

I.N.I.

First Sunday in Lent
February 17, 2010
Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

In Christ Jesus, Who is made known to us through His Word, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Have you ever thought about how many promises you have made in your lifetime—big ones and little ones. As children we promise to be good; to pick up our clothes and keep our room clean; to not fight with brother or sister; to come home right after school. As adults we promise not to be late; to help out around the house; to get more organized; to be more patient and more understanding with our children; to spend more time with our spouse. We make so many promises everyday that it is hard to take them seriously. Maybe that is why so many people don't believe politicians—they make so many promises!

Our text this morning speaks of the vows and promises we make before our God. It speaks of how seriously we are to look upon them. Our life is so filled with broken promises that very often we aren't even surprised anymore if promises made to us or by us fall by the wayside. In the past 20-30 years as a society I believe we have lost the sanctity of marriage and the sanctity of life. We have lost the respect for those in authority and we have lost the importance of being able to take people at their word.

There are not many absolutes anymore. Such values as honesty, integrity, dependability, trustworthiness seem to have gone the way of the rotary phone and the record player. Those kinds of values just don't seem to work in the business and political world of today. And one of the reasons why is because God and worship of God has become so unreal. Many people will say such things as "God bless you," or "God bless America" and they have no real idea of what they are talking about.

Much like the super heroes our children watch on TV or in the movies, it is fun to fantasize about them, or even pretend to be them but in the real live world they just don't exist. I'm afraid that Jesus and God the Creator and the Bible stories are looked upon in much the same way. It's nice to speak of such powerful beings, of such wonderful stories and beautiful promises; it's nice to fantasize about them on a Sunday morning but in the real life world do they exist; do they really matter; or make a difference or apply to one's life?

For many people the only real things in this world are the things that they can see and touch. Things they can use, eat, work with or play with. Things like faith, prayer, and worship are nebulous, non-entities. And very often we can fall into the same kind of thinking.

From our text this morning we need to ask ourselves the question:

HOW REAL IS OUR WORSHIP?

I: DO WE COME READY TO HEAR?

How many of you watched your step as you came into church this morning? I'm not talking about making sure you didn't slip on the snow or ice, or stub your toe on a step; I mean how many of you took the time this morning to think about and ask yourself why you are here; what you will be doing?

That's the first admonition from Solomon to us this morning. He writes: **WALK PRUDENTLY WHEN YOU GO TO THE HOUSE OF GOD.** Another translation is: **GUARD YOUR STEPS WHEN YOU GO TO THE HOUSE OF GOD.** Literally the Hebrew reads: Watch your steps like one who is walking along a rocky path or a steep cliff. In other words stay alert as you walk along. If you walk carelessly you may injure yourself or worse yet plummet to your death.

So also Solomon says when you enter the House of God do so with care. For if we enter God's house with a mechanical, formal, empty, careless, meaningless ritual response in our worship then we too will injure ourselves spiritually or worse yet plummet our souls into eternal destruction. How easily we fall into formal worship with the mouth and lips but no heart. How easily we allow our heart and mind to drift away from what is being read or said or sung. How easily we fall into a half slumber without really listening carefully and worshiping fervently. The Apostle echoes these same words of Solomon in Heb. 2:1 when he wrote: **WE MUST PAY MORE CAREFUL ATTENTION, THEREFORE, TO WHAT WE HAVE HEARD, SO THAT WE DO NOT DRIFT AWAY.**

So the Lord through Solomon says to all of us worshippers this morning: "Watch yourselves, keep alert, stay awake, don't let your thoughts stray and **DRAW NEAR TO HEAR RATHER THAN TO GIVE THE SACRIFICE OF FOOLS.**"

Yes, that is the most important reason for our coming to the House of God: **TO HEAR HIS WORD---**to receive with believing hearts the message of salvation; to have the Law applied to our proud and selfish hearts to condemn them and to lead us to repentant sorrow and then to have the beautiful Gospel message lead us to a confident trust in Jesus Christ for full and free forgiveness of all of our sins.

What is the "sacrifice of fools?" To the Hebrews a fool was not someone lacking in intelligence, but a person lacking in morals and a right relationship with God. If we come to God's House with only our bodies, going through the motions of standing up and sitting down; of responding with our lips and speaking from our mouths, the Lord says we are offering the sacrifice of fools. That is thoughtless worship which is hypocritical worship. Worship of the lips and mouth, mere formalism of going through the motions of worship is the way of the fool. The fool is one who believes that God can see no further than the outward deed and not the heart. Just being here on a Sunday morning does no good; just sitting in the pews means nothing. Are the words getting into the heart? Is the heart responding to the Word? For our God sees into our hearts. All is laid bare before Him. Paul says in Romans 10:17: **SO THEN FAITH COMES BY HEARING, AND HEARING BY THE WORD OF GOD.** Jesus said in Luke 11:28: **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD AND KEEP IT!**

Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews of His day; many of whom followed Him very religiously from place to place: **THESE PEOPLE DRAW NEAR TO ME WITH THEIR MOUTH, AND HONOR ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME. AND IN VAIN THEY WORSHIP ME...** And that is the call word of this book---**VANITY!** The word means empty, useless, futile. Everything in this world without a heart knowledge of Jesus Christ is useless, futile, empty and in vain.

So also a heartless worship of God; just coming and sitting in the pews; letting our minds wander miles away and think on hundreds of other subjects; letting our eyes look around at everyone's clothes; and our mouths recite words is useless. Then we may as well have stayed home.

