

Are We There Yet?
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Romans 5: 1-2; Revelation 21: 1-5

So, here we are on the last Sunday of August. I don't know about you, but I'm wondering where the summer went. What happened to June, July, and August? How did those months fly by so quickly? With chilly nights and shorter days, it is beginning to feel a lot like fall. Most children are beginning classes this week, many older students already have left for college, and summer vacations are winding down.

One unmistakable sign of fall is the return of the yellow school bus – and not only buses return to the streets. As the school year starts up, the roads also get crowded with minivans and SUVs full of kids being shuttled by parents to school, soccer games, tennis matches, art classes, and music lessons. Personally, I have always enjoyed the excitement of the busy, back-to-school season. The new school year is ripe with such promise and potential!

But as these last weeks of summer slip away, I will miss seeing many of those same minivans and SUVs packed to overflowing for vacations. Perhaps you've seen them, too. Every available storage space is full! The tops of the vehicles are loaded with luggage pods. Sometimes coolers and camping equipment are strapped on the roof for dear life with bungee cords. The backs of the vehicles are covered with a jumble of precariously attached bicycles and strollers. Curiously, it doesn't seem to matter if we are traveling to the shore or to Maine; we still pack a lot of stuff. We want to be prepared for any and every possibility on our vacations.

If we get an opportunity to look through the rear windows, past the mountains of pillows and beach chairs, we might get a glimpse of the children, barely visible in the back seats. Anyone who has ever driven somewhere for vacation as a child, or with children, knows the adults in the car are dreading that unavoidable moment. One of the kids will stop playing a video game, reading, or eating long enough to ask, "Are we there yet?" Curiously, once again, the length of the road trip doesn't seem to matter. Inevitably, someone wants to know: Are we there yet?

Today also is the last Sunday of our Heidelberg Catechism series. It would not surprise me to learn some of you may be thinking the very same thing: Are we there yet? Have we arrived at the end of this catechism journey? Perhaps some of you would not be heartbroken if you didn't hear the name Heidelberg spoken in worship for a very, long time!

Of course, on the other hand, many of you have really enjoyed this series of sermons and classes. Each week, between 30 and 50 people attended the class at 9:45 AM. Using the book *Body & Soul* by Craig Barnes, we explored the supplemental resource material and videos to engage with the Catechism. Based upon the first question and answer, we titled this series "Comfort in an Age of Anxiety." For me and the rest of the preaching team, it has

been a great gift to savor this 450-year-old text. So, regardless of where you are on the spectrum of love it or leave it, thank you for joining us on the journey this summer!

For those of you who may be first-time guests, and for members returning from being away, we took eight weeks to explore the Heidelberg Catechism. This set of 129 questions and answers was written in 1563, in the midst of religious divisiveness, with the intent of unifying the Christians of its day. Sadly, centuries later, the Church and the world continue to experience deep divisions.

Along the journey, we discovered the Heidelberg Catechism covers the building blocks of our Christian faith: our salvation in Jesus Christ, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Sacraments, and the Lord's Prayer. It reminds us that God is our only comfort. As we stated in the answer to the first question of the Catechism: We belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our Savior, Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate us from Christ.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Rome stated the significance of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote: *"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God."*(NRSV, Romans 5:1-2)

One biblical scholar described these verses as "one of Paul's great lyrical passages in which he almost sings the intimate joy of his confidence in God."¹ Another called them "a characteristically dense statement of the past event, the present result, and the future promise."²

Paul is celebrating our access to God's grace. In the original Greek language, Paul paints the picture of Jesus opening the door to introduce us to God, the Holy One, the King of Kings. Thankfully, we are not sent in alone – at our side is Jesus Christ our Savior, the one who mediates on our behalf. Instead of being met by God's condemnation or vengeance, we encounter God's amazing grace – the underserved and unmerited loving kindness of God.³

At the Global Leadership Summit earlier this month, one of my favorite speakers was activist and lawyer Bryan Stevenson. Through his leadership with the Equal Justice Initiative, Stevenson has dedicated his life to helping the poor and advocating for those unjustly incarcerated and condemned. During his presentation, he shared a story about his grandmother.

Stevenson's grandmother was a woman who loved to hug her grandchildren. Her hugs were so strong, he said, that when she hugged you it almost hurt. But there is more. As she would release Stevenson from her powerful – and somewhat painful – embrace, she would ask him, "Do you still feel me hugging you?" Gradually recovering from the force of her bear hug, he would nod his head. "Good," she would tell him, "because no matter where you are, I want you to remember that I'm always going to be hugging you."

¹ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, p. 72

² *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Romans, p. 515

³ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, p. 73

For people of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism is a reminder we are always held in the firm embrace of God. It teaches us to have confidence in God's love – a love that will not let us go.

Moreover, since we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, we experience – not just the power of God's love – but a whole, new relationship with God. Jesus – who prays to God his Father – draws us into a new, deeper relationship, rooted in close intimacy with God. Biblical scholar N. T. Wright explains that through our reconciliation with God, we experience a number of things: a warm glow in our hearts, a sigh of relief that our sins are forgiven, and a fuller understanding of what it means to belong to God. But at the center of it all – at its core – we experience *peace with God*.⁴

The peace we have with God – this assurance of God's constant presence and unceasing love – brings us through the darkest valleys. It gets us back on our feet when we have been clobbered and knocked down by the struggles of life. It does, indeed, provide comfort in an age of anxiety.

As we conclude our study of the Heidelberg Catechism, what are your key takeaways from the series? If you attended a class, do you have a favorite passage from the book *Body & Soul*? What do you want to remember from the sermons you heard this summer?

Personally, I really enjoyed the last chapter of the book. Craig Barnes concludes the Catechism study with the certainty of a future filled with hope. Because we belong to a good and gracious God, we have hope! Because we are held in the strong embrace of a loving God, we have hope! Because we are free of anxiety and worry about the future, we have hope!

Yes, you heard that correctly. In Christ, we are set free from anxiety and worry about the future. Why? Because as Christians, we believe God already has determined the future of the world. That future is coming, and a vision of it is described in Revelation. A new city is promised. God will make his home with us, dwelling among mortals. Tears and death will be no more.

In my favorite passage from the book, Barnes goes on to explain how the vision of God's new kingdom affects us. He writes,

The point of God revealing this glorious ending is not just that it gives us a glimpse of the new kingdom that's coming. It also renews our vision of our mission today. That mission is to watch for signs that the future kingdom is breaking into the present, and then to throw ourselves into preparing its way. This new kingdom doesn't spread from our hearts out into the waiting world; rather, it spreads from God's established future into our hearts. There's no doubt about the future. The Holy Spirit has already written it down in Scripture. What is in question is our response today.⁵

Christ is leading us on a road trip into a new kingdom of justice, peace, and joy for all. Are we there yet? No. But there should be no doubt or anxiety about its promised coming. The only thing in question is our response today.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone, Romans: Part I*, p. 81

⁵ M. Craig Barnes, *Body & Soul: Reclaiming the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 153.

As this congregation looks for signs of God's future kingdom breaking into the present, I watch as you throw yourselves into preparing the way. Let me lift a couple recent examples of where I have seen a glimpse of God's new kingdom being established in your hearts.

This past week, over 60 volunteers provided hospitality for four families we were hosting with Family Promise. We provided a safe place for five parents and eleven children, ranging in ages from 1 ½ to 17 years old, to stay for a week of emergency shelter. Each evening they received a warm welcome and a delicious dinner. Younger children enjoyed going outside to climb on the playground equipment, while the older kids had fun playing ping-pong and air hockey in the youth room. And the parents – who are struggling to find stable, affordable housing for their children – rested, held in the awareness that people care enough to make this all happen.

On Sunday, August 6th, a child of this congregation returned for a visit. As part of our 125th Anniversary Celebration, an invitation to preach was extended to the Rev. Sara Randal Hill. Not only did she say yes, but she also agreed to participate in the Heidelberg Catechism series! Sara had an ordinary start to life. But the seed of faith, planted by God and her parents, was nurtured by Westminster Sunday School teachers and youth leaders. Her growing sense of call to ordained ministry was strengthened by serving as an intern in our Youth Ministry Program. The heart and life of this congregation helped shape Sara from a child of this church into an extraordinary Minister of Word and Sacrament.

While we have reached the end of our Heidelberg Catechism series, we have not arrived at the Promised Land. Not yet. Given the current racial tensions and social injustices, we know we are not there yet. The journey continues as an ongoing conversation, in which God calls us to be partners in bringing about the new kingdom. We are invited to look with eyes full of hope, to see signs of God's activity breaking into the world. What is our response today?

As the church, as the body of Christ, we are asked to prepare the way. So, let us seek and find those places in our communities and in our lives where the living God is at work – and let us join in! Like the start of a new school year, our journey with God is always full of promise, potential, and hope! Thanks be to God! Amen.