

"The Challenge of Tradition"

Text: 2 Kings 17:6-14

God grant *not* that we prepare to receive the Christ Child into our hearts on Christmas Day, for surely he resides there even now, but that the Savior we now have might never leave – and that we might thereby be fully prepared for his bodily return when he comes to judge the living and the dead. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians: Tradition can be a tricky thing. G. K. Chesterton once wrote, *"Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."* Yet Chesterton also recognized the challenge of tradition, since he also wrote: *"Don't ever take a fence down until you know the reason why it was put up."*

That's the challenge of tradition. Not every old way is the best way, or for that matter even a good way, but never dismiss the old way until you are sure you fully understand the "why" of it. Clinging to tradition in ignorance is formalism, and the danger with formalism is that it causes us to focus on the external (the "forms") to the exclusion of the internal. Formalism tells us to put lights on our Christmas trees without understanding that they symbolize Christ, the Light that entered our sin-darkened world on Christmas Day. Formalism tells us to set up Advent wreaths without understanding what each of the candles signifies. Formalism tells us to do what our forefathers did – without the understanding that once gave meaning to their actions.

The challenge of tradition is made all the more urgent when we recognize that some things *must* change, while others never should. While this is important in our day-to-day lives, it is absolutely critical to remember in our faith lives.

Our text for this morning will illustrate the problem, and thereby also the importance that we get this right. That text is found in the Book of 2 Kings, the 17th Chapter:

ESV **(2 Ki. 17:6-14)** *In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. ⁷ And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods ⁸ and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. ⁹ And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified*

city. ¹⁰ They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, ¹¹ and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, ¹² and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this." ¹³ Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets." ¹⁴ But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.

These are God's Words – the sure, certain, verbally inspired words of our God. May that same Holy Spirit who gave us these words work powerfully in our hearts as we study them this morning. To that end we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"** Amen.

Remember, first of all, that we are participants here, not spectators. These words are not only historically accurate, describing things that actually happened long ago, they were recorded and preserved as tools to be used by each one of us. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:6-12: ***Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." ⁸ We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."***

When you fit all of this under the tent that is tradition, you can see the problem, the challenge. At the time our text was written, the Twelve Tribes had already been divided for some time. The northern Ten Tribes called themselves Israel, and they had long before embraced syncretism.

Don't be intimidated by that word, by the way. It represents something to be feared, but like a deadly snake that is loose in the nursery, we need to grab hold of it, subdue it, and master it, for syncretism is the deadliest killer of Christians around the world. It is not just what was killing people back then; it is exactly what is destroying so many Christians today.

Syncretism comes from a compound Greek word that means, literally, *"with Cretans."* A Cretan was an inhabitant of the Island of Crete. You will

recall what Paul, quoting a Cretan writer, said in 1 Titus 1: **"One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, 'Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.'**" Originally then the word referred to any ill-advised joining with Cretans. Today it refers (in the context of religion) to any attempt to combine different religions, or to pick and choose components from various religions to create your own hybrid belief system. That is exactly what the Jews did back then, and it is exactly what Christians are doing today. The result is *always and only* spiritually catastrophic.

Our text tells us what happened to the Northern Ten Tribes of Israel: they were annihilated by the Assyrians. The people that were once part of God's chosen nation ceased to exist. Every single Christian should want to know why, should be intensely interested in learning what happened so that the same thing never happens to us. What "happened" was syncretism. The Jews didn't just cast off the God that had formed them, brought them out of Egypt, performed countless miracles before their eyes, and established them in their own land. They *added* other gods, other religious practices. They had built temples to the true God in Dan and Bethel, but they also then built worship sites to the pagan idols of the people that were there before them. It was as if they reasoned that if one God was good, many gods would be even better. Once those other worship sites were erected, the worship of those gods became tradition. You get the problem. Idol worship quickly morphed from something obviously wicked into "the customs of our fathers." The pure evil was painted over by their love and respect for their parents and grandparents. *"If it was good enough for mom and dad, grandma and grandpa..."*

God in his Word was not and is not ambiguous as to just what he thinks about syncretism. He hates it, and he rejects all who embrace it (Cf. the Northern Tribes of Israel). Fast forward to the years following Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Evil men known as Judaizers infiltrated Christian congregations. They didn't promote the idea that Jesus had to be rejected; they claimed that more had to be added – like Old Testament rituals, including circumcision. They proclaimed the superior wisdom of syncretism – a little of this and a little of that and you will get it just right. God the Holy Spirit's reaction, recorded in Paul's Letter to the Galatians? **Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.** (Gal. 5:2-4 ESV) Adding to God's Word, adding anything at all to Christ crucified and grace, doesn't improve it, it destroys it.

Fast forward two thousand years to today. What do you see? Exactly the same thing. You need to learn to recognize it every time someone famous talks about *"the great religions of the world,"* every time someone promotes *"many paths to the same God,"* every time someone picks out certain

elements of the Christian faith and combines them with other spiritual beliefs to form their own hybrid religion. All of it is syncretism.

And the sugar that makes this whole bile of syncretism palatable is the false sweetness of wisdom and tolerance in the short term and tradition in the long. In other words, syncretism is sold to those who want to be wise, kind, and inclusive, and then passed down to future generations by tradition. To put it another way, syncretism really only has to be sold once, since from that point on it is inherited.

Is that really a problem today? Clearly it is. Many of you know from bitter personal experience just how hard it is to tell someone that you love and respect that they are wrong. You know how difficult it is to evaluate for yourself the belief system that your parents and grandparents passed down to you. Worse still is the apparent harmlessness that often masks evil. Yet go back to our text for a bit. Do you suppose that anyone walked up to the Jews and said, *"Here, this is evil in the sight of your God – pure poison that will condemn your soul to hell for all eternity. Do you want some?"* The evil was marketed as a harmless add-on, as a new and improved upgrade that is perfectly compatible with your old operating system. And, again, once sold, it was passed down or inherited. It became "harmless tradition."

So we ask again: Do we have anything like that today? Santa Claus comes to mind, as does dressing up like a witch or devil on Halloween. The high school in Devil's Lake adopted the "Satans" as their mascot, and Bismarck High the "Demons." I've heard all of these things defended by Christians as harmless – something they just inherited them – just tradition. Yet how do you think God sees it when we make light of what he sees as hideously evil? Would he want us pass down to our children the tradition of believing in an omnipotent being that rewards us if we have been good and punishes us when we have been bad. Is that pleasing to him – to teach our children to be good so that Santa, who knows and sees all, will reward them for their good behavior? The fact is nothing is harmless unless God says it is. Nothing is good unless God says it is. Conversely, if God calls something evil, woe is us if we call it good – no matter who did it before us or for how long. We could ask a member of the Northern Tribes of Israel, but they're not around anymore – which is, in itself, an answer.

The same challenges show up in the area of theology. Passages are interpreted or applied in a certain way, and that understanding is passed down to us by our forefathers – recent and ancient. Therein lies the challenge. Most were far smarter, wiser, and knew their Bibles better than we, yet they too were fallible human beings. Do we then just take their word for something so important, or do we investigate and verify everything for ourselves? Let me ask a different way. If someone told you

that the ice was thick enough to drive out on to it with you brand new pickup, would you just drive out onto it, or would you drill a few holes to test it yourself?

And the challenge of tradition cuts both ways. Some fences have to be torn down, but never before we understand why they were built in the first place. Tradition doesn't get to dictate, but it certainly deserves a vote. What we often discover is that God himself ordered the building of most of our fences – barriers that even Christian churches have now recklessly labelled as outdated and unnecessary. It is God himself that put the fence around human sexuality, confining it to marriage. God himself established the boundaries of marriage as between a man and a woman, as well as the roles of men and women in the home and in the church. It is God himself who said that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved, but that we are to *practice fellowship* only with those who teach and believe exactly as we do. All of these fences, and countless others, have been or are being removed both by our secular society and by our religious leaders, and the results are as catastrophic as they are predictable.

How then can we ever hope to meet such a challenge? How can we ever possibly know for certain which traditions need to be guarded and preserved and which need to be condemned and discarded? Our Bibles. That sweet, pure, changeless Word of God. God did not, would not, leave us to fend for ourselves – as he did not leave the Jews to fend for themselves. He told them, warned them, over and over again. From our text: ***Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets."***¹⁴ ***But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.***

God did not give us his Word because he hates us, but because he loves us. He did not give us his Word to oppress us; he gave us his Word to rescue and save us. There we learn what is true and what is false, what must be kept and what must be discarded. There we learn how forgiveness and life eternal can be our own personal possession (through faith alone in Jesus Christ) and how every other salvation plan leads only to eternal death and destruction.

The only safe course of action is therefore to continually evaluate *everything* that has been given to us, *everything* that we do, *everything* that we teach, and *everything* that we pass down to our children – all on the basis of God's Word alone. So help us God. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Philippians 4:4-9** Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ ¶ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

^{ESV} **Luke 7:18b-23** John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ²⁰ And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" ²¹ In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²² And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

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The Third Sunday in Advent – December 16, 2018

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 702 (Brown Hymnal)

"As Angels Joyed with One Accord"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Epistle Lesson: (Philippians 4:4-9) Our First Lesson offers some solid, practical, divine counsel on just what Christians should regard as the perfect example of conduct at all times. The world dismisses such counsel as too vague or too simplistic to work "in the real world." God does not make such mistakes. Having given us such guidance, we can and should be fully convinced that taking these things to heart and incorporating them into our lives is as timely as it is God-pleasing.

Psalm 8 (Supplement page 27) (Brown Hymnal)

The Gospel Lesson: (Luke 7:18b-23) John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus for several reasons. First and foremost because he understood that his followers had to be directed away from himself to Jesus – who was the object of John's work and preparation. Still today society would have us believe that there is something "beyond Jesus." That's simply not true. Jesus is the ultimate goal and focus.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5 (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 73 Third Tune (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads, He Mighty Gates"

The Sermon – Text: 2 Kings 17:6-14 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"The Challenge of Tradition"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 326 (Stanzas 1-3) Red Hymnal)

"Lord, to Thee I Make Confession"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 73 Third Tune (Stanza 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Lift Up Your Heads, He Mighty Gates"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (21) Average (40) Wednesday (20)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	-11:30 a.m.	– Fellowship meal
	-12:00 p.m.	– Annual Voters and WF meetings
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Saturday	-11:00 a.m.	– Christmas Eve Rehearsal
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Christmas Eve Rehearsal
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

Fellowship Meal and Meetings – A fellowship meal is planned following our service this morning, after which both the Voters and the Women's Fellowship are scheduled to meet.

Next Week's Schedule – Please note that Confirmation is at 6 pm this Wednesday, but there will be no mid-week Bible Class. Also note that the Sunday School will practice for the Christmas Eve service both Saturday and Sunday morning, which means there will be no Bible Class on Sunday.

Annual Meeting – As noted above, the Voters meeting this morning is our Annual Meeting, which means we hold elections and set both the annual budget and our estimate of what we will contribute to the Synod. All Voters should make a point of attending, so that the true will of the majority might be reflected in all of our elections and decisions.