Solomon says: **DO NOT BE RASH WITH YOUR MOUTH, AND LET NOT YOUR HEART UTTER ANYTHING HASTILY BEFORE GOD. FOR GOD IS IN HEAVEN, AND YOU ON EARTH; THEREFORE LET YOUR WORDS BE FEW. FOR A FOOL'S VOICE IS KNOWN BY HIS MANY WORDS.**

The tendency to say too much and to say words without thinking are marks of the fool. Don't be so quick to speak in thoughtless prayer or sing a hymn from the lungs but not from the heart. Prayer demands the thoughts of the heart—an attitude of humble meditation. One man wrote: *The words of our mouth in worship to God must be the product of the meditation of our heart.*

Thoughts are words to God, and words are but the wind if they do not come from the thoughts. Lip labor, no matter how loud, long, or sincere sounding, if not from the heart is lost labor.

The fool believes that the efficacy of his prayer depends on the amount of words used. The longer the prayer, the more words spoken the more effectual it will be. What does Jesus say? **AND WHEN YOU PRAY, DO NOT USE VAIN REPETITIONS AS THE HEATHEN DO. FOR THEY THINK THAT THEY WILL BE HEARD FOR THEIR MANY WORDS.** Instead Jesus says our prayers should be from a heart of faith: **THEREFORE I SAY TO YOU, WHATEVER THINGS YOU ASK WHEN YOU PRAY, BELIEVE THAT YOU RECEIVE THEM, AND YOU WILL HAVE THEM.**

We need to remember as Solomon writes: **FOR GOD IS IN HEAVEN, AND YOU ON EARTH.** God is holy, almighty, all-knowing. We can approach Him only through the mediation of His Son our Savior Jesus Christ. and when we do we can do so only with proper respect, awe, reverence, what Scripture calls FEAR!

Do we approach God's house with such reverence? Do we look upon God's Word as holy ground? If we do not we will probably take it for granted, treat it with little respect, worship God thoughtlessly, and appear in His house irregularly and more often than not offer up the sacrifice of fools. We have the Means of Grace which we dispense every Sunday—the Gospel in Word and in the Sacraments. What a blessing! How we should thank God for this and fearfully approach His powerful Word.

A second part to our question this morning-- **HOW REAL IS OUR WORSHIP?—is**

II: ARE OUR VOWS BEING FULFILLED?

Solomon declares in vs. 4-7: **WHEN YOU MAKE A VOW TO GOD, DO NOT DELAY TO PAY IT; FOR HE HAS NO PLEASURE IN FOOLS. PAY WHAT YOU HAVE VOWED -- BETTER NOT TO VOW THAN TO VOW AND NOT PAY. DO NOT LET YOUR MOUTH CAUSE YOUR FLESH TO SIN, NOR SAY BEFORE THE MESSENGER OF GOD THAT IT WAS AN ERROR. WHY SHOULD GOD BE ANGRY AT YOUR EXCUSE AND DESTROY THE WORK OF YOUR HANDS? FOR IN THE MULTITUDE OF DREAMS AND MANY WORDS THERE IS ALSO VANITY. BUT FEAR GOD.**

For the Old Testament people vows were optional. It's the same today. We don't have to make promises. But if we do, we should be serious about them. At our confirmation we vowed "to remain faithful to Christ and to His Word even unto death. Those of us who are married vowed to remain faithful to our spouse till death parts us. As a minister of God's Word I vowed to teach and preach that Word in its truth and purity and faithfully perform my duties as a called pastor. You Church Council members promised to serve the Lord and His Church faithfully in your respective offices. You Sunday School teachers promised to work hard in your calling to teach the Lord's little lambs His Word. These are serious promises before God. They are not just so many empty words to be forgotten like last night's dreams. Solomon says, fulfill them!

A vow made but not fulfilled in God's eyes is abominable. That is why Solomon also writes: **BETTER NOT TO VOW THAN TO VOW AND NOT PAY.** Our ability to remain faithful to our vows does not depend upon us, but upon our Lord. We are sinful human beings, whose nature is to break promises, to not keep our word. But God is faithful. He has never broken any promise He has made. Therefore we also include in our vows—"with the help of God and by the grace of God." Solomon says: **FEAR GOD.** Stand in awe of God. Look to Him for the strength, the ability to be faithful to your vows. Our Lord not only forgives us for our many sins, but He also in His Word gives us the strength to stand and fulfill the vows we have made.

The greatest promise God ever gave to us sinners was given to Adam and Eve after they had sinned. God vowed that He would send His Son to come and crush Satan's power and authority over us. And He did. Jesus was sent to this earth as the God/Man who took our place and lived a perfect life for us and then was sacrificed on the cross for us. That fulfillment is the Gospel we preach and the Gospel that forgives us and motivates us to keep our vows that we have made to God out of love and thankfulness for all that He has done for us.

May we all watch our steps and walk prudently today and everyday as we enter into this House of God. May we be ready to hear--with our hearts--His Word in Bible Class, Sunday School and Church. May we respond to our Lord's Words with truly repentant, humble hearts, praying and singing words that come from our hearts of faith. Then our worship will not be one of habit or routine, just saying words, but will be out of conviction, from the heart testifying to our own sinfulness and to the need of forgiveness and declaring that wondrous salvation that we have through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Amen.