

10.6.2024 Trinity 19 (Ephesians 4:17-32)

I once heard a story about Satan calling a meeting of his demons, and in this meeting asking them for deceitful, clever ideas on how to prevent people from living the type of life that honors and glorifies God, a life marked by love for God and neighbor. When the meeting began and the question was asked, one demon stood and said, "I'll tell them there is no heaven." To which Satan replied, "No, that will never work. God has made them for Himself, and has placed in them a knowledge that there is life beyond their existence on the earth. The vast majority will never believe you." Then another demon stood and said, "I'll tell them there is no hell." Satan replied, "That won't work either. Every human has an innate sense of right and wrong, and knows that evil must be judged and defeated. They won't believe you either." Silence settled over the gathering until a demon at the back of the room stood and said, "I know, I'll tell them that there is no need to hurry," and Satan said, "Go."

One of the most effective strategies used against us by the enemy is the lie that there is no need to hurry. We can be sure that the devil will gladly concede the reality of heaven and hell, just as long as he can lure us into the false notion that we have plenty of time to choose heaven, to set both of our feet firmly on the path that directs our soul entirely toward God. Too often we live as if there's no need to hurry, but living that way contradicts what we observe and experience in this world on a daily basis. News stories continually present us with accounts of people whose last day on this earth came in a hurry, at a moment no one would've expected, and at times it is our own family members or friends that pass in the same unexpected way. Our daily personal experience echoes the truth proclaimed in the words of a medieval chant that states: "Life is short, and shortly it will end. Death comes quickly, and respects no one... To death we are hastening, let us refrain from sinning."

The enemy would have us believe the lie that there is no need to hurry, but time and again our own experience presents us with those unavoidable facts stated in that ancient chant: Life is short... Death comes quickly... To death we are hastening... Unavoidable facts that should lead us to "refrain from sinning." This message, to amend our lives, to turn away from sin and toward

the righteousness which flows from the holy Spirit of God is also presented in our Epistle today. In that passage, St. Paul doesn't tell us that we have plenty of time. Instead, he exhorts Christians to re-order our lives, to *"no longer walk as the Gentiles do... They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart"* (Ephesians 4:17-18).

The Christian life involves a radical re-ordering of our selves, our souls, and bodies. Again, in the words of the Epistle, we *"put off"* our old self which belongs to our former way of life, and we *"put on"* the new self, which is *"created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness"* (4:22-24). To *"put off"* the old way of life is to rid ourselves of those things that separate us from God and from one another. Paul lists examples such as *"bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking"* (4:31), saying, let these things be put away from you, along with every form of malice. We rid ourselves of the old, and we put on the new, as the Scripture states, being *"kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you"* (4:32).

Put off the old, put on the new, and do it now, because we know that our life is, as St. James states, *"a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away"* (James 4:14). The time to choose heaven completely is now. This is the day to set both of our feet firmly on the path that directs our soul entirely toward God, and the Bible is filled with the stories of saints who chose such immediate obedience. For example, when the Angel Gabriel said to the Blessed Virgin Mary, *"Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,"* Mary didn't hesitate. Instead she replied, *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word,"* and Gabriel departed (Luke 1:31-32; 38).

We could also look to the examples of the first disciples Jesus called. In Mark's Gospel account, we read about our Lord calling out to Simon, Andrew, James, and John. Mark tells us that Simon and Andrew, at His word, *"immediately left their nets and followed Him,"* and that James and John *"left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed*

Him” (Mark 1:16-20), or consider Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. His intent on that journey was to bring any Christians he found there back to Jerusalem as prisoners, but after hearing the voice of our Lord on his way to the city and being blinded, Paul was led to Damascus where he was met the disciple Ananias, regained his sight, was baptized, and *promptly* began “*to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, declaring, He is the Son of God*” (Acts 9:1-22).

These examples of immediate obedience weren’t written for the saints who set the examples, but rather, they were written and passed down to us for our benefit and instruction. They help us recognize that the time to choose heaven completely is now, and one of the best examples of such faithfulness comes from the man called the Father of Faith, Abraham. In the book of Genesis, God commanded Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. This is a familiar story, and we know that after Isaac was bound to an altar, and Abraham stretched out his hand to slay his son, that “*the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham... Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me*” (Genesis 22:11-12).

The example Abraham sets for us here is clearly one of complete obedience. Abraham kept nothing from God, and if we step back and consider the beginning of this passage, we realize it was not only complete, but immediate obedience. This story began with God saying to Abraham, “*Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you. So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey.... and went to the place of which God had told him*” (Genesis 22:2-3).

God said to Abraham, “*Take now your son...*” The enemy tells us that there is no need to hurry, but God’s command to Abraham is His command to us all, “*Take now...*” Take now, that which you value most in this life and place it on the altar. Take now - your family, your time, your money; your career, your hobbies, your comfortable life; your self, your soul, your body. Offer it all to God as a sacrifice. Follow the example of Abraham, the Father of Faith, rise *early in the morning*, take every good gift God has given you, and offer it

back to Him without delay.

The enemy would have us believe that there is no need to hurry, we all have plenty of time to choose heaven completely, but is that what you observe and experience in this world, or is it far more accurate to say that life is short and death comes quickly? Don't be deceived by the devil's schemes. Instead, follow the examples of the saints, and "*choose this day whom you will serve*" (Joshua 24:15).