

Sermon on Sunday of Invokavit Hebrews 4, 14-16



¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,^[1] Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Borders separate and connect at the same time. A state border not only defines territories but also laws that apply within the state. It protects and maintains identities and shows where responsibility begins and where it ends. Such state borders are uncompromising in nature and are often protected by soldiers and state power. Only those with a valid passport or visa are granted access. And many a person has stood fearfully in front of such a fence and asked themselves: "Will they let me in or do I have to stay outside?" Such a border or fence can decide whether a person has a future or not. Such a border can decide whether a person stays alive or not. And many a person has tragically died at such a border or on the way across such a border.

There is another border that is even more tragic than the closure of state borders. This is about the border between this world and the next; between heaven and hell; between eternal life and eternal death! And there is also a sign and an angel blocking the entrance. Because behind this border is God. Behind this border is everything other than our world. Also in stark contrast to us. And the angel with his sword is completely uncompromising. He looks at our passports and gives us a stamp: "Unworthy! Unworthy! Inadequate! There is no way forward here." The message that the angel conveys there is that none of us humans can come to God. We have neither the talent nor the means to approach God. That means that we must remain homeless forever. It means that we must remain separated from God forever. It means that we can never be truly happy. That is because we have become guilty. And yet it is the wish of every human being to finally get to where there is happiness, peace and paradise. There where all searching comes to an end. There where I can breathe a sigh of relief and say: This is where I am at home. Here life makes sense again. This is where I belong. I want to get in there! I want to go to this paradise!... Human experience teaches us that if you want something really good, you have to work for it. If you want to be a top athlete, you have to train for hours all your life. Achievement creates success and access. This is also the experience of every refugee in Europe. If you want to gain access here, you first have to risk your own life and find the dangerous route to Europe. Then you have to spend years applying for asylum; you have to learn the language; you may even have to take on a whole new training course with very hard, backbreaking work. Achievement creates access. This is simply how it is in every human area.

It is no wonder then that we humans come up with the idea that we have to work just as hard for heaven. To get the best place in the afterlife, you certainly have to do a lot of hard work here on earth. For example, you should practice prayer, reading the Bible, doing good works, giving up earthly pleasures so that things will be better in heaven. People who want to earn heaven through such hard, backbreaking work often become bitter, legalistic and grumpy. Because they never achieve success in the spiritual realm they do not love themselves. And they often feel

even less loved by God and separated from him... In the Old Testament, this separation between people and God was also clearly expressed by the temple in Jerusalem. The entire temple in Jerusalem was, by definition, a boundary between the sacred and the secular. Even within the temple there were boundaries. There were areas where women were not allowed to go, areas where disabled people and the sick were not allowed to go. Inside there was a sanctuary that was only accessible to a very few chosen priests. And then there was the Holy of Holies! Only the high priest could go there! And not always! Only once a year. And only this one time was the high priest finally allowed to utter the name of God. A high priest like this was a kind of mediator between people and God. The Latin word for high priest, "pontifex", actually means a bridge builder. What is meant is a bridge builder between people and God. This means that the high priest went into the Holy of Holies on behalf of the people. And uttered God's name on their behalf. He did that for everyone. Jesus Christ is also a high priest in the same way. What was presented in the Old Testament through the high priest, Jesus Christ put into practice. He really did build the bridge from heaven to earth and from God to man. And when he built the bridge from heaven to earth, he finally abolished the separation between man and God. Now we no longer need a holy place and a most holy place and a single priest who only provides access for us once a year. We can always go before God ourselves. We can even call him "Father" in prayer and believe that this Father is very close to us in everyday life. The Epistle to the Hebrews paints all of this clearly before our eyes! Jesus Christ has passed through the heavens! And we can follow him! Through him we can find meaning and a center for our lives. We can simply walk across the border of this life into heaven. Of course, that is a lofty, distant goal. Especially when you constantly have to stand in front of closed doors in this life too. How can anyone still believe that things will be better in heaven? The people to whom the Epistle to the Hebrews paints a clear picture of Christ could not see heaven either. As Christians, they were severely persecuted and oppressed. Many became tired and could no longer believe that heaven was wide open. Some could no longer believe that Christ was there and would give us access. Many Christians feel the same way today. What we see here on earth is not heaven, but rather a glimpse into the abysmal depths of hell. People who are killed, people who have to go hungry and no longer have any hope for the future. People who are constantly and repeatedly denied access to life. Even when you finally have the right to stay in Germany, most of the doors to education and work remain closed. How can anyone still believe in heaven? Every person, even the most deeply sunk, senses something of the beauty of an incredibly beautiful paradise in which we would like to be forever. Where everything is different. Christ shows us the way to this paradise. He knows our tiredness. He also knows our weak eyes, which, in the midst of our hopelessness, have such a hard time imagining heaven. In the Epistle to the Hebrews it says: He can sympathize. He knows all our suffering. He walked his path with us and in our place. Jesus not only understands something about heaven. He also understands something about our suffering and our hopelessness. Jesus also understands exactly what it means to be excluded. And not to be allowed to be part of society. He even understands the times when we have separated ourselves from God and feel that we can no longer be saved because sin separates us from God. Jesus understands all of this and gently takes us by the hand and shows us the way forward. The way into the open gate! The way into heaven, which He has opened for us! He shows us that He has long since removed the "No Entry!" sign. And tells us: You belong here. It is precisely for someone like you that I died on the cross and opened the gate to heaven again.

In the short verses from the Epistle to the Hebrews, God opens our eyes to heaven. This view allows us to see clearly what is important and what is unimportant. The Epistle to the Hebrews uses two words for this. The first is holding on to the confession of Jesus Christ. The second is approaching the throne of grace with confidence. Both images are important. The first is about

holding on. Holding on always implies a certain danger that we could let go or fall. That is why it is important that we assess the situation very soberly. Anyone who has seen the view of heaven from hell knows what is important! He is like a mountain climber who is stuck to the rock face with his ropes and hooks. Always looking upwards, every step and every movement is perfectly planned. Everything is secured with ropes and hooks. Our own strength is not enough. It must be secured again and again. With God's word, with communion with Christians who pray for us. All of this is expressed with the words: "hold fast to the confession of Jesus Christ!" Because we know that it is a matter of life and death. Because we know how good it is to be and stay with Jesus. Satan wants nothing more than to seduce us and distract us from Christ again. That is why we must not carelessly take this or that step at this point. Everything must be firm and secure. Without Jesus we are without security and do not want to take a single step without Him.

But the Epistle to the Hebrews gives us a second picture. This picture is completely different. We don't imagine ourselves as a mountain climber stuck to a wall. We approach with confidence and trust. **THEREFORE LET US APPROACH THE THRONE OF GRACE WITH CONFIDENCE**

Many people believe that God doesn't really hear them when they pray or that they don't deserve to be heard. This text sweeps all doubts off the table! Because of the throne of grace, heaven is open and closed and we can approach God in heaven! Therefore, we don't sit there in hopelessness and discouragement. We move forward. What drives us forward is Christ on his throne, who has conquered heaven for us. We can approach because Jesus is before us. There will be days when it will be dark around us. That's true. There will also always be days when we will experience rejection from others and feel that we are excluded. Sometimes doubts will haunt us and we will think that God has forgotten us too. On days like these, we can call out to Jesus all the more, worship him and call for help. And then we can walk across the border with complete confidence. From one world to the other. That's how God always intended it! Amen.