

The Church of Heaven and Earth
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon Text: Hebrews 12:12-18, 22-25



Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;¹⁶ that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.¹⁷ For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest...²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to

Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.²⁵ See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused Him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject Him who warns from heaven.

The message of Jesus Christ is a professed faith that is directed outwards. Christians should be the light of the world and salt of the earth. That is our mission. And yet, there are clear texts from the Bible that are meant only for Christians. The text we read today is one for “insiders.” In this section of Hebrews, we find a text that was written explicitly for Christians who are on the path of faith. These Christians have not yet reached their goal and for this very reason, there is a danger that they could lose their way, become weak in their faith, or even fall away from the faith altogether. There is a danger that they will not reach the goal they are striving for. This is why the text begins with the admonition: “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees...” Not everyone who was once passionate in their faith sticks with it. The church is now facing the frightening experience of some turning away from the church. No one can say whether these people have completely lost their faith because only God can see into the heart of man.

The above painting by Albrecht Dürer was painted in 1511 and impressively illustrates today’s sermon text. In the center is Jesus on the cross, whom God the Father offered as a sacrifice for His church. To the left and right is the perfected Christian church, which is gathered around Christ. This church, around Jesus, is no longer on their journey of faith – they have reached their destination and are with God. Below is the church that has not yet been perfected, in other words, this is the church that is still on their journey of faith. During Dürer’s time, the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church were perceived as a threat. This is why the pope stands at the front in a show of his power, while the church under attack can be seen in the background. The people in the background appear weak and ineffective in comparison to the seemingly powerful pope. But Christ looks down on this church, He seems to keep a close eye on her. At the very top, the Holy Spirit is enthroned in the form of a dove. In this way, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit watch over the Church, which is still on its journey. It is not difficult to recognize ourselves in the church that is under attack. It is not only the church to which the letter to the Hebrews was addressed or to the church at the time of Martin Luther that is in danger. We too are in temptation and danger. The central beliefs on which the church is built are increasingly perceived as a foreign body. Not only in our society, but also in the church. Some Christians therefore feel uncomfortable as Christians. They feel that their faith is alienating and no longer relevant. Some may be tempted to give up their faith altogether. The letter to the Hebrews makes a comparison here with the story of Esau from the Old Testament. It is well-known that Esau sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup. He was not deceived but acted in full awareness. When he smelled the lentil soup, this soup became more important to him than anything else. Later, he tearfully regretted his actions but by then it was too late. We Christians could suffer a similar fate. Although Christ sees us and keeps us in His heart and within sight, we can’t see **Him**. In the

midst of the conflicts here on earth, we could quickly lose sight of Christ or even completely forget about Him. Other things could become more important. As Martin Luther said: "Where your heart is, there is your God." We must ask ourselves whether the image of Christ in our lives has become blurred or whether we are in danger of losing faith completely. The letter to the Hebrews wants to strengthen the early church and open its eyes so that it can clearly see the true God and His Son, Jesus Christ. How urgently do we also need the ability to recognize the bright light of the Gospel again despite our clouded eyes? We too are often disillusioned with the church, weakened in our faith, and tired so that we are quickly tempted to exchange our faith like an old coat for something else or to even sell it like Esau for a bowl of lentil soup. We don't always realize that the battle of faith doesn't take place in an isolated vacuum. The battlefield is a spiritual reality in which Satan and God fight against each other. It is therefore not possible for us to deny Christ and then be free. The space that Christ has filled is quickly taken over by Satan. We often present ourselves too idealistically and actually believe that we alone are responsible for everything and that the question of God must be resolved with pious deeds, or we create a heaven for ourselves in which all our personal wishes come true. In the proverbial sense, we have exchanged heaven for a bowl of soup! The letter to the Hebrews opens the clouded eyes of the congregation and does so by looking at Mount Sinai. Eyes and ears are opened by the harsh reality of God's Law because Mount Sinai was the place of God's holiness. Neither man nor animal could approach this mountain or even touch it. This mountain didn't represent God's commandments, but God Himself. God is holy. In Hebrew, the word "Kadosh" is translated as holy. This means that God is separate from the world and from us. There is no path that leads from man to God because humans are not holy by nature and would die if they approached the living God. For modern people, the idea of a holy God who punishes sin is hard to deal with because on the one hand, we don't see ourselves as sinners and on the other, we always imagine God as approachable and benevolent. But on Mount Sinai, another side of God is revealed to us: the unapproachable and incomprehensible side of God... His holiness. It is important that we never lose sight of this side of God because we can't dictate what God should be like. God made us, we didn't create Him! When our eyes are opened and we recognize the Holy God on Mount Sinai, we quickly understand why there are good reasons not to approach the Holy God because it is only at Mount Sinai that we realize that we are not holy. Our human history is filled with unspeakably horrible things that have happened and continue to happen around us. Even if we haven't personally committed these terrible atrocities, we can't pretend that we are immune to such things or that none of it concerns us. We must also not make the mistake of placing all the wickedness of the world upon the dictators of today in order to absolve ourselves from all wickedness. If we haven't committed such wickedness ourselves, we only have to go back in history a little to realize that murder, rape, robbery, and theft are part of every family's history and therefore also part of us. We are a part of evil and therefore separated from God. But God established His sanctuary on Mount Sinai and not only there, but also in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, God personally redeemed us from all our sins through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Where before, God's holiness was only on Mount Sinai, His holiness is now in all people who are in Jesus Christ. This means that we are ransomed and saved from wickedness and thus also separated from the influences of evil. From now on, we no longer belong to Satan but to God. If we look again at Albrecht's Dürer's painting, we see something remarkable: although the earthly church is still embroiled in strife and must contend with many weaknesses within and outside the church, the church is floating in the same cloud as those redeemed by God who stand by His side. This means that the act of our redemption has already happened. Jesus and His work for us is already signed and sealed and we already belong to the fellowship of the redeemed in heaven. This means that we as a church have a fixed goal in mind despite great danger – and that is Jesus. Through Him, we can approach the holiness of God. In history, the church has often been compared to a ship on the high seas. We sail through the sea of time, sometimes the waves are so high that it feels more like we're in an empty nutshell and not a ship. We are tossed to and fro by the waves and we don't know the way. Dürer's painting, however, shows a different picture. The safe harbor is not far away. Our Lord Jesus is firmly connected to us, even if we can't see it now. This makes it clear that we will only be able to complete this journey because we have God at our side. Amen.