

**+ Hebrews 10:19-25 + Series: Why Are We Here? + Theme: ...To Connect People to God +
+ 18th Sunday after Pentecost + 18 September 2016 +**

Back in 1975, when our congregation held its first service and our first mission efforts began in the greater Syracuse area, a simple question was on hearts and minds, "Why do we need to be here?" In 1981, when we dedicated our original facility, another simple question was on hearts and minds, "Why are we here at this location?" In 1995, when the Lord allowed our decade-long vacancy to begin, yet another simple question was on hearts and minds, "Can we still be here?" In 2005, when our mission restarted, we started asking an old question yet again, "Why do we need to be here?" In 2015, when the Lord enabled us to dedicate this beautiful facility, we started asking ourselves a different question—"Now what?" We're still asking it. To start answering that question we need to consider this question, "Why are we here?" Why does Cross of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Liverpool, NY exist?

Could you answer that question? How well do you understand why this congregation exists? What is our God-given purpose and mission? Starting this morning, we're going to take a closer look at five Scriptural reasons why we're here, what our God has given us to do, and why we do it. This morning through the eyes of the writer to the Hebrews, let's take a closer look at the first big reason we're here: **...TO CONNECT PEOPLE TO GOD.**

Some years back we described that one big reason this way, ***"We are here to connect people to God their Savior, through the faithful use of the Gospel in Word and Sacraments, by which we are able to bring him glory in all we do."*** Now you could say that that sounds like a general statement that could describe much of what we do as a congregation, but where do we typically connect with our God through the faithful use of his Gospel in Word and Sacraments? Don't think too hard. You're involved in it right now. It's worship.

...But what is worship? Is it just coming to church on Sunday mornings to stand up and sit down, sing some hymns, offer some prayers, hear a sermon, and receive the Lord's Supper? While almost all of that plays an important role in our weekly worship lives, there's even more to worship. Is it simply praising God and glorifying his name? Praising God is one important component of our worship lives, but there are several others. So how are we able to worship? Why do we gather for worship? What happens when we worship and what results from it? The writer to the Hebrew Christians has much to tell us!

What worship is and why it matters so much starts with a look at the past. ***"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body..."*** When our first parents fell into sin, an unmeasurably big, impossibly thick wall went up between people and God. That barrier is called God's holy Law. It blocks anyone who disobeys God's Law in word, thought, or action even in the slightest way. It prevents everyone from connecting with God as he intended it back when he created our world. Before the fall into sin, God had a perfect relationship with humanity, but sin led to the creation of that impossible barrier, which continues to bar you and me and every sinner from the presence of God in his holiness. In fact, sin separates us from our God and can even separate us from his love for all eternity in hell. What makes it worse is that you can't just decide, "I'm going to connect with God today," and walk through that barrier. You can't get on your knees and pray so hard that the barrier opens up for you. All human efforts fail to open that barrier between us and God.

Yet Someone opened the way for us through that barrier! One came who lived a perfect life in every thought, every word, every action. One came who willingly gave up his life and allowed his blood to be shed to break through the barrier for us. His body and blood opened ***"a new and living way"*** to the true God. Jesus opened that way to connect each of us with God and to keep that way open for us forever.

The writer tells us that we have ***"a great priest over the house of God..."*** The One who opened the way for us is our great High Priest who loves and cares for each and every one of us, who is deeply concerned about your soul and mine. He calls each of us to repent of our sins, to turn from those sins and live, and then he says, "Here, I shed my blood for you. Your sins are forgiven. If you don't believe me, look at the nail prints in my hands and feet and the spear mark in my side."

Though you and I don't deserve it, Jesus steps in between us and the holy God. He serves as your Mediator. He speaks on my behalf. Though our prayers and pleas deserve to be rejected by God, Jesus says, "Here's my life. Here's my death. It's okay to listen to them because I have made them your own." Jesus watches over us. He watches over your coming and going. He strengthens your faith and then he gives life to your soul with precious gifts of grace that only he can give.

...And what tremendous gifts our God gives! The writer tells us, ***“...Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”*** Jesus provides his own forgiving food. With his own body and blood, he nourishes your soul. He takes away the guilt of your sins. He strengthens your faith. He assures you that heaven is yours and gives you the strength to keep going with the struggle that you face daily from your sinful nature and the world around you. At the Lord’s Table, Jesus feeds your soul with the life-giving, forgiveness-bestowing food of himself, but before that, he had to cleanse your soul.

The writer here speaks of Holy Baptism. He speaks of guilty consciences cleansed of all their guilt, of ***“bodies washed with pure water.”*** At the font, babies and children and teens and adults are brought to the Savior’s waiting arms. At the font, the Lord with cleansing waters forgives your sin, transforms sinners into sons and daughters, and raises us to new life.

So where does Jesus do all of this? Where do you and I receive these precious gifts of our God? In worship! When you and I gather for worship, God comes to us through his Word and Sacraments. He comes to us so you and I can enjoy his gifts of grace, gifts that are ours because Jesus, our great High Priest, opened the way for us to be connected with our God and welcomed into his family. Is it any wonder why every worship service focuses on the Gospel—the good news of our Savior Jesus—or why the Gospel in Word and Sacraments is not just the guiding principle in the design of our sanctuary, but the beating heart of our worship lives as a congregation?

...But we don’t just come together for worship to hear what our God has done through Jesus! When we hear the Gospel proclaimed through the lessons and the sermon and the liturgy each week, when we recall the Gospel as we see the baptismal font each week, when we touch and taste the Gospel as Jesus gives us himself in his Supper, that has a transforming impact on your life and mine week after week. It’s not just a one-way street in worship, but the Gospel is the cause that has effects in our lives! The writer tells us, ***“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another...”***

A healthy worship life that focuses on the faithful use of the Gospel in Word and Sacraments results in praise and encouragement. Your heart made clean with Christ’s forgiveness fills up with thanksgiving for what he has done—and it results in praise. The Apostle Paul wrote about that to the Christians in Colosse. ***“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”*** (Colossians 3:16) You respond with joy and relief, with thanksgiving and gratitude because you have been cleansed. You have been fed. You have been forgiven. Is it any wonder why the Christian church’s most beautiful songs are often songs of praise that rejoice in God our Savior, that glorify his saving name and recount the great things he has done! The praise and prayers of God’s people go hand in hand with the faithful use of the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. When we recall what our God has done, we rejoice!

...But worship isn’t just about praising. If that were the case, our worship would soon become all about what “I” am doing or what “I” have done or what “I” will do for God. No, worship focused on the Gospel in Word and Sacraments gets you to think outside of yourself towards those around you. That’s what the writer is talking about when he says, ***“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”***

When we gather for worship, there’s comfort for the grieving, help for the struggling, and encouragement for the straying. Why? Jesus has made us members of his family. He has made us sons and daughters of the king, not slaves, not servants, not distant cousins, but sons and daughters. That impacts who we are. God provides that family for you when you grieve the loss of a loved one or when you struggle with whatever happens to be going on in your life as Satan and your sinful nature and the sinful world do everything they can to tear you away from this beloved family that God has given to us.

...But it’s so tempting to hit the snooze button and go back to sleep on a Sunday morning, isn’t it? Why get up on a Sunday morning for worship? In worship we gather around God’s Word and Sacraments. In worship we are equipped to serve. In worship we are encouraged with the Gospel so we can go out to the personal mission fields in which our Lord has placed us. We go out to glorify our God in the unique callings he has given

each of us in the home, in society, and in the church. That's why we meet here week in and week out until Christ returns or calls us home.

In the end, God wants us to gather for worship until he returns. He wants us to gather around his Word and Baptism and the Supper. He wants us to come together as a congregation week in and week out so we can mutually encourage each other, even as he builds and strengthen us with his Gospel. Like keeping your car filled up with fuel, in worship our God refills our spiritual tanks again and again with the Gospel.

So why are we here? Don't come because that's what you do on Sundays when you plop down in our comfortable chairs. No, we are here to connect people to God our Savior and to be connected to him through the faithful use of his Gospel in Word and Sacraments, by which we glorify him in all we do. We are here to worship our Savior-God, to be fed by him, to praise him, and to be equipped to serve him. May we never forget that! Amen.