

ACTS 2:14a, 36-41
FAR OFF

This text starts in the middle of Peter's sermon. Some of you may like to do that, skip half the sermon. Well, today you got to do that, you missed the first half of Peter's sermon. In the part which we missed Peter had summarized the history of God's plan of salvation for the people of Israel. You might want to go back and read verses fourteen to thirty-five to see what you missed. In that missing section Peter talks about the coming of Jesus to be the Messiah, but He was rejected by His people.

Peter says to the people, "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves know — this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised Him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for Him to be held by it" (v's 22-24).

Of this statement that God raised Jesus from the dead Peter says that the apostles are all witnesses of this (v. 31). When it comes to witnesses of the resurrected Jesus, in our Easter Sunday reading we heard Paul list the eleven apostles, the other disciples, a group of over five hundred people, James the brother of Jesus and Paul himself. If these people whom Peter was speaking to had any doubts, there was a vast amount of witnesses whom they could question if this was in fact true that Jesus rose from the dead.

Yet, we don't have any questioning recorded here, but only that after they're told that they had a hand in crucifying their Messiah, whom they were waiting for, we hear that they were cut to the heart. They experienced a deeply troubling sickening feeling in their guts. They had it clearly pointed out to them that they had done something extremely awful, and they were sickened by the thoughts that now occupied them.

What were they to do? They asked that question. How could they handle the emotional turmoil that this preacher had inflicted upon them as their sins were exposed by the Law that was preached to them?

The answer seems so simple to us now, or maybe just to me, because I preach on this text quite often when it comes to talking about baptism. So let's try to look at this answer from another angle, and not focus so much on baptism. Yes, Peter mentions baptism, and so let's hear Peter's answer to their question of what to do now, and then try to set baptism aside.

"Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for

all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." (v's 38-40).

If Jesus of Nazareth was indeed their anointed Messiah, then no guilt could be greater than the guilt they felt for treating Him as they did. If they had refused Jesus in whom all their hopes of salvation rested, then what hope of salvation was left to them. It was right for them to cry out in anguish, "What are we to do now!?"

Repent. You've done something wrong. You realize it. So, turn away from the wrong you've done. There's a promise here, for with baptism comes the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit and being reconciled with God. But they might've asked if the promise was really for them who played a role in having Jesus crucified. You might ask if such promises are for you.

Peter tells them that it's for them, it's for you, and it's for their children, for your children. They still might think, no it's not for me, but maybe for my children; yes they may receive it. When the Israelites first refused to enter the Promised Land they weren't allowed to enter the Promised Land after they repented, but only their children could enter. The adults were kept far off from the Promised Land. They died outside of the Promised Land. Would that be their fate too, to die being kept outside of heaven after having killed their Messiah?

In no other congregation that I've served have I had as many people come to me doubting that they're going to heaven as I've had people talk to me in the short time that I've been here. It's like people are coming to me and asking, what shall I do. There's repentance. There has been a baptism. But still there's no trust in the promises of forgiveness. The hope of heaven isn't for them.

What can I say if the promises of baptism don't feel like they're for you. Maybe they're for your children, but then again maybe not, they don't even attend anymore. So let me agree with those who question their salvation. You're right these promises are not for you, or for you children. You're right your children have forsaken the church. They didn't crucify Jesus, but He did die for their sins and they've clearly rejected that by not coming to worship God. And what about you? You don't come every Sunday, but only when it's convenient to you. You don't help out in church in any way, but only come and then leave. You take part in no fellowship. Your offerings are menial or none existent, and God describes that as robbing God by withholding your offerings (Malachi 3:8). Why should you have any hope of salvation?

Now, remember Peter said this promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.

Far off is not only in distance on the planet, as in someone who lives far away from a church. Nor is far off in time as in us living 2000 years later in a different culture. But far off can also refer to those who are far off in understanding of God. This promise is for you who are far off in your understanding about God and questioning your salvation. The Lord God called you to Himself here today to hear His Holy Word, to hear His forgiveness of your sins, and to receive His Holy Spirit. You've been made a part of the family of God, part of this family of Grace Lutheran Church.

We're all far off from God in our own individual ways. It may just be distance in that you have to drive the longest to get here. Or it may be in more serious matters. You may feel a spiritual distance from God. Your prayer life may be blah or none existent. You prayed, but you didn't feel any connection with God, so you gave that up. You tried family devotions, but members of your family didn't seem interested, or it felt fake to you, so you gave that up too.

Far off also comes in other serious ways such as sin. The Bible has many words and descriptions for sin, and one of them is "missing the mark" in that you shot for the bull's eye, but you hit the wall. You missed the mark, you were far off from doing what God wanted you to do. You may have terrible sins hanging over your head, and such a promise of forgiveness is hard to grasp. How do you face your guilt and that feeling of being far off from God?

How do you get closer to God, to where you wish to be with Him, to where God wants you to be, and doing some sort of service for God? Listen again to Peter's words. After he said "all who are far off", he says, "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself." God calls you. He called you when you first heard His Holy Word. He called you in your baptism. He calls you to come to church in many and various ways, and they worked on you who are here today. Here He tells you that you are forgiven. Through His Holy Word He tells you that through Jesus crucified and risen for you, you have the hope of eternal life.

God calls you through His Holy Word to come to Him, and when you come and receive that Word and believe the promises in that Word you are saved. About three thousand who heard God's Word that day were saved. So it's possible for you too.

If you're baptized and believe, and trust in this promise that your sins are forgiven through Christ Jesus, and God has given you the gift of the Holy Spirit, then you're saved. If you haven't yet been baptized, then God is calling you and your children to be baptized. Receive this promise and add your soul to those who are being saved by God's continuous call to those both near here today, and those who are far off and away. Amen.