

## ***Take the Right Hat when You Leave Church***

**Hebrews 12:18-24**

### ***A sermon for a church anniversary***

Men don't wear hats as much as they used to, but I trust you'll appreciate this humorous account of Mark Twain's hat being taken by mistake. This comes from a speech Twain gave in London in 1899.

“Yesterday I was at a luncheon party. At the end of the party a great dignitary of the English Established Church went away half an hour before anybody else and carried off my hat. Now, that was an innocent act on his part. He went out first and, of course, had the choice of hats. As a rule I try to get out first myself. But I hold that it was an innocent, unconscious act, due, perhaps, to heredity. He was thinking about ecclesiastical matters, and when a man is in that condition of mind he will take anybody's hat. The result was that the whole afternoon I was under the influence of his clerical hat and could not tell a lie. Of course, he was hard at it.”

Whose influence will you be under this week? Are you going to take the right hat with you today when you leave church? In Ephesians 6:17 St. Paul talks about taking the helmet of salvation. Helmets, hats...it's figurative language, picture language that comes down to this: Do you go out from here determined to live a life that is consistent with your Christian profession? As someone once and famously put it, if you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Will you take the right “hat” when you leave church today?

During my first go around as a seminary professor I had a student of whom I am immensely proud. Rev. William Metzger is a caring pastor and a great preacher. He told me a story once about some members of his church in Minnesota. It seems that the local cable company offered to broadcast each week's worship service at a later time during the week. A good opportunity and, best of all, this was offered free of charge. No problem, right? Well, there was a problem. Some men in the congregation were opposed to broadcasting the service. Pastor Metzger couldn't figure out why they were opposed to such an opportunity. So he did a little talking around and found out that the men who objected didn't want other people in town to know that they went to church. They were under the influence of the world, not of the Gospel. In our picture language, they were not leaving church with the right hat.

Were you wearing the right hat this past week? Let's take a minute, literally 60 seconds, to reflect in silence about some times this past week when you were not under the influence of the Gospel....

To repeat Mark Twain again, “The result was that the whole afternoon I was under the influence of his clerical hat and could not tell a lie. Of course, he was hard at

it.” Then Twain said something that strikes me as full of truth. “It is a compliment to both of us. His hat fitted me exactly; my hat fitted him exactly.” The truth is that the world’s “hat” often seems more fitting to us than the precepts of our religion. We don’t always let ourselves be under the influence by the Gospel. Many times we don’t even think of the truths of our faith during the business and busyness of the week. Many times we’re not only “in” the world; we are also “of” the world. Martin Luther called it “simul justus et peccator,” saint and sinner at the same time. In this piece of haberdashery homiletics, I’m saying that you and I don’t always wear the “helmet of salvation,” we don’t always “wear the right hat” when we leave church.

That’s why the letter to the Hebrews was written. We don’t know who wrote it. Scholars are not precisely sure where these “Hebrews” lived. We do know that they were facing a serious case of the same problem I’ve been talking about, waffling in our weekly commitment to the Christian faith. Here’s how the author encouraged them “to wear the right hat” during the week. He told them, “Remember where you have come.”

“You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

Let’s apply that to you and to me. We have come “to the city of the living God.” Biblical scholar George Buchanan has researched and found that biblical expression “living God” often refers to “a wrathful, militant deity.” So you have not just come before a placid God. You a sinner have come before the “judge of all.” In this church you are before His tribunal.

You have come “to Mount Zion...to the heavenly Jerusalem.” Ah, some encouragement here. The writer does not say that you have come to Mount Sinai, to that place where God gave the commandments. Nothing wrong with the commandments, of course, but the sin that is born in us breaks those commandments. Hence we feel guilt and anger; we experience alienation and death. But here in this tribunal God forgives. You have not come to Mount Sinai but to Mount Zion.

You have come to the spirits of righteous men made perfect. We know each other’s faults but when you look at the people around you, remember that their sins have been forgiven. Believe that yours have been forgiven too, whether others know it or not.

You have come to the church of the firstborn. In biblical times the firstborn was the special heir. Whatever your earthly birth-order, your birth in Baptism makes each one of you an heir of great promises from God.

You have come to thousands of thousands of angels in joyful assembly. Do you see them? Of course not, but they’re here and they’re wherever God’s people worship.

You have come to those whose names are written in heaven. Ashamed of what people might think of you? Ashamed of your membership in the church? Why? Your names are written in heaven!

And the crux of the whole matter is this: You have come to “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood.” As Luther says, “The Holy Spirit has called (you) by the Gospel.”

“You have come; you have come, you have come” echoes throughout this passage. And so the best way for you to take the right “hat” into your weekly life, the best way to go forth with the “helmet of salvation,” is to remember what happens at this place to which you return week after week after week.

*Ashamed of Jesus? Yes, I may  
When I've no guilt to wash away,  
No tear to wipe, no good to crave,  
No fear to quell, no soul to save.*

*Jesus! And shall it ever be,  
A mortal man ashamed of Thee?  
Ashamed of Thee, whom angels praise,  
Whose glories shine through endless days? (The Lutheran Hymnal 346)*

I tell my students that reading long quotations from the pulpit does not make for the best communication. Well, I'm going to break my rule. Here's a long quotation from the famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth. “On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to happen. How strong this expectancy is in the people who are interested, or even whether there are any people whatever who consciously cherish it, is not our question now. Expectancy is inherent in the whole situation.

“Here is an ancient and venerable institution, capable of change and yet constant, ancient and usually modern as well (though it does not like either word), often and severely attacked from outside and still more often and more severely compromised from within, but possessed of an inexhaustible ability to live or at least to exist... Here is a building, old or new, of which the very architecture, even apart from the symbols, paintings, and appointments which adorn it, betrays the fact that it is thought of as a place of extraordinary doings. Here are people, only two or three, or perhaps even a few hundred, who, impelled by a strange instinct or will, stream toward this building, where they seek – what? Satisfaction of an old habit? But whence came this old habit? Entertainment and instruction? Very strange entertainment and instruction it is! Edification? So they say, but what is edification? Do they know? Do they really know at all why they are here? In any case, here they are....

“And here above all is a man, upon whom the expectation of the apparently imminent event seems to rest in a special way... And now before the congregation and for the congregation he will pray – you note: pray – to God! He will open the Bible and read from it words of infinite import, words that refer, all of them, to God. And then he will enter the pulpit and – here is daring! – preach.... And then the man will have the congregation sing ancient songs full of weighty and weird memories, struggles, and triumphs of the long departed fathers, all leading to the edge of an immeasurable event, all, whether the minister and people understand what they are singing or not, full of reminiscences of God, always of God. “God is present!” God is present. The whole situation witnesses, cries, simply shouts of it, even when in minister or people there arises questioning, wretchedness, or despair. Then perhaps it is witnessed to best of all – better than when the real problem is obscured or concealed by abundant human success.” (ALPB IV, 423f.)

As I said, that is a long quotation, longer than I would normally suggest using, but don't Barth's words describe you. For whatever reasons, you have come. You have come to the living God, to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to this fellowship of forgiven and holy people and joyful angels. So when you leave today, take the right “hat” with you into the new week. “O Lamb of God, I come, I come.” Amen.