stop gathering at synagogue." The title of this Bible book is directly addressed to those Jews who had converted to Christianity. They had been in the habit of meeting together once a week as the 3rd Commandment told them to. ***Don't give that up*** God's Word says. And it says the same thing to us today. Our sermon reading makes the point that God's People Gather for three reasons, three things we actually do better when we assemble.

Some quick background on the Bible book of Hebrews. These early believers didn't have to worry about COVID-19. They had something far more dangerous to be concerned about. Medical viruses weren't a threat. But, persecution was. The Roman emperor Nero was ramping up these persecutions. If any believers were found to be gathering together, they were thrown into jail and the key was just thrown away. Even darker and more damning, believers were giving up their Christian faith to return back to the Jewish faith because of family influences or maybe it was just more familiar.

The writer to the Hebrews spent the first two thirds of the book explaining why New Testament Christianity was far superior to Old Testament Judaism. He talks about how Jesus was greater than Moses and how the New covenant of God's grace was greater than the Old covenant based on works that no one could ever do. The writer skillfully explains how the sacrifice Jesus made at the cross was better than all the sacrifices of the previous high priests combined. Jesus, the Son of God, sacrificed himself one time on the cross, once for all, died a painful death in our place, and that made up for the sins of the whole world, including sins.

That brings us to our reading. Actually, our sermon reading verses one long sentence in the Greek language emphasizing this thought: God's People Gather. It begins with a summary of who Christ is, and what Christ has done for us.

Therefore brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through that curtain, that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God. This was vivid language for his Jewish listeners. ***The Most Holy Place*** – you know what that's referring to, right? That's the Holy of Holies, the perfectly square room in Jerusalem in the Great Temple where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, the presence of God on earth. Once a year, the high priest would enter that room with a bowl full of animal blood to atone for all sin, as directed by God. God reminded his people that he'd remain among them because of that blood sprinkled on the altar.

Those animal sacrifices pointed to the sacrifice of Christ. His body, crucified at Calvary's cross paid for all sin. And because of that fact, revealed in Holy Scripture, we get to do something unthinkable, something the Israelites never got to do. We get to go into God's presence, right here, right now. Do you think of it this way? When we

gather together in worship, we are actually in God's holy presence. Wow – what a privilege.

That brings us to our first reason why **God's People Gather**. We gather to worship in His presence. And that's a BIG deal. Look at it this way. Imagine when you got to this sanctuary tonight/today, you saw a Bengal tiger sitting on the altar. Those cats get to be 10 feet long, 500 pounds, with 4-inch razor teeth. With a tiger sitting on the altar, would you enter this place? No way. You'd run away. "It's not safe," you'd say. And you'd be right. Being around a hungry tiger is never safe. What about being in the presence of a holy God who hates sin? Is he safe? Ask the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Ask the army of Egypt who were swallowed up in the Red Sea.

Or just ask the people of Israel. They didn't go into the Holy of Holies. Know why? They didn't want to. It was terrifying to be in the presence of the Almighty, even worse than being in the presence of a hungry tiger.

But, are you terrified right now? Of course not. **We have confidence**, Scripture says. Why? God remains as holy as ever. He hates sin, the sin we've been born with and the sin God knows we did when we thought no one was looking. God hasn't changed. But, we have. By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has changed us by faith. Now when God looks at us, Jesus, he doesn't see our sins anymore. We are absolutely clean, perfect because that's what Christ has made us. God most certainly deserves our praise because He has transformed us from sinner to saint. Can you draw near to God and worship him at home? Sure and I hope you do with home devotions and viewing our St. Paul services online with a family member or friend. Is it the same? Let me give you but one test. Do you sing as loudly or as regularly alone in your living room as you sing surrounded by many other Christians here in God's house? If not, then I think you can see why God's people gather – to worship him.

But, there's a second reason why we gather – to gain hope. God's Word says: **Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful**. Hope is defined as wanting a certain thing to happen. And usually that hope is uncertain. I hope the Minnesota Vikings or Packers win this week. Al was diagnosed with cancer – I *hope* he gets better. Now that hope is optimistic, but nothing is guaranteed. Things don't always work the way we want in a broken world. Of course worldly hope is uncertain. The writer to the Hebrews says Christ offers us so much more. We "hope" in a God who has never let us down, not in this life nor the life to come. **God is faithful**. He has never broken a promise, never has and never will. God promises he will take care of us every single day even in the next pandemic. And He promises when we die, we go home to heaven ... for sure. Just as Jesus rose with a stronger, glorified body, so we will rise. That's real hope. And that's just what we need. When you really think about it, our faith is so fragile. It needs to be fed every week. It needs to be strengthened because life's battles and disappointments make us lose hope. The problem isn't with God, it's with us. How we need to do everything we can to feed that faith.

Now someone here might say: "but I can do that at home. I can study my Bible every day." To that I say, I sincerely hope you do. But, remember that Bible word:

“unswervingly.” In other words, hold super-tight and do everything we can to feed our faith. Think of it this way: if I really want to lose weight, I don’t just cut out a few carbs and eat more greens, I need to exercise too. I need to do sit-ups and walk, maybe even run – do all I can. It’s not an either ... or proposition. It’s both ... and. It’s like that with faith. It’s not just feeding my faith at home – it’s with other Christians. It’s both. Gathering together is different, it’s special, and it’s so worth it. And in a few minutes, we get to share the best meal ever together, heaven’s meal, Holy Communion. We stand side by side, and take Jesus’ body and blood together with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. We can’t exactly do that online. God’s People Gather to gain that hope.

And we gather to encourage one another. Our sermon reading closes with these words: ***24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*** A St. Paul’s member who struggles with anxiety or temptation doesn’t have to struggle alone. God gives us each other ... our congregation ... our family of believers to listen to each other, to stand next to each other, to perhaps smile at each other, to love one another. That can make the difference between continuing in the good fight of faith and a person just giving up. Sometimes it means saying an encouraging word to build each other up. Sometimes, it means holding us accountable even if we’d rather ignore sin. We need to ***spur one another on***. That’s what God’s people do. Let’s make it easier for each other to do that by taking a bit more time to talk to a person we don’t know. Maybe get our picture included in our photo directory even if we don’t like our picture taken so that others, especially our newer members, can get to know us – do whatever it takes.

Let me say it this clearly: online worship is good. But, I think you can agree that in-person worship is better. When I watched NFL stadiums last week on TV, I didn’t see many empty seats. People actually pay big bucks to get up close and personal with their football heroes. God bless them. And may God bless every single person who comes to St. Paul’s every week to give God the praise He deserves, to get their faith and hope strengthened, and to love one another. God’s People Gather. I pray I see you next week. God is worth it! Amen